

## Dong Ba Thin

# No Front Lines

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**Vietnam** was a war with no front lines. No direction was safe. Though almost all of the fighting was done by about twenty percent of the soldiers, sometimes support personnel, like clerks, cooks and mechanics, were handed a share of the action. As we were told in Basic Training, "You are all infantry first." I was trained to be a clerk, but seven months after entering the Army, I found myself behind an M-60 machine gun when our perimeter was penetrated by enemy sappers.

Sappers were the elite of the enemy's forces and sometimes they sneaked into U.S. military bases to set off explosives to kill U.S. soldiers. They received their orders from the highest North Vietnamese commands and each mission was of great importance to the enemy's overall military plan. Every sapper attack was meticulously planned and deadly. They were extraordinarily brave and highly trained soldiers, very similar to our own special forces. We respected them and feared them.

The attack occurred on November 30, 1969 against the US Army base at Dong Ba Thin, South Vietnam. There were at least ten sappers and seven of them sneaked under and cut through our concertina wire, crossed our perimeter and were completely inside the base before being discovered. They carried with them a five-foot long Bangalore torpedo containing 75 cakes of C-4 plastic explosive – a bomb powerful enough to flatten half a city block. A bomb designed to kill many soldiers.

I was on guard duty that night, and 53 officers, including Brigadier General John W. Morris, were sleeping a hundred yards behind my tower. The evidence is clear the sappers intended to strike my company's officer quarters. In the tower next to mine was Jerry Laws, who later became a Brigadier General, but was then an aviation captain with the 18th Combat Engineer Brigade. Four hundred yards to my right was Specialist Butch Graef who was manning the 183rd Aviation's tower.

In Basic Training, our drill sergeants told us that when we entered combat each of us would do one of the "Three F's". We would freeze, flee, or fight. They told us their job was to train us to fight. The drill sergeants did their job well. The night of the attack, good soldiers fought with great courage. Only the chance crossing of good luck and good soldiers prevented this night from becoming a story of massive tragedy.

## Leaving on a jet plane

In early 1969, at twenty years old, I withdrew from my classes at the University of Illinois to join the Army. I did not tell my parents until after the papers were signed. My father was upset and my mother cried.

I took Basic Training and Clerical AIT (Advanced Individual Training) at Ft. Leonard Wood, Missouri, and then Personnel Training at Ft. Benjamin Harrison, Indianapolis. Upon completion of my training, I was given a four-week leave and orders to report to Fort Dix in New Jersey where I caught an airplane for duty in the Republic of South Vietnam. Peter Paul and Mary's number one hit "Leaving On a Jet Plane" was all over the airwaves. To this day, whenever I hear that song, my mind returns to that time nearly a half century ago.

When I arrived in Vietnam, I was assigned to Headquarters Company of the 18th Combat Engineer Brigade, which was stationed at Dong Ba Thin. Dong Ba Thin was a small Army base south of Nha Trang and near Cam Ranh Bay. It was situated on Highway 1, which we nicknamed "Bloody One." Highway 1 is now the main coastal route between Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon) and Hanoi.

Bloody One split our base into two separate parts so that our soldiers were responsible for safeguarding two perimeters and two front gates. The western portion of Dong Ba Thin, across Bloody One, contained about 80 acres. My company was on the eastern side, a trapezoid-shaped area of land totaling about 160 acres. We had Bloody One on our west, an inlet of the South China Sea to our east, marshy elephant grass to the south and north, and close, too close, neighboring mountains on three sides.

There were at least seven companies quartered at Dong Ba Thin. It was headquarters for my company, the 18th Combat Engineer Brigade, the 10th Combat Aviation Battalion (Soldiers in the Sky), and the 35th Engineer Group. Also quartered at Dong Ba Thin were the 183rd Aviation Company (Sea Horses), the 243rd Assault Aviation Company (Freight Train), the 92nd Assault Helicopter Company, and the 608th Transportation Company (The Reliables).

My company was headquarters for an entire Brigade and we provided about half of the Army's construction work throughout about a third of South Vietnam. We built roads, bridges, bases, hospitals, and even an orphanage. The 10th flew helicopter gunships on combat missions. The 35th did construction work. The 183<sup>rd</sup> flew small reconnaissance planes, the "Birddogs", while the 243rd commanded 16 Chinooks, the huge helicopters that were so powerful they could lift and transport a tank. The 92nd also flew helicopter gunships on combat missions and the 608th provided aircraft maintenance. My estimate is that Dong Ba Thin housed between a thousand and fifteen hundred US soldiers, along with eight Korean officers and a few civilian contractors.

Dong Ba Thin was in one of the most beautiful locations on earth. The South China Sea's water was brilliant blue and so clear that when we flew over the shoreline we could easily see the white sand bottom and scores of four or five feet long Sand Sharks that looked like guppies in a fishbowl. The Navy had a beautiful white sand beach at Cam Ranh Bay often used by their sailors and other military personnel. I doubt many of the soldiers knew they were swimming so close to sharks. The mountains and jungle surrounding Dong Ba Thin were a deep and beautiful green and the Vietnamese people I met were the most humble and gentle people I have ever known. I was struck by the pure irony that a war was being fought in such a lovely, peaceful place.

Dong Ba Thin was also hot. At mid-summer the temperature sometimes rose to nearly 120 degrees Fahrenheit. Every day, though, during those hottest months, at about 2 p.m. a bank of clouds appeared from the

South China Sea and gave us a cooling rain for about 20 minutes. Interestingly, it rained hard, but we could still see the bright sun high in the sky. The rain hit us before the clouds covered the sun. Credence Clearwater Revival sang a song that had a stanza "I want to know, have you ever seen the rain, comin' down on a sunny day?" John Fogerty wrote several classics about the Vietnam War and some have thought that wrenching song is about Vietnam – that Fogerty was referring to rockets and mortars raining down on a sunny day in Vietnam. Dong Ba Thin often got hit by rockets and mortars during the night, but we did occasionally see them during the day and we did literally see it rain on many sunny days.

## Rockets Mortars and Generals

The mountains, though majestic and beautiful, provided cover for the enemy and made it easier for them to attack on a regular basis. Each mortar had the explosive power of approximately four hand grenades. The rockets were about seven feet tall and were far more powerful than the mortars. We respected the mortars, but we were afraid of the rockets.

The rockets and mortars typically hit in the dead of the night, at about 2 a.m. At the sound of the first explosion, everyone would immediately hit the ground and lie down as flat as possible. We called it "hugging the concrete."

After the first few mortar attacks, I found myself hugging the concrete next to my bed even before I awoke and I would be on the floor with no recollection of getting out of bed. My body would react without me making a conscious decision. To this day, I am still easily startled by sharp unexpected noises, and sometimes involuntarily duck when they happen. I have since read that such reflex reactions are hard wired into the base of the mind, near the backbone. Somehow our bodies knew there was simply no time to involve the brain. I recall two of our pilots laughing about an incident that happened when they met their wives in Hawaii for R&R (Rest and Recuperation). While walking down a sidewalk in Waikiki, a car loudly backfired and both officers hit the concrete while their wives stood open mouthed and bewildered.

