

VIETNAM II

Memoirs of Major Donald Babb

(10 June 1968 to 15 July 1968) (3 August 1968 to 17 September 1968)

On June 3, 1968, I flew from Albuquerque, New Mexico, to Kansas City and visited with Mom, Dad, Judy and Gary and girls, and family before flying on to Lawton, Oklahoma, to attend the five week Field Artillery Officer Vietnam Orientation Course at Fort Sill. The course was a good refresher and brought me and the other officers attending up to date on the tactics and techniques being employed by artillery units throughout Vietnam. A number of officers and soldiers recently returned from service in Vietnam shared with us their first hand experiences. All valuable information and the course seemed to be finished too quickly.

I returned to Kansas City on July 17, 1968, and stayed there until flying on to Albuquerque on July 27 to visit with Scott and Jon for a few days and then flying on to San Francisco on August 1. While in Kansas City I had the opportunity to attend the tenth reunion of my high school class. It was a fun evening. I also had several discussions with Dad concerning service in Vietnam. I was aware that some individuals and organizations in the USA had been sending fake telegrams to families of soldiers serving in Vietnam saying their son had been killed or severely wounded, etc. I told Dad if such a telegram was sent to Mom and Dad they should immediately contact the local office of Congressman Randall and get confirmation from the Department of the Army. The Army was sending telegrams to families only after receiving official notice from the casualty section at the Army Headquarters in Vietnam. At that time my assignment was to be an Artillery Liaison Officer to the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment and I would be participating in combat operations.

The four days I spent in Albuquerque with Scott and Jon went by all too quickly. Then it was on to San Francisco and the Oakland Army Terminal and finally to Travis Air Force Base for my flight to Vietnam on August 2, 1968.

We flew into the Bien Hoa Air Base just northeast of Saigon on Saturday night, August 3, 1968. From there we were transported to the Replacement Center at Long Binh. Long Binh was a massive facility with lots of activity. All the hubbub and commotion staggers one at first glance. It seemed to me at the moment that every single one of the more than 520,000 troops assigned to Vietnam were all there at Long Binh and each one was going a different direction and speed. On August 7, 1968, my assignment was changed. I was being assigned to the 23rd Artillery Group specifically to command A Battery, 2nd Battalion, 32nd Artillery at Fire Base Camp Saint Barbara. Lieutenant Colonel Billy McDonald, Commander, 2nd/32nd Artillery, met me at Long Binh and we caught a ride on a helicopter flying to the city of Tay Ninh in Tay Ninh Province about 60 miles northwest of Saigon. The Headquarters of both the 23rd Artillery Group and the 2nd/32nd Artillery were in Tay Ninh. I signed in at the 23rd Artillery Group and met the Commanding Officer, Colonel Harold G. DeArment. I received updates on locations, missions and current operations of all elements of the 23rd Artillery Group. Colonel McDonald and I made quick trips by helicopter to visit and tour B and C Battery's

locations. On August 10 we went by helicopter to Fire Base Camp Saint Barbara and I would take command of A Battery.

Colonel McDonald conducted a brief change of command ceremony and I took command of the battery from Major Richard Ranc who would be reassigned to Headquarters and Headquarters Battery, and a primary duty as assistant operations officer, 2nd/32nd Artillery in Tay Ninh city. On August 18, Major Ranc was reassigned to the 25th Infantry Division Artillery. Soon after the change of command ceremony, Colonel McDonald and Major Ranc returned to Tay Ninh city. It was time to meet the soldiers of Battery A.

A Battery was a “heavy” artillery battery made up of four 175mm self propelled guns. The M-110 chassis could be reconfigured to mount either the 175mm gun tube or an 8-inch howitzer gun tube. Each of the four guns had its’ own pad or firing position, an ammo bunker and an equipment bunker.



The picture above shows the 175mm gun configuration, below the 8-inch howitzer.



Fire Base Camp Saint Barbara (Saint Barbara is the Patron Saint of the Artillery) was located about 20-25 miles north, northeast of Tay Ninh city in an area carved out and built by an Engineer unit in March 1968 and occupied by the battery in April 1968. Inside dimensions of the fire base were 400 feet by 500 feet. Built up bunkers (walls) along each side were all covered by a dirt berm to a height of nearly 20 feet. At the base each wall was nearly 40 feet thick. The bunkers served as both the living quarters for the soldiers and as fighting positions for defense of the perimeter. In addition to the individual positions, there were two .50 caliber machinegun firing positions built into each wall and centered in each wall was a 105mm recoilless rifle position. We had a 4.2-inch mortar as well as two 81mm mortars that were used mainly to fire flares. Depending on the movement that was detected outside the perimeter, we could choose to fire a series of flares far enough out in order to back light any movement detected. In addition to the munitions with flares we had a supply of high explosive rounds for the mortars and would use these from time to time. At each corner there was an air defense artillery section consisting of a quad-50 and a searchlight. The quad-50 element was four .50 caliber machineguns as pictured below.



