Second Tour of Duty in Vietnam

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Easter invasion - 1972

Between my first and second deployment to Vietnam, I had became familiar with the 0V-10 and was able to get flying time with the Air Force pilots at Kadena. Around the first of April, 1972, a call came out to Marines stationed in Okinawa for assistance in Vietnam. The North Vietnamese had launched an attack against South Vietnamese and United States forces and facilities in the South. The Second Division of the Republic of Vietnam Army had abandoned their posts, positions, and weapons along the DMZ in Northern South Vietnam, leaving civilians stranded and fleeing Southward. The South Vietnamese President had ordered the 2nd RVN Division, in total, back into basic training to reconstitute their force and replaced them in I Corps Zone with the Vietnamese Marine regiments currently stationed in the South, protecting, Saigon. The forces in the South would be supported by U.S. air and sea power and would be advised in their use by U.S. advisors. To assist in this requirement, the U.S. Marine Corps and Navy would provide trained personnel from Sub-Unit 1, First Air Naval Gunfire Liaison Company to work with and advise in the use of U.S. air support from the Navy, Marines, Air Force, and South Vietnamese Air Force. Naval gunfire support and expertise would come from U.S. naval gunfire ships positioned off the coast of South Vietnam, and tactics and weapon employment from U.S. Army, Air Force, and U.S. Marine advisors. Because I was already assigned "duty involving flight operations" (DIFOT) orders, as a secondary job, my name was sent out by the Third Marine Division to check in for possible further assignment to duty with Sub Unit One, 1st ANGLICO, headquartered in Saigon, South Vietnam, as a tactical air observer. On April 13th, 1972, ten U.S. Marine officers, four majors and six captains, found ourselves on a C-130 from Kadena Air Force Base in Okinawa, Japan, on our way to Tan Son Nhut, Air Force Base, near Saigon, RVN. After landing we proceeded to the U.S. Military Advisory Command Vietnam (MACV) compound and met with LtCol. De wane Gray, Sub Unit One's commander. He briefed us that the current members of his small unit were spread throughout the country, providing support to the ARVN and Vietnamese Marines in directing U. S. fire support on the attacking North Vietnamese and Viet Cong forces. Those who were on flight orders would be flying with U.S. Air Force pilots in their 0V-10s, 0-2s, and 0-1s from Da Nang Air Base, Vietnamese pilots in their 0-1s and TA-37s from bases in central and Southern South Vietnam.

I was one of the six AOs who were assigned to Da Nang. Our mission was to become familiar with the locations of South Vietnamese RVN and Marine units, North of Hue City to the DMZ and assist in providing air and naval gunfire support to these units when requested through communication with their U.S. Advisors and the establishment of communication with air and naval gunfire ships. He said that we would be seeing Russian made T-52 tanks, 152 mm artillery weapons, 37mm, 57mm, shoulder-fired, heat-seeking missile, effective to an altitude of up to 7,000 feet. LtCol. Gray told us that an AO and an Air Force pilot had been shot down by a SA-7 near the Cua Viet River two days before we arrived. It was suspected that they were taken

prisoner by the NVA. He directed us not to take chances with actions that were not worth the risk. With this direction, he wished us well and sent us off to a night's effort to rest before catching flights to our assigned locations.

Da Nang

We six Marine AOs arrived at Da Nang Air Base on the 14th of April. We checked in with the 20th Tactical Air Support Squadron, USAF, received our equipment to be used in the OV-10, met some of the pilots with whom we would be flying, and were briefed on the procedures for receiving our daily missions. We were then shown where we were to live on the base. We would be flying missions daily for 3-5 hours in the 0V-10s with Air Force pilots, who would be acting as tactical air controllers, airborne, and we would be directing the naval gunfire of ships located off the East coast of our area and communicating, not only with the ships, but with the U.S. advisors, located on the ground with the South Vietnamese troops.

OV-10 Bronco

The OV-10s would be armed with white phosphorous missiles, used to mark targets for air strikes. We AOs would be assisting the pilots in locating targets after communication and confirmation was established with ground elements. The AO also provided another set of eyes to watch for enemy activity on the ground, such as muzzle flashes, blasts and dust from artillery, tanks, anti-air missiles, and shore based weapon fire. There were several occasions when the pilot and I would be conducting coordinated and simultaneous air strikes and naval gunfire on enemy targets in proximity with maneuvering ground forces. The pilot would be directing the air strikes on the UHF radio, I would be talking to the U.S. advisor on fm frequencies , communicating with the Naval Gun Fire ship on HF, and we would be coordinating our actions over the plane's intercom. Each of us had a pad of paper attached to a "knee board" and would be writing down locations, frequencies, call signs, and other information as received over the radios. It took a month of "on the job training" to become proficient.