On one occasion a mortar directly hit the quarters of a friend of mine, the base telephone operator. He emerged with only a shrapnel scratch across his heel because it wasn't the first explosion in the spray and he was already hugging the concrete. Every piece of clothing in his locker had shrapnel holes, so he was issued all new clothes, which made him look like a newbie (new in Vietnam.) Our clothes faded over time, and we could always recognize a newbie by his bright green fatigues. I remember telling him he should ask his commander to award him a purple heart, but he didn't ask and didn't get one. I know of other soldiers who were slightly wounded in Vietnam who did not get purple hearts, but surely deserved one.

In his memoirs, General Morris commented that Dong Ba Thin "**was hit frequently because we were near the Vietcong trail between the hills and the coast..... couldn't keep the Vietcong from firing a couple of rounds at us every couple of nights.**" He also stated, "**we suffered more casualties than any other unit in Vietnam for 3 of the 12 months I was there.**" (pages 75-76, Engineer Memoirs, Lieutenant General John W. Morris, U.S.A. Retired, Office of History Headquarters, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Alexandria, Virginia.)

One night a rocket hit and destroyed the 92nd Assault Helicopter Company's mess hall, which, fortunately, was empty, since it was late at night and not during eating hours. We took 25 mortars that night causing two soldier's deaths and seven wounded. Only three days later, while a three star general was visiting, six enemy rockets missed my company's officer mess hall by 250 feet. The enlisted men were not aware we had a general visiting, but the enemy knew. I was standing nearby and those rockets flew directly over my head. I heard them whistle then, and I still do today.

Generals were often the enemy's favorite target. Twelve generals and one admiral died in the Vietnam War, seven by hostile enemy action, four more by helicopter crashes, and two by other causes. Each time a general was killed, it created the newspaper headlines that North Vietnam continually tried to generate. Halfway through my tour, on May 12, the commander of all the engineers in Vietnam, our general's boss, was killed while flying in one of my brigade's helicopters. Major General John Dillard and ten others on board were shot down near Pleiku by a 51 caliber machine gun while they were inspecting road work on highway 509. Colonel Carroll Adams, Jr. was on the flight and he was promoted posthumously to brigadier general, so two generals were killed on that awful day.

The crew chief on the flight, Specialist Stephen Ray Renner, had only 6 days left until he could go home. He had already served more than the standard 12 month tour but had extended for 5 weeks in order to get under 180 days left in his enlistment. When sent back to the states, if an enlisted man had less than 180 days left, the Army discharged him rather than send him on a new assignment. Most of us wanted to reenter civilian life as soon as possible, and it was common to extend our tour in Vietnam for a month or two. In addition, Steve was still not required to fly that day, since it was standard to not fly during the last 30 days of a tour, but he wanted to go because General Dillard would be on the flight. Sargent Major Robert Elkey was the only survivor, and he was severely injured.

Generals in the Vietnam War were approximately 9 times more likely to get killed than were the generals in our country's other modern wars. World War I lost only one general. General Dillard was the 5th general to die by hostile action in Vietnam and when a reporter asked a government spokesman in Washington D.C. why we were losing so many generals, he was told it was because "There are no nice, tidy front lines" in the Vietnam War.

## Sappers

During my year at Dong Ba Thin, sappers penetrated our perimeter twice. Sappers were not under the command of the regular enemy units in South Vietnam. Instead they took their orders from the 429th Sapper Group, which reported directly to the NVA (North Vietnamese Army) High Command in Hanoi. We now know that Ho Chi Minh, North Vietnam's President, was personally involved with the missions carried out by sappers. Just as President Lyndon Johnson was personally involved in planning our bombing raids of North Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh and North Vietnam's top leadership were personally involved with North Vietnam's sapper attacks.

Sappers would crawl under and cut through our concertina wire, and could traverse a hundred yard deep perimeter in less than five minutes. They would usually crawl between two towers, moving when neither guard was watching and freezing when either guard looked their way. Our perimeter was lit up and denuded of most plant life but the uneven terrain cast shadows so a sapper lying flat and motionless was difficult to see at a hundred yards distance. An alert and active guard diligently using his starlight scope could see the entire 400 yards between towers, but even five minutes of inattention was all sappers needed to crawl across undetected. When sneaking across a perimeter, sappers always had hidden comrades armed with small shoulder fired rocket launchers stationed directly in front of nearby towers. Inspectors told me the day after the attack that there had been one or two sappers hiding in the grass directly in front of *my* tower, a tower armed with a machine gun, Claymore Mines, and a grenade launcher. If a sapper was discovered, his comrades were ready to fire their rockets at the towers. They would knock out the towers, abort the mission, escape, and return another night. Because clothing could get caught in the razor-sharp barbs of our concertina wire, they came in naked,

except for a black loin cloth or very short dark shorts. The sappers were extremely good at what they did, usually quickly accomplishing their very specific missions, then escaping unscathed.

## Guard Duty

Upon my arrival at Dong Ba Thin I was assigned to work both in the Personnel office and on guard duty. Our company was required to man two small wooden towers on the southeast corner of the base. One of the towers faced the elephant grass on our south side and the second faced the sea on our east side. Nearly ninety percent of our company's 225 enlisted men were exempt from guard duty, so about 25 of us did it all, which meant each of us on the roster worked a night of duty more than once a week. During my year I spent a total of 65 nights, or 780 hours, on guard duty, including two nights at the Water Point. I turned my 21st birthday on a guard tower. Although almost everybody hated guard duty and managed ways to get exempt, I liked it. I enjoyed being alone, and I looked forward to the half day off to sleep late the next day. Even after I was transferred out of Personnel to a position with the Aviation section, which was exempt from guard duty, I continued on the guard roster. The Major in charge of base security insisted I remain a guard. Even though guard duty was generally assigned to those enlisted men who worked lesser jobs, I was not offended by the Major's decision. The Major thought I was a good guard. I knew guard duty was important and I considered his orders a compliment.

In addition to regular guard duty, every night three of us were trucked five miles out into the jungle to guard a small post that provided our fresh water, called the "Water Point." It was composed of a small block building with a well and pumps inside, was situated on about one acre, was surrounded by concertina wire and was protected by a single guard tower. Each company at Dong Ba Thin provided guards for Water Point duty and we worked that assignment once a month. It was a good way to meet soldiers from other companies because there were no other soldiers at the Water Point, just the three of us – five miles out in the jungle for a long twelve hours. We weren't able or expected to fight off a substantial attack, but we were pretty good "canaries in the coal mine."

Three months into my tour, the Water Point was overrun by a platoon of Vietcong. Miraculously, none of the guards was killed, though all three were wounded, two of them very seriously. One lost a leg. The two who were seriously injured never returned to Dong Ba Thin. I spoke at length with the one who did return after two weeks in the hospital. He told me they were all blown out of the tower by a B-40 RPG (rocket propelled grenade) but managed to hide in the elephant grass that was growing inside the post while the Vietcong damaged the block building and water pumping equipment. The attackers must have assumed our 3 guards were dead, so they finished their mission and left in a hurry. From that time on, none of Dong Ba Thin's ordinary guards was sent to the Water Point. We were replaced by a full platoon, about 30 men, of Korean infantry.

Each tower had an M-60 machine gun, an M-79 grenade launcher, ten clackers wired to ten Claymore Mines, a starlight scope, flares, and a field phone. Each guard also brought his rifle, flak jacket, and steel helmet. Our enemy hated the Claymore Mines. Each Claymore fired off 700 steel pellets and each pellet was approximately 22 caliber. It was like 700 rifles being shot at once or a huge shotgun shooting double aught shot. It discharged in a sixty degree arc and was designed to strike all enemies within 165 feet.