The searchlight was capable of using infrared as well as switching to a one million candle power white light. At night the searchlights would operate using infrared as they swept the perimeter. When movement was detected, the searchlight sections would coordinate with each other to be certain two sections were detecting the same movement. The quad-50 section chiefs would contact the fire direction center concerning the movement being detected. The officer in charge of the fire direction center would alert the battery and everyone would man their respective firing positions with their individual weapons or would man the .50 caliber machinegun and 105mm recoilless rifle positions. When everyone was in place the command would be issued to the two searchlights sections who had detected the movement using infrared to switch to white light. White light was the signal for the quad-50's and other soldiers to open fire. 15 to 30 seconds was all the time usually needed and cease fire was ordered. The searchlights would switch back to infrared and continue to monitor the perimeter.

Most days an Armored Cavalry section would lead a convoy between Tay Ninh city and Camp Saint Barbara bringing food, mail and ammunition resupply. The cavalry unit would spend the night and each morning would sweep around the perimeter, search and pickup dead Vietcong and North Vietnamese Army (NVA) soldiers. All documents, maps, etc., found on the bodies were sent to the battalion S-2 (Intelligence) for evaluation and assessment. More often than not the dead were very, very young, mere boys than young men.

The battery was authorized 115 soldiers and most positions were filled. In addition there was an Infantry platoon attached, a searchlight and quad-50 platoon, and a heavy weapons platoon. About 180 total. Outside the bunker walls are a series of wire fences some 50 meters between each fence. And between the outer two fences there were

more than 4,000 land mines of various types along with trip flares, booby traps, etc. [The cavalry units always seemed to have one or more pet dogs with them when they came to the fire base. And even though we would warn them about the mine fields, dogs being dogs, they would frequently wander in those forbidden areas and “Boom!” a mine would explode and “dog gone.”]

After taking command I began a series of inspections and reviews of each section of the battery. I had some 30 days to verify all equipment assigned to the battery was accounted for. I began my evaluation with 1LT Noble and the supply clerk, PFC Kevin Dugan. We reviewed the copies of documentation in the notebook maintained in the supply bunker. Copies of hand receipts were on hand for all items and everything appeared to be in order. My next step was to meet with each section chief and go over each hand receipt item by item. I found it worked best to conduct these assessments one at a time and at irregular intervals.

The fire direction center, mess, communications, firearms and weapons, and supply sections were in good shape. If an item was not physically present there was a record showing why, usually because it had been turned in to battalion for repair or replacement. The individual gun sections, however, were another matter. Several items were simply gone and could not be accounted for.

I now had a list of items to take to battalion and discuss with the property book officer. Unable to schedule a helicopter to transport me to battalion, I had the First Sergeant coordinate with the Armored Cavalry unit a road trip to Tay Ninh city. The battery had too many trucks and jeeps parked at Camp Saint Barbara and they would be better off in the motor pool at the battalion location. On September 2, 1968, two 2 ½-ton trucks and one jeep from the battery joined the vehicles from the Armored Cavalry unit for the trip to Tay Ninh city. I had given battalion our estimated departure and arrival times and would report to battalion following arrival in Tay Ninh. I rode in the jeep and 2LT Lucas rode in the 2 ½-ton truck immediately behind the jeep. We were approaching the half way point when suddenly there was a huge explosion behind me. Thinking ambush, all vehicles began pulling off the road alternating left and right. The Armored Cavalry unit set up a perimeter and waited for an attack that never came. But the explosion had demolished the 2 ½-ton truck that had been following my jeep. 2LT Lucas was killed, the driver and two soldiers riding in the rear of the truck sustained serious injuries. I radioed for a Medical Evacuation Helicopter [The medical evacuation helicopter units were referred to as “Dustoff” throughout Vietnam and when you needed one you always called for it by that name] and it arrived in about twenty minutes. We loaded the casualties onto the Dust off helicopter and it lifted off taking them to the medical unit in Tay Ninh. We then reassembled the convoy and made the rest of the trip without further incident.