We were struggling with the difficulties of seeing targets, or much of anything, from the flying altitude of 10,000 feet, dictated by the Seventh Air Force command, due to the altitude range of the enemy's SA-7. The AOs even carried binoculars to try getting visual recognition of possible targets. The vision adaptation was difficult to achieve because of the movement and orientation of the plane. The North Vietnamese had placed a large caliber artillery piece, pointing South, from a cave mouth on the North side of the Ben Hai River (the DMZ). When our ships providing naval gunfire would venture North, near the area of this artillery piece, the weapon would be rolled out and would begin firing at them. It would then, be rolled back into the cave before acquisition could be made. This not only endangered our ships, but interrupted the attack of enemy targets in the area South of the DMZ.

New tactics with negative results

On one morning in early June, another AO, Capt. Christiansen and I planned a two-plane mission to go north toward the DMZ, looking for enemy weapons locations. The plan involved one plane diving to a lower altitude, where the AO could see objects on the ground and the other plane's pilot and AO would fly at a

higher altitude and watch for muzzle flashes, or other signs of enemy activity, and plot the locations for attack. The low plane would recover from the dive and trade places with the high aircraft. This seemed to work well during the first couple of maneuvers. We were able to get good sightings on the caves and positions along the Cua Viet and Ben Hai Rivers. We were about to begin the third dive, with Chris being the low aircraft, when I heard a scream over the radio. Chris had been hit. An AK-47 round had come through the left side of his canopy, behind the pilot, had gone through his left small finger, entered his binoculars and rattled around inside the glasses. His little finger had been almost severed. He told us that he had been hit and was heading back to Da Nang. He explained that his hand was the only pain that he could feel and they could make it back without assistance. He was thankful that he had been holding his binoculars in front of his chest. He was reluctant to remove his glove from the injured hand. As they flew out of our sight, we climbed back to 10,000 feet, continued to verify the locations we had previously plotted and returned to Da Nang. When we landed, I caught a ride to the Hospital to see Chris. His finger would never look the same, but not a career ending wound. His binoculars would have a nice hole in one side and would make a rattling sound when shaken, from the AK bullet. After a short stay in recovery, he was on his way back to the States.

A month later, one of our AOs and his pilot were flying along the coast, North, when their OV-10 took a hit from an SA-7 in the tailpipe of the left engine. The tailpipe is positioned just above the wheel well, with all of its associated hydraulic lines. The missile's 2 ½ pound charge explosion had severed the hydraulic lines, causing the left landing gear to extend down and fail to lock. The Pilot and AO discussed the situation and weighed their options) 1) To return to Da Nang, have the runway foamed and attempt a landing on a slick surface and hope that the limp landing gear would retract, 2) To eject from the disabled aircraft and hope to be picked from the ocean by one of the nearby naval gunfire ships, 3) Try landing on the beach and hope the gear would retract. After checking the cabin of the aircraft, the AO observed some white cloth material hanging from the parachute behind his ejection seat, leading him to believe that his chute was damaged to an unknown extent. This ruled out option 2, since the pilot could eject safely, but since the AO was in the damaged back seat, he would be burned by the rocket ejection of the pilot in the front seat. The plane is designed to have the back seater eject first to avoid the rocket's heat blast on the AO. Any ejection would result in the AO's chute not deploying properly. The 300 gallon centerline fuel tank would have to be jettisoned to permit any belly landing, whither on land or water. This action would cause insufficient fuel for the plane to make it back to Da Nang. It was decided to jettison the fuel tank and risk a water landing and hope for a pick up by a friendly ship. The ships in the area were notified of the decision and the pilot began lining up for a water landing. As the left landing gear contacted the sea, the entire plane began to cart wheel across and through the water it flipped several times and came to rest upside down with the nose pointing downward. It began to sink. The AO unbuckled his seat harness, opened his side window and escaped the sinking plane. When he surfaced, he saw no sight of the pilot. He dove back down to search. The pilot had been knocked out by the impact with the water and was unconscious in a sinking aircraft, out of reach of the rescue, the AO gave up attempts to reach him and swam to the surface. A life raft suddenly popped to the surface. The AO cut the line attaching the raft to the plane with his survival knife. He noticed a group of Vietnamese rowing a small boat toward him. He fired two rounds from his .45 in the air and they hesitated. A motorized craft from one of the gunfire ships arrived within minutes and scooped the AO from the water and took him back to the ship for debrief and recovery before being flown back to Da Nang. Two days later he flew another mission North and, upon return from an uneventful flight, he turned in his flight gear and headed back to the states. The plane and the pilot's body were recovered a few days later. A month after that incident, another pilot and AO were shot down along the coast, near the DMZ, and captured by NVA soldiers. They were taken to Hanoi and held for 2 years, before their negotiated release occurred.