Each tower also had a folding chair to sit on. I asked about the chair a week earlier when I was briefed about the requirements of guard duty. The Sergeant told me that a short rest will keep a guard more alert, and that I could sit down for a minute or two if I got tired, but to "not overdo it." It was very tiring to stand for two hours wearing a heavy flak jacket and steel helmet, especially after a full eleven hour regular workday, and then get

up and do it again after four hours of sleep. Sitting down briefly helped manage fatigue, but when a guard sat down, and most did, he could not see much of the perimeter. He could see the stars and moon, but the perimeter itself was mostly blocked by the tower's four feet tall sidewalls. Any enemy surveilling the tower from the elephant grass just beyond our wire could clearly see the guard's silhouette and know whether he was standing or sitting. We knew the enemy studied our behaviors from the elephant grass. They knew when guards sat down and when shifts changed.

## **Sappers Inside Our Base**

The sappers penetrated our perimeter at 11:30 P.M. on the Sunday night of November 30, 1969. That was too early for a sapper attack. The moon was in its “waning gibbous” stage at about 66% visibility and that was plenty of moonlight for us to see the perimeter clearly. I found 25 different Vietnam War sapper attacks chronicled on the internet as well as two books written on the subject. I checked the dates of each of the other attacks with an astronomical site that records historical moon phases and found only three other attacks that occurred during a bright moon. None of those other attacks happened at such an early hour. Why did our sappers attack on November 30? Why did they not choose a darker night and why did they attack at such an early hour when our guards were fresh and some of our soldiers were still up and moving around? I believe there is an explanation that I will detail in 2 following sections: "Why November 30th..." and "Why So Early..."

I was a green PFC and had been in Vietnam only fifteen days. It was only my second night on guard duty, and I was on the tower that faced the elephant grass to the south. I had third shift, from ten p.m. until midnight and then again from four a.m. until six a.m. I was a 20 year old with a machine gun who felt important and powerful and the excitement of my new job kept me very alert that night. I did not sit down for even a moment and I remember how fascinated I was with my starlight scope. It was a single lens scope, about 18” long, hand held, and weighed over 5 pounds. The more moonlight, the better it worked. It slightly magnified and somehow gathered enough light from the moon and stars to project back a greenish image of objects we could not otherwise see in the dark. I played with it like a ten-year-old with a new toy.

The sappers completely breached our perimeter and were behind the 183rd tower and on the perimeter road heading my direction and toward my officers area when, fortunately, Specialist Jim Benoit happened to be drying off after showering. At the time, Captain Paul Walker said Jim started singing in the shower, but 46 years later Jim told me, laughing, “No, it wasn’t my music that saved us.” We do know that Jim did something that startled them and caused one of the sappers to chamber a round into his Chinese-made AK-47 rifle. The guard on the 183rd tower, Specialist Butch Graef, who was a mechanic by day, heard that distinctive click and threw a spotlight on the sapper.

The sappers knew they were caught and they immediately pinned down Specialist Graef with a flurry of fire. They had lost their element of surprise and quickly aborted their mission and entered their plan of escape. After the bursts of rifle fire at Butch and his tower, the sappers loosed an RPG that demolished the latrine next to the shower that Specialist Benoit was in. Jim is alive today solely because the sappers thought his “serenade” was coming from the latrine.

The sappers then quickly threw a few satchel charges at the adjacent Officer and NCO quarters, threw grenades at the 183rd tower and bunker and blew up the 183rd generator, enveloping that corner of the base in darkness. The primary purpose of the satchel charges was to confuse the rest of the basis into the false belief that we were getting hit by mortars. When mortars came in, we stayed low until sirens instructed us to race to the perimeter.

I heard the AK-47 volley first but thought someone had set off firecrackers. A more experienced guard would have known it was AK-47 fire, which has a distinct sound. Only seconds later there were several explosions. At that point I still did not realize we were under sapper attack. I thought the 183rd corner of the base had taken a few mortars. It happened so quickly that the incongruity of firecrackers going off shortly before mortars exploded didn't register. The next day my friends, all of whom had been in Vietnam longer, had a laugh when I told them I had thought of firecrackers. "No, Randy," one told me, "you won't hear any firecrackers at Dong Ba Thin. That would put the whole base on alert and the sirens would go off. We would all have had to get up and run to our positions on the perimeter."

Specialist Leo Farrell happened to be walking to the latrine, the same latrine demolished by the RPG, and saw the sappers as they were throwing satchel charges. Leo had his rifle with him and fired a few rounds at them. Butch Graef's machine gun was inoperable due to a cleaning error and the sappers had already cut the wires to his Claymore Mines so he grabbed his rifle and managed to shoot one of the sappers in the knee. The sapper he hit, apparently the leader, was an ARVN (Army Republic of Vietnam) captain who had been on our base many times to learn to fly! He was ostensibly our ally and had even eaten in the 183rd mess hall! Like I said, the enemy was everywhere. There were no front lines. The sappers then hurriedly exited our base through the same holes in our wire they had cut only a few minutes earlier.

Only our enemy used AK-47 rifles, and that rifle has a very distinct, recognizable sound. Brigadier General (retired) Jerry Laws, who was then an aviation captain with my company, quickly recognized that the AK-47 blitz meant enemy was near and we were not just taking mortars. We were under direct enemy attack. Captain Laws had not yet retired for the evening, was still dressed, and his response was instantaneous. He grabbed his flak jacket, steel helmet and weapon and ran to our company's eastern guard tower which was only a few yards from his quarters. He was half way up the ladder when the first satchel charges exploded. He soon sent fire from that tower's M-60 and rifle fire onto the perimeter. Captain Laws knew that tower's early machine gun and rifle fire might hit enemy, and just as importantly, it let everyone on the base realize more quickly that we were not under a mortar attack!

In the process the sappers injured five of our men including both guards on duty with Graef. Specialists James Dorough and Frank Robertson received purple hearts. Captain Hodgson also received a purple heart. The living quarters of Captain Hodgson and Captain Miller were a shambles from satchel charges. Major Edward Harris' quarters was also damaged.

The sirens went off, and the lights inside the base flashed on. Specialist Michael Buttolph joined the action and carried another M-60 up Graef's tower. The two guards on duty with me, who had been sleeping in the small bunker at the base of our tower, quickly joined me on top.

After the sappers had escaped, but still within rifle range, Specialists Terry Hackney, Wesley Smith, Markus Mitchell and others added their own flurries of rifle fire into the perimeter, probably wounding or killing more of the sappers.

A couple of minutes after the explosions, the 183rd tower, about 400 yards to my right, opened up with the replacement machine gun that Specialist Buttolph had provided. In short order I received a call on the field phone from our captain of the guard. He inquired if I had seen any enemy or done any shooting. When I answered "No," he then asked, "Well, you hear all that machine gun fire, don't you?" His tone was a little impatient. He told me that our perimeter had been penetrated and gave us permission to open fire into the elephant grass. My heart raced, time slowed and my mind focused to an extraordinary degree. It was a detached, surreal feeling that lasted for days.