When I reported to battalion after arrival in Tay Ninh, I asked Colonel McDonald to go with me to the medical unit to visit the soldiers who had been wounded in the explosion during the road trip and brought to Tay Ninh. We spent some time waiting at the hospital to visit the soldiers and to see how they were holding up. Two of them had leg fractures and the third had an arm fracture. The doctor we spoke with said the men would be transferred to Japan for rehabilitation and perhaps even to the USA. It certainly

seemed their war was over. LT Lucas' body was in the process of being readied for transfer to the graves registration element at Long Binh where his body would be prepared for placement in a casket and shipment home to the USA. I stopped by the S-1 office and obtained the name and address for 2LT Lucas' next of kin, his parents. Writing that letter of condolence to his parents was a difficult task, but one I needed to do as soon as possible. After returning to Camp Saint Barbara I conducted a brief memorial service for LT Lucas, a man who had been with the battery for such a short time.

While in Tay Ninh, I spent time with the battalion property book officer going over the equipment listed as assigned to my battery. I signed for all the items I had inspected and knew were present at Camp Saint Barbara. I annotated the property book for the items that were missing and could not be accounted for and did not sign for them. The property book officer made sounds of exasperation telling me there would need to be a report of survey, etc., etc.

I attended briefings and meetings at both the battalion and group operations centers. I learned that preparations were underway for a series of listening devices to be dropped by aircraft or delivered by artillery fires off the sides of the road and trails that ran from Tay Ninh to the vicinity of Camp Saint Barbara. At impact, the listening devices would be buried to varying depths and all that remained above ground was a very thin wire-like antenna. The devices were supposed to be sensitive enough to pick up the sounds of people walking or running or even bicycling nearby and then to transmit the sounds on a specific frequency. Battalion and each battery were being issued radios to receive the sounds and signals of movement. Because the listening devices were being dropped or fired into areas considered hostile, then those sounds and signals transmitted and received were interpreted as coming from Viet Cong or North Vietnamese Army elements as they passed by. The firing battery's could then coordinate a time on target fire mission to cause havoc with the movement being detected. Over the next two weeks I was able to listen to the radios in my fire direction center as several of these firing missions were carried out.

Back at Camp Saint Barbara the days seemed to speed up as First Sergeant Dixon Barfield prepared for his final day with the battery before going to Tay Ninh and then on to Long Binh and a flight to the USA. His tour of duty in Vietnam was coming to a close. A new First Sergeant would be assigned but in the meantime First Sergeant Barfield helped the chief of firing battery learn the ropes so he could fill in for a while. Sergeant Barfield had a Polaroid camera and was taking photos before leaving the fire base. The picture below is an extra one he took of me.



There were frequent visitors to the fire base. In addition to officers from the battalion and group flying in from time to time, we also received visits from the 25th Division Commander, Major General Williamson, pictured below.



Vietcong and North Vietnamese Army movement and activity in Tay Ninh Province seemed to be on the increase. Camp Saint Barbara came under harassing mortar fires daily. Each time we had a fire mission, the tube of one of the guns would be elevated and could be easily observed by anyone in the tree lines surrounding the fire base. That always seemed to trigger one or two mortar rounds being fired at us and the explosions always got our attention. And again each day around dusk we would receive

another round or two just to harass us it seemed. We had three soldiers very lightly wounded, more like scratches, so we were lucky.

By the end of the first full week of September, the harassing mortar fires were getting too damned accurate. It seemed like the center of the fire base was now zeroed in and that caused no small amount of uneasiness. Everyone began to move at a quick time, especially during fire missions. No one went without their helmet or flak jacket except when inside one of the bunkers or when trying to grab a quick shower [The fire base had its own Artesian well for water so we had an unlimited water supply. The Armored Cavalry and Infantry elements that came through the area and stayed in the fire base from time to time really liked the idea of unlimited water for showers.]

The fire base received its share of visitors – Battalion, Group, 25th Division and II Field Force – seemed to drop in unannounced as often as not. If they were bringing mail or some supplies then the visit was a plus. Somewhere around September 7, Major General Walter Richardson, Deputy Commanding General, II Field Force, dropped in for a visit. He was aware of the harassing mortar fires we were receiving and before he departed that day he asked, “Is there anything you think you need that you don’t have?” I responded, “Yes sir there is. I would like to have a 105mm howitzer and gun crew, and I would like to have a pallet or two of flechette ammunition for the howitzer.” General Richardson asked me, “Why Captain?” “For direct fire purposes,” I replied. “There is one easy way