On October 6, 1972, most of the AO's, from the original group arriving in April had left Vietnam for Okinawa or the states. I was left as the senior Marine AO in I Corps at Da Nang. That day, I was taking a UH-1 flight from Da Nang North to Hue City to visit the Vietnamese Marine Advisor with whom I had been working to provide information on enemy forces in Quang Tri, City. I had been scheduled to take a mission flight that afternoon on our regular rotation. Feeling that I may not be back to Da Nang in time to make the mission, I switched missions with CWO Buzz Boltz, a Marine Warrant Officer, who had joined our group from the 3rd Marine Air Wing, a couple of months earlier. The switch gave me time to make the coordination visit and get back in time. My pilot and I took off from Da Nang Main on the later mission at about dusk. As we approached the operating area I began making radio contact with Boltz. He had been very busy, directing naval gunfire, while his pilot, Air Force LtCol, McCormack, with experience in flying B-52 aircraft before joining 20th TASS, was running air strikes on multiple enemy positions in the Quang Tri area. Boltz told me about the targets in the area and the results of those he attacked in the last three hours. We exchanged other necessary information and Boltz headed South toward Da Nang. My pilot and I resumed control of air and naval gunfire on targets as directed by the U.S. Advisors on the ground. After a couple of hours, we were contacted by the Direct Air Support Center from Da Nang asking if we had contact with WO Boltz and LtCol. McCormack. I told them that we had taken their mission two hours ago and had not contacted them since. The DASC asked us to try to contact Boltz and McCormack again. We made several attempts over the next hour to make contact with them. Weather began to close in and we were instructed not to attempt to return to Da Nang, but rather divert West to Ubon, Thailand, to avoid the storm. As we flew West, we continued to attempt contacting Boltz and his pilot, with no success. We returned to Da Nang the morning of October 7th to learn that CWO Boltz and LtCol McCormack had not returned from their mission. Search efforts found only the rear hatch door of the OV-10 and some organic material in the sea North of Da Nang. The incident has haunted me for 45 years. That was my assigned mission, my plane, and my pilot. CWO Boltz had agreed to take my place to allow me to take the later flight. A memorial service was held for the two airmen at the squadron later that week. Our good Father had shown his will and, for a reason known only to him, I was allowed to live on.

Still another example of how quickly bad tactics can have disastrous outcomes occurred the week before I left RVN for home in October, 1972. My pilot and I were taking visual reconnaissance of the area around Quang Tri on a bright, sunny day. The AO that I had relieved on station earlier had told me that a lot of ground fire was coming from freshly dug trench lines throughout the city. The fire was being directed at any aircraft that ventured over the trenches. We tested the report from 10,000 feet altitude and, sure enough, the area lit up with sparkling muzzle flashes as we neared the trenches. We called for air support with napalm and 250 lb bombs. While we were waiting for the fighters to arrive, I proceeded to contact the advisor on the ground and the naval gunfire ships off the coast for indirect fire support. While I was adjusting the artillery in the vicinity of the trenches, a flight of two Air Force F-4s came on station with the requested ordinance aboard. We ceased the indirect fire and focused on briefing the F-4 flight on to the trenches and fired our marking rounds near the trench locations. The first pass of both fighter planes set off the ground fire of high volume. The bomb drops were about 100 meters

off target. My pilot advised the fighters of the intense ground fire and to change their angle of attack. The lead F-4 began his second run. The ground fire lit up again. As the fighter came to release his bombs, his left wing began to smoke and detached. The plane rolled to the left, inverted and splashed into the river North of Quang Tri. My pilot and I became silent. There was no sign of parachutes, or any other indication of survival of the F-4s crew. The second fighter was over the target and dropped his ordinance on the trench lines. As he pulled out, my pilot uttered, “You’re cleared,----------I’m sorry.” We did a visual check of the area around the scene of the crash and the trench lines. The fighters had inflicted some damage, but it was obvious that more work had to be done. We headed back to Da Nang to debrief and console the air crew of the second F-4 of the flight; another scene that has been vivid in my mind since that October day in 1972.

After the completion of my second tour in Vietnam, I received orders to report to the U.S. Army Field Artillery School, Fort Sill, Oklahoma, for duty as an instructor.