Within a few minutes, the captain of the guard called again to tell us that helicopters would soon be in the air and to hold fire lest we might hit one of our own helicopters. Almost immediately a number of attack helicopters were scouring the elephant grass with search lights. Two of them soon hovered over a small area between our towers. The helicopters opened up their machine guns into that concentrated area for fully five minutes. I knew they had found the sappers.

My emotions were mixed. It was the moment when the realization of what had just taken place became real. I knew that men were dead and dying out in that grass. Men just like us, men with families who wanted them to come home. I knew the fight was over, and I was very glad for that, but I was also sad.

All of the sappers immediately fled our base, including their wounded leader, although he slowed them down and was abandoned a hundred or so yards outside the perimeter. They must have spent 5 or more minutes trying to drag him with them. The sappers had about 10 minutes before the helicopters arrived yet they remained a couple of hundred yards away and just 200 hundred yards from the motorcycles they had parked along a creek that ran along the south side of our perimeter. In that span of time, they should have had time to reach their motorcycles, sped under Bloody One through a culvert and scattered into the nearby village or into the mountains. It is now clear that by the time the helicopters arrived, several of them had been wounded, and without their leader were disorganized. Their limited time to escape had vanished before they could.

According to John Bradley, who was a Staff Sergeant with the 183rd, and is now a Baptist minister, a total of nine sappers were killed that night. The next morning the sapper wounded by Specialist Graef was found hiding in a row of bushes on the eastern berm of Bloody One. Three of our soldiers killed him, totaling ten enemy dead.

## **The Investigators**

Midmorning the day after the attack two NCO's from Army Intelligence out of Cam Ranh, came to talk to me. They took me back out to the tower and I answered all of their questions. The investigators disclosed to me that there was "a lot of blood" and "several blood trails" and "several dead sappers" out in the elephant grass. The bodies had not yet been removed because dead enemy bodies were sometimes booby trapped, and bomb demolition experts were on their way to do that work. I asked the investigators if they found any dead men or blood near my tower. They said no. I asked if the sappers had been near my tower, and they said "it looked like Grand Central Station" between my tower and the 183rd. The investigators said that the sappers "shuttled back and forth several times", and were "probing for a place to get through." They told me the sappers had beaten a path between our two towers and had been squatting down in an area of grass about a hundred yards to the right of my tower and another smaller patch directly in front of my tower. The investigators knew that sapper attacks were always well planned with a specific point of entry and they seemed puzzled the sappers would "shuttle" back and forth, "probing for a place to get through." This explains why the 183rd Aviation's pet, a small dog named "Jessie", had been yapping for 45 minutes before the attack. She did that sometimes and everyone ignored her.

The investigators put me on the defensive. They said the sappers were right in front of me yet I had not seen them. I told them that the reason the sappers did not come in a hundred yards to my right was because they could see I was standing and constantly using my Starlight Scope and they would have been discovered. The investigators knew I was feeling their heat, so they eventually admitted they were aware I would not have been able to see the sappers. The sappers had done their moving and crouching only twenty yards deep in the

elephant grass, but the tower wasn't tall enough to allow me to see down into the elephant grass a hundred yards in the distance.

Historians now know that sapper attacks were always very well planned. The sappers created mock-up pre-raid miniature camps in the jungle and knew precisely where they would pierce the perimeter and what they were going to attack. Each sapper had a specific, rehearsed job to do. They rehearsed their plan in minute detail with every intention to accomplish a very specific mission and escape before we could counter.

When I didn't sit down, or put my starlight scope down, the sappers couldn't get through at their intended point of entry a hundred yards to my right. They could have waited for another guard to replace me, who probably would have sat down. Or, they could have just left to return another night. Instead, these sappers appear to have made a significant change to their plan.

Maybe the sapper's motive for altering their plan was influenced by North Vietnam's president, Ho Chi Minh. Minh died in September 1969, two months before the attack against our base, but shortly after he died, a proclamation of his specifically about sapper attacks was released at an October 1969 North Vietnam military conference. That proclamation was issued merely one month prior to the attack against our base. In it Minh urged that **“sapper tactics must be flexible...determination to win and destroy the enemy must be strong...accomplish all missions and overcome any difficulties.”** Evidently, the sappers who attacked our base were trying to do just that when they radically changed their point of entry. They came in nearly 500 yards from our officer's area, instead of 150, only a few yards from showers, latrines and the 183rd sleeping quarters. They came in at a point too close to soldiers and at a time when a few of those soldiers were still awake and moving around. If they had entered a hundred yards to my right, they would have come in under dark shadows behind empty administration buildings that had no soldiers, latrines, showers or sleeping quarters.

If you are wondering how it is that our enemy had such precise details of our camp, it is because they had spies working inside every U.S. base in Vietnam. We had about 200 South Vietnamese men and women working inside Dong Ba Thin. They did our laundry, washed dishes and aided with numerous other necessary tasks. They were very hard working and cooperative people – but a few of them were spies. We caught one hooch maid pacing off the distance between two buildings. Our intelligence knew from captured documents that our enemy had precise and accurate layouts of our camps. Our enemy was very intelligent and resourceful. A comment made by General Morris in his memoirs accentuates these facts. On page 75 of his memoirs, surely with mild humor intended, General Morris stated:

*“In 1969, the 18th Brigade headquarters didn't have an officers' club or lounge. So the officers got together and built what would be an officers lounge. ...Anyhow, the night we opened it, we invited some local friends to come over in the afternoon to christen this club. Well, I guess the Vietcong were upset because they were not invited. We no sooner got in the club than they whammed one right in on top of us. Fortunately they didn't have very good aim, but the club was a very nervous place to be for the next couple of weeks.”*

General Morris' humor reminds me so much of Vietnam. Our humor usually had a tinge of fatalism. After I got back to the states, over a period of about 2 years, nothing anybody said seemed funny and nothing I said was funny to anyone else.

I believe the sappers were intent upon following Ho Chi Minh's dying words to “be flexible” and “accomplish all missions.” I believe the attack against our base was a very important mission that would have maximum impact only if it were carried out *early* on the night of November 30th. A night when the moon was just *too full* for a sapper attack!

## Understanding That Night

Until recently, I didn't learn much else about that night. The intelligence work was done off base and we were not privy to their findings or their conclusions. Because of the risk that information could be overheard and relayed by Vietnamese spies who worked at our base, Army Intelligence personnel severely limited disclosure of any news regarding the attack. The Army had a firm policy of providing information on a "need to know" basis only. We did hear rumors, however. As I look back now it seems pretty clear that Specialist Swearer was granted knowledge individually that the rest of us weren't. I recall him saying that a "little bird" told him the sappers intended to kill General Morris. He was also aware that there were regiments of NVA fighting the 4<sup>th</sup> Infantry in the mountains within 30 miles of our base and it is now widely known that was true and that hundreds of enemy were killed in two major battles.

During the past 47 years I have thought about that night a number of times. Recently I discovered a 3 page memorandum written by the 183rd company clerk, Marcus Mitchell. In that memorandum, Marcus stated that while he was helping sweep the perimeter early on the morning after the attack, he personally **"recovered an enemy Bangalore torpedo w/blasting cap which had 75 cakes (about the size of a bar of soap) of C4 lashed in with vines."**

Specialist Jim Benoit, the same soldier who disturbed the sappers with his "vocal performance" in the shower, was on the sweep with Marcus. I called Jim at his home in Florida, and he told me that the Bangalore Torpedo was five or six feet long and about six inches in diameter. Marcus and Jim are both adamant that they and three other soldiers personally found the Bangalore Torpedo, and that it was a monster. Jim recounted that they performed the sweep with an off-base Infantry captain, who it appears, took the torpedo to Cam Ranh.

To understand what happened that night, we must answer the central question of what the sappers were intending to do with a bomb that powerful. Although North Vietnam did have limited supplies of another plastic high explosive, it is my understanding they did not have the capability to make their own C-4, and that any they did have was stolen from us. Our Claymore Mines were filled with C-4, and the enemy would sometimes sneak up on our positions, cut the wires to the mines, and steal them. That is how bold and brazen they were. A weapon containing 75 cakes of C-4 was an armament of nearly immeasurable value that surely had an extraordinarily important purpose.

The sappers smashed down grass a hundred yards to the right of my tower. General Morris and 52 other officers were sleeping a hundred yards behind my tower. The sappers had a bomb big enough to flatten half a city block. The only way these facts can be reconciled is to conclude that the sappers' intention was to enter our base a hundred yards from my tower, then use their Bangalore Torpedo against General Morris and our other 52 officers. Moreover, the attack received an inordinate amount of attention from the highest command levels of the U.S. Army. Intelligence from Cam Ranh Bay questioned me and others. General Laws, with whom I spoke with recently, informed me that the nearby Vietnamese village was searched and two Vietnamese women who worked as maids on our base were incarcerated as a part of that investigation. General Laws said that CID (United States Army Criminal Investigation Command) also did an investigation. It is unusual for CID to investigate enemy attacks, since enemy attacks are not normally considered a criminal act.

The sapper's mission, it appears, was to attack my company's officer quarters with their Bangalore torpedo. There was no other target at Dong Ba Thin that would warrant the use of such a powerful bomb. Such a weapon would not have been useful against our base's helicopters or airplanes since each was protected by an individual revetment. A revetment was shaped steel and concrete housing that surrounded each aircraft. A

revetment was designed to deflect a blast into the air so that the damage from an explosion would be contained to the area inside the revetment. This huge bomb would have taken out only one aircraft in one revetment so, certainly, it was not meant for that purpose.

The Bangalore torpedo was armed with a blasting cap and was ready to make just one very big uncontained explosion. If it would have been placed under General Morris' mobile home, more of the blast would have been focused laterally, causing even more death and destruction. It would have turned our General's mobile home, as well as two other mobile homes, one on each side of him, into thousands of shards of shrapnel. Its design and purpose was anti-personnel. It was meant to kill soldiers. Many soldiers. A friend of mine, Tony Lawson, who spent 3 tours in Vietnam as a combat engineer and personally worked closely with C-4, told me that bomb would have done damage approximately 400 feet away from its point of blast. Tony said it would definitely have taken out our entire officer's area and would have most likely killed or seriously injured all 53 officers. In addition, all of my company's 225 enlisted men were also quartered at a distance within the bomb's reach.

General Laws, who certainly has extensive Army education and training to make the comment, said to me, **"That bomb would have taken out our whole officer's area."**

The sappers waited for me to sit down, or at least not be as diligent with my starlight scope, for the five minutes they needed to cut through our wire and crawl the 100 yards across our perimeter. We knew the enemy often watched us from the elephant grass and were aware of our habits. They expected me to sit down, or at least not be using my Starlight Scope the entire hour and a half. When I didn't conform to their expectations, they changed their plan and came in 20 feet to the west of the 183rd tower. They were on the dark perimeter road heading my way when Specialist Benoit startled one of them.

Butch Graef was shot at with flurries of AK-47 fire and grenades were thrown at him. Both of Butch's fellow guards were wounded. It took great courage for Butch to not lie on the tower's floor and wait. Instead, Butch faced the sappers and shot back, wounding their leader. The wounded leader slowed the sappers down and that is why our helicopters found them - before they could get to their motorcycles and disperse into the nearby village or the mountains. If Butch had not wounded the sapper's leader, I believe that all of the sappers would have escaped and they would have taken their Bangalore Torpedo with them. With a bomb that extraordinary and a plan that big, they would have been back. Butch Graef's courage, in my opinion, is the primary reason that we did not later suffer the devastating attack that was thwarted that night. Butch was awarded a Bronze Star and he deserved it. Maybe he deserved a Silver Star. While doing my research, I learned that Marine Specialist 4th class Michael John Fitzmaurice earned a Medal of Honor for his actions during a sapper attack!

A number of things went right that night. I was a new guard playing with a Starlight scope and I didn't sit down. Specialist Benoit disrupted the sappers while taking a late shower. Most importantly, Specialist Graef heard the round chambered and put a spotlight on one of the sappers. If even one of those would not have happened, the sappers would have made it to our officers' area, and this narrative would have unfolded quite differently. I believe three of the rocket launchers the sappers brought with them were still manned by sappers hiding near each tower in the grass outside the perimeter. The investigators told me that one or two had been hiding directly in front of my tower. We know that only 7 sappers entered the base, but 10 were killed, thus at least 3 stayed outside with rocket launchers to knock out the towers if needed. The three towers would have been hit seconds after the big explosion. It is likely that General Morris and most or all of the officers, along with many enlisted men, including several guards, would have been killed. We would have been casualties in what would have been the biggest story to emerge from Vietnam in 1969.

And, it would have been a very big story; it would have been one of the top ten tragedies of the entire war ([www.g2mil.com/lost\\_vietnam.htm](http://www.g2mil.com/lost_vietnam.htm)) The Vietnam War, for the most part, was a war of small battles,

skirmishes, and ambushes. Early in the war the enemy realized they could not compete with us in large battles because our firepower was far too massive when we cornered them in big fights.. Our infantry would quickly surround the enemy, cut off escape routes, and then call in massive air power and artillery. Even the major battles did not often cause large losses of American soldiers. The smaller battles added up and killed more than 58,000 Americans, but they were not individual headline grabbers.

I know of only one other attack where such a large bomb was planted to kill sleeping Americans – the February 10, 1965 attack against a hotel near Qui Nhon when 23 American soldiers died. Twelve generals and one admiral died during the Vietnam War, but none died in his own bed. Seventy-five percent of the soldiers in Vietnam were stationed at bases. Our loved ones, tens of millions of voters, thought we were relatively safe, and we were. An attack that killed so many of us at a base would have greatly alarmed them. It would have had a very negative political effect on Nixon, and it would have stayed in the headlines for weeks.

## Paris Peace Talks

During a recent conversation with General Laws, he mentioned that the Paris Peace Talks were an important consideration of North Vietnam when they developed their military strategy. I hadn't before considered that as a possible reason for the attack. I now think General Laws hit upon the exact reason why the sappers were trying to kill General Morris. The North Vietnamese were trying to make a dramatic statement that would affect their leverage in Paris.

First, a little bit of background:

President Lyndon Johnson was in office during most of the war's escalation. In a moving speech, he declined to run for a second term in the 1968 elections. His stated reason for not running was that the Vietnam War was too divisive, so in the country's best interest he would not seek a second term. Candidate Richard Nixon promised he would seek peace and he said he had a secret plan to accomplish it. President Nixon won the election and at his inaugural address, he stated "The greatest honor history can bestow is the title of "Peacemaker." President Nixon sincerely wanted to be that peacemaker. When he won the election, it seemed peace was on the horizon. I remember that while I was in Basic Training, my father told me he believed the war would be over in a few months.

The Peace Talks that President Johnson initiated, however, quickly revealed that the two sides were far apart and the night the sappers penetrated our base the Talks were stalled. Our country had ceased bombing North Vietnam as a concession to further the talks and President Nixon urged the North Vietnamese to respond in kind. He was willing to tone down our end of the war and he urged them to do the same. President Nixon's position, essentially, was that both sides should slow down the fighting and each should begin staged withdrawals from South Vietnam. When the North Vietnamese did not accept President Nixon's proposals, our negotiators accused them of not negotiating in good faith. North Vietnam responded by *increasing* their attacks.

The North Vietnamese wanted us to leave South Vietnam, but they had no intention of themselves leaving. Their goal was to reunite South Vietnam and North Vietnam. Vietnam is thousands of years old and although they had often been two separate countries with quite different cultures, in the recent past they had been split by foreign powers. North Vietnam wanted the two countries reunited. North Vietnam did not call their half of the country "North Vietnam." They called it "Vietnam." Their position at the Paris Peace Talks, essentially, was that the United States would withdraw and they would remain in South Vietnam and participate in the

government with the eventual reunification of the North and South. However, I knew many South Vietnamese and the ones I knew did not want reunification with the North.

North Vietnam also wanted peace, but they were not willing to settle for anything close to our terms. It appears North Vietnam's leadership believed that stepping up attacks would not only apply more political pressure on President Nixon but also further their objectives in Paris. I believe North Vietnam's increased attacks and specifically the attack against Dong Ba Thin was meant to be a very dramatic statement that they were not leaving South Vietnam. It was meant to be a shout to President Nixon that the Peace Talks would not bring peace until their objectives were given more consideration.

## **Anti-War Movement**

The Parris Talks were greatly affected by the Anti-war Movement which, in late 1969, was going strong in the United States and the rest of the world. The North Vietnamese leadership correctly understood that the Anti-war Movement was having a significant effect on President Nixon and our politics. North Vietnam knew they could not defeat us militarily, but they were confident they could outlast us and they believed the Anti-war Movement would bring about our eventual withdrawal more quickly.

In 1969, 71% of the American public still approved of President Nixon's Vietnam policy, but every day more American citizens became discontented with the war and massive anti-war demonstrations were widespread and growing larger. Just five weeks before I left for Vietnam, North Vietnam's leadership, for the first time, publically cited the American Anti-war Movement. Their prime minister, Pham Van Dong, praised the war protestors and sent a letter to the movement's leaders.

On October 15, 1969, in a series of protests called "Vietnam Moratorium", the protestors held numerous demonstrations in different US cities. There were 50 U.S. Congressmen and a million U.S. citizens at the October 15 demonstrations along with millions of other protestors throughout the world. Our nation's 42nd president, Bill Clinton, helped organize and participated in the protest in England. Only one month later, on November 15, the very day I arrived in Vietnam, the largest protest in U.S. history, before or since, was held in Washington, D.C. The movement to end the Vietnam War was strong and growing. A substantial minority of our citizenry and most of the world were against the war.

It is incorrect, however, to believe everyone was against the Vietnam War. Soon after the "Vietnam Moratorium" marches, massive counter demonstrations were held. Those marches, labeled "Honor America" and "Pro War" demonstrations were in support of our involvement in Vietnam and intended to counter the effects of the anti-war demonstrations. They were attended and supported by many concerned and influential citizens, including the Reverend Billy Graham and Bob Hope. On July 4, 1970, approximately 400,000 people attended a rally called "Honor America Day" held in Washington D.C.

Many who demonstrated in favor of our nation's involvement in Vietnam believed the anti-war protests hurt our country and made the war more difficult to win. General Westmoreland, at a rally in Pittsburg, told 100,000 participants that the anti-war protests "tend to confuse Hanoi." The governor of Georgia, Lester Maddox, was blunt. He said the dissenters who organized the anti-war demonstrations "betray our boys in battle." Our country was deeply divided.

Those in the streets protesting against the War believed the Vietnam War was an immoral war that served no useful purpose. They believed it was a war we could never win and that it was a waste of lives and money.

Those who attended the counter demonstrations believed exactly the opposite. They believed, and most of us in Vietnam believed, that our country was making a great sacrifice for altruistic and humanitarian reasons. We believed we were stopping the spread of brutal communism. And, the communism that the people of South Vietnam experienced was exceedingly brutal. Yes, our side sometimes acted and reacted in brutal even shameful ways, but we could not hold a candle to our enemy. The atrocities they committed are unspeakable.

We believed that if South Vietnam fell to the Communists, other small nations would also soon fall. We believed in what was called “The Domino Theory” – that South Vietnam was a “domino” and if it fell, other countries would quickly fall as a result. And, I will add, many countries fell to communism before the Vietnam War and few have fallen since. The Vietnam War was not a waste. We did stop the spread of Communism. Furthermore, the South Vietnamese I knew appreciated us. They ***did not*** want communist North Vietnam to take over their country. The Vietnamese people are often very expressive and I personally heard many of them express their extreme dislike and **extreme fear** of Communism. The neighbors who live across the street from us are a Vietnam veteran and a Vietnamese woman he dramatically rescued near the end of the war, then married. She knows, firsthand, how brutal the communists were in her country and to this day she still sometimes wells up in tears over her memories.

North Vietnam clearly understood that major attacks that grabbed our country’s headlines had great influence on the American public’s perception of and attitude toward the war. The battle for Hamburger Hill and the Tet Offensive, large battles fought early in the war where many American soldiers were killed, each had a big influence on the American public. Even though both battles were clear U.S. military victories, they were political and psychological defeats that turned many Americans against the war. North Vietnam’s leadership knew that sensational attacks worked to their advantage. They knew our politicians would respond to more pressure from our citizens to end the war. After all, many of our senators and congressmen were actively against the war. Fifty of them participated in the “Vietnam Moratorium” marches! North Vietnam’s leadership believed that further pressure on our politicians would give them greater leverage in Paris, and the attack against Dong Ba Thin was a part of that strategy.

## **Why November 30th? The Moon was too bright!**

It is clear the sapper’s target was General Morris. The huge bomb they carried and the fact the sappers were congregated so near my tower make it obvious, to me anyway, and several experts, their mission was to kill our general and many others.

But why did they not choose a darker night?

I believe the sappers and their leaders in North Vietnam made the exceedingly dangerous decision to attack on November 30th because the much anticipated Draft Lottery was to be held the very next day – December 1st. The Draft Lottery was certain to be a huge media event that captured the front page of every newspaper and was the lead story of every television newscast. The North Vietnamese were trying to generate a big story that would compete with and interfere with the next day’s lottery.

The Draft Lottery was an enormously important event in the Vietnam War and it greatly affected the lives of tens of millions of young men who had not yet been drafted.

In a nutshell, the Lottery gave each eligible young man a number that was based upon his birthday. The 366 calendar days of the year (including February 29<sup>th</sup>) were put into plastic capsules and placed inside a container from which to draw them. As each capsule was blindly drawn, the birthday within was listed in that order to be drafted. For example, my birthday of December 31<sup>st</sup> was drawn on the 100<sup>th</sup> pull and received the number

“100.” So, anyone born on December 31st knew he would not get drafted until all eligible men who had the numbers 1 through 99 were drafted first. December 1st, 1969, was the first drawing, followed by a new drawing during each of the ensuing years. Each year males who turned 18, or otherwise became eligible through an expired deferment, would receive the number his birthday drew. Most importantly, everyone’s eligibility to be drafted lasted only that single year. Once an individual passed through that year, he could no longer be drafted. Incidentally, the birthdate that “won” the lottery, the first date drawn, was September 14<sup>th</sup>.

The Vietnam War was fought disproportionately by the sons of the working class. It was a huge issue for tens of millions of voters, and while campaigning, Nixon promised he would make the draft fair. The Lottery was his attempt to do that and it partially accomplished its goal in two ways:

First, it nationalized the selection process. Before the Lottery, each community was given a quota to fill each month and the members of the local draft boards often made their selections behind closed doors. Those local boards were sometimes corrupt and it often seemed that the men selected to be drafted were not the sons of the influential. It was a huge bone of contention and it had a lot to do with why so many Americans were against the War.

Second, the Lottery made it much easier for individuals to plan their lives. After the Lottery, each eligible man knew his prospects of getting drafted. If he got a higher number, he knew he would probably not get drafted. And once he passed through his year of eligibility, he knew for certain he would not get drafted. Before the draft, men who did not have a deferment were eligible to be drafted between the ages of 18 and 26, so an individual’s life was in a state of limbo for 9 years. Sometimes the lack of clarity about the chances of getting drafted caused postponed marriages, hastened marriages, muddled child bearing plans, disordered job opportunities and diminished house buying. It nearly doubled the number of men who went to college, which was the favored way to get a deferment. The issue of deferments itself could be the subject of a long discussion about unfairness. Only 2.6 million of my generation’s 30 million eligible men, about 9.7% of us, went to Vietnam. *More than 15 million* were given deferments.

The Draft Lottery was also a brilliant political move. Once a young man received a higher number, or once he passed through his year of eligibility, he and his family were much less likely to be so fervently against the War. After the Lottery, the number of protestors at the Anti War demonstrations declined considerably. Nixon surely knew the lottery would work to lessen sentiment against the War, and so did the North Vietnamese. The Lottery had an abundant effect on the anti-War movement, and that in turn had an abundant effect on the politics surrounding the War. It was important to tens of millions of American voters. The Draft Lottery was important and *positive* for President Nixon but, for the other side, it was important and *negative* to North Vietnam’s leadership.

The Lottery was also a statement to the North Vietnamese that, if necessary, our country was in the war for the long term. Why would we need a draft or a lottery if the War were to end soon? President Nixon had campaigned on the promise that he would end the war. By November, 1969, he had been in office for more than 10 months and the War was showing no signs of ending. Over 10,000 more American soldiers had died during those ten months and the Paris Peace Talks were stalled. The institution of the Draft Lottery helped President Nixon to show the North Vietnamese that, unless they came back to the table, and got more serious with the peace negotiations, we would fight for years to come.

The North Vietnamese leadership knew the Lottery would have a politically adverse effect on their war efforts and was a signal that President Nixon was digging in. I think the attack against Dong Ba Thin was meant to be a statement by the North Vietnamese that they were not intimidated. They wanted to make their own statement and compete with, maybe even over shadow, the headlines in the next day’s newspapers.

## Why So Early In the Evening?

The attack occurred on a night when the moon was too bright to sneak through a perimeter. They accepted that great disadvantage solely because it was the night before the Draft Lottery. But why was the attack so early in the evening? The time was simply too early for sappers to begin an assault, and it added a very dangerous element to their mission. An assault between 2 a.m. and 4 a.m. would have been more judicious. We guards called those hours the “Graveyard Watch.” During those hours the guards would have been more tired, and less alert. I know how tired guards were by 2 a.m. and we weren’t nearly as likely to use our five pound hand held Starlight Scopes. During the Graveyard Watch, one of our soldiers would have been far less likely to disturb one of the sappers, like Jim Benoit did, or see the sappers, like Leo Farrell did. Sappers did not want a gunfight with us. We had our enemy outgunned a hundred to one. A Sapper unit’s intention, always, was to move in, accomplish a very quick well planned mission, and move out before our guards or anyone else realized they were on our base. The sappers only advantage was surprise, and if they got detected that benefit was useless. They needed to come in undetected, so why did they come in at an hour when that was far less likely?

I have a good friend, Jerry Sanderson, who spent 8 years as an army MP (Military Policeman) during the Vietnam War. Jerry had specialized Army training in security, infiltration, and intelligence. As a civilian, he received further training as the Chief of Police of Collinwood, Tennessee. When I described the attack to Jerry, he was astounded at the early hour the sappers chose to penetrate. As soon as I mentioned that the sapper’s came in at 11:30 and before I could even finish the sentence, Jerry said to me, ***“They had to have had a reason. They absolutely would not have come in that early without some very good reason.”*** In my research, I did not find another sapper attack that started so early.

Why would the sappers come in so early? Why would they take the very substantial risk of encountering one of our men? They risked the success of the raid for some reason. And it cost them their lives.

The reason was because the North Vietnamese leadership wanted the story to make the morning newspapers back in the United States. Keep in mind, this all happened during a time before Ted Turner’s and the Internet’s 24/7 news. The American public received virtually all of its news from newspapers, the radio and evening television newscasts, and the newspapers were the most important. Reading the morning paper, while drinking coffee, was an American ritual that nearly every adult practiced.

For the attack to make the morning newspapers on December 1st, the morning of the Lottery, the attack would have had to be over by midnight Vietnam time. Back then, newspapers needed about 14 hours lead time to get a story on the street. I personally know this because I was a paperboy in my hometown of Danville, Illinois. For five years I delivered the Danville Commercial News, our evening paper, and the Chicago Daily News, a morning paper. I remember that when a major story broke before 2 p.m., even a major local story, it would not make the next morning’s paper. I have been in the back rooms of the Commercial News and know the process. It took 14 hours for the reporters, linotype operators, printers, and truck drivers to get even the *most important story* on the street. Moreover, a story from Dong Ba Thin would have taken an additional hour more. Vietnam was eleven hours ahead of the east coast of the United States, so the sappers needed the attack to end before midnight in order for it to make the important East Coast’s morning newspapers. North Vietnam’s leadership wanted the attack to be the headline story on the day the Lottery was drawn and they wanted it to make the morning papers of New York City, Washington D.C., Philadelphia, Atlanta, Miami, and Boston.

Incidentally, I started delivering newspapers when I was 10 years old. I walked more than five miles a day, often before sunup and after dark, sometimes in below zero weather and through rain, sleet and snow, and twice a day I crossed a very busy 4 lane highway at a point with no stoplights. And, not so incidentally, the highway I crossed was U.S. Highway 1, which, along with its counterpart through Dong Ba Thin, also had the nickname of “Bloody One.” My wife Mindy also delivered newspapers for the Commercial News. She was one of only a few “papergirls.” Parents today would not let a 10 year old cross busy highways to deliver newspapers before and after dark, but we lived in a different world back then. Mindy and I were paid *10 cents per customer per week* and we thought that was a lot of money!

## Duck Hook: The November Option

The night of the attack was a very pivotal point in the Vietnam conflict. The war was near its peak and 11,780 of our soldiers died that year, the second worst annual total of the War. The prior year, 1968, was the worst when 16,899 died. However, deaths were declining, primarily due to President Nixon’s attempts to deescalate the fighting. Foremost on the President’s mind and that of the public was the number of American casualties. The total killed each week was often a newspaper headline. Our local newspapers sent us copies of their paper free of charge. Those daily papers often arrived sporadically, with many a week late and others packaged together from two or three consecutive dates. But we did get the news and we knew about the concerns for us. And we appreciated it. President Nixon’s White House notes have recently been released and it is very apparent that keeping our casualties low was a top priority.

If the attack against Dong Ba Thin had been successful, it would have had a major effect on President Nixon. He would first have mourned over the loss of so many lives, then secondly deplored the thought that his personally conceived idea of the Draft Lottery would be associated with such a day of tragedy.

Historians now know, through recently released classified documents, that President Nixon was on the verge of drastically escalating the War during the fall of 1969. He had on his desk a top secret military plan called “Duck Hook” that would have instated a massive bombing and harbor mining attack against North Vietnam. President Nixon and his advisors often called it “The November Option.” Our country had curtailed bombing North Vietnam for more than a year because President Johnson resolved to show good faith during the Paris Peace Talks. The Talks, however, were now stalled and Peace seemed distant. The North Vietnamese were warned through Russian intermediaries that **“serious events were to happen if there were not movement toward a settlement.”** The President’s closest advisors, including Henry Kissinger, General Maxwell Taylor and General Earle Wheeler were counseling the President to pull Duck Hook’s trigger. Duck Hook would have been far more massive and brutal than President Johnson’s previous bombing campaign. This time, no holds would be barred and the most crucial elements of North Vietnam’s economy would have been destroyed. Duck Hook would have bombed North Vietnam’s dams, dikes, bridges, water and power stations and factories, and mined her harbors. Approximately 200,000 North Vietnamese citizens would have drowned if the dikes had been destroyed.

President Johnson, who literally sat at the table with the generals as his bombing missions were planned, never allowed non-military targets to be bombed and he would not allow military targets near population centers to be bombed. Duck Hook removed those restrictions. The plan was to bring North Vietnam’s economy to its knees and many tens of thousands, even several hundred thousand, North Vietnamese civilians and military personnel would have been killed. The plan even employed the possible use of tactical nuclear weapons. Henry Kissinger, the National Security Advisor, told his staff: “I cannot believe that a little fourth rate power like North Vietnam does not have a breaking point.” General Taylor, the World War II hero, advised Nixon that Duck Hook was

necessary to get North Vietnam back to the negotiating table. General Wheeler, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and other key advisors were pressing Nixon to give the order.

Duck Hook was designed to end the War quickly – the way we ended the wars against Germany and Japan – with brutal and relentless bombing of any and all targets, with nuclear weapons, when necessary.

President Eisenhower had threatened to use nuclear weapons to end the Korean War and Nixon was one of Eisenhower's closest advisers during that conflict. Eisenhower and Nixon are each on record that they believed that threat ended the Korean War. Each later confirmed that the threat was not a bluff – it was real. President Nixon carried that experience and attitude with him into his own Presidency.

President Nixon did not order Duck Hook, and he did not order the bombing of North Vietnam until the "Christmas Bombings" in 1972. It is believed by historians that Nixon did not order Duck Hook in 1969 because the fighting was beginning to slow down and American casualties were declining, but that he would have pulled the trigger if North Vietnam escalated their attacks. Would Nixon have ordered Duck Hook if the attack against Dong Ba Thin was successful? We know the President's closest advisors were strongly urging him to give the order. We know the plan was ready and President Nixon was on the verge of signing it.

Historians now know, through recently released documents, that when President Nixon finally decided to put Duck Hook on the back burner, he informed his Secretary of Defense, Melvin Laird, that there would be no attack on North Vietnam unless there was a "provocation." Nixon then went on to tell Laird, "**If the North Vietnamese try to break us with an offensive then we must hit them – and I do not mean tit for tat.**" It is now known that by 1972, Nixon regretted not ordering Duck Hook in 1969.

William Safire interviewed Henry Kissinger in 1973 and Kissinger seemed to make reference to Duck Hook when he told Safire "**We should have taken the doves on right then – started bombing and mining the harbors. The war would have been over in 1970.**"

For a more detailed understanding of Duck Hook and all that surrounded Nixon's decision to not sign the order, I recommend the very scholarly and excellent book "**Nixon's Nuclear Specter**" by William Burr and Jeffrey Kimball. Burr is a senior analyst at the National Security Archives. He directs the Archive's Nuclear History Documentation Project. Jeff Kimball is Professor Emeritus of History at Miami University.

The Draft Lottery was President Nixon's pet project and a project he was proud of. While campaigning, he had promised to end the war but the war "ended" for only the men who drew the higher numbers in the first lottery. It also ended for everyone once he lasted through his year of eligibility without being called to service. Nixon was typically cool and collected, but he was known to have a temper and could act impetuous. If his pet project had been stained by such a tragedy, he would have been furious.

Had that Bangalore torpedo killed a hundred of us that night, including a general, and 52 officers, President Nixon would have responded. Would his response have been a slap on the wrist, or would it have been very substantial? He told Melvin Laird that it would be very substantial. In my opinion, it is likely Nixon would have ordered Duck Hook. It would have been enough of a "provocation."

## Conclusion

Most Americans thought the U.S. bases in the Vietnam War were “behind the lines.” It was a misconception that was derived from World War II where the fighting truly was almost entirely confined to the front lines. In addition, those of us who knew better often did not correct that misconception. Our superiors told us to not write home letters that would worry our loved ones and when we got home most of us did not talk much about Vietnam. It is certainly true that our infantry and other direct combat troops were in more danger than the 75% of soldiers who were at the bases, however considerable fighting was brought to us.

If North Vietnam had demonstrated they could invade a base and kill a General and 52 other officers and many enlisted men, the American public would then have realized that even the bases were not as safe as they thought. The millions of Americans who had husbands and sons and a few thousand daughters at the bases would quickly have realized that *there were no front lines in Vietnam*. The already intense political pressure to end the war would have increased dramatically. It would have been a disaster that very well may have triggered President Nixon to order Operation Duck Hook.

We were good soldiers. And we were lucky. The attack against us failed and ended as only one of the tens of thousands of minor skirmishes of the Vietnam War – not even a footnote. However, it was meant by our enemy to be a devastating attack and it happened at a moment in the War that was extremely pivotal. If it would have been successful, it could have been THE emphatic exclamation point, the beginning of the end, to the entire War. It would have interfered with President Nixon’s Draft Lottery, and it would have disrupted the Paris Peace Talks. It would have strengthened the influence of the Anti-war movement and that would have increased the American public’s demand to somehow end the war.

A successful attack may have resulted in President Nixon bowing to increased political pressure and softening his position in Paris and that might have ended the War sooner. More likely, President Nixon would have responded by increasing our attacks against North Vietnam. If President Nixon would have ordered Operation Duck Hook to commence or, God help us, used nuclear weapons against North Vietnam, the Vietnam War would have concluded in a hurry. It would have ended in a way few of us, in retrospect, may have wanted.

The Vietnam War did not end for another five and a half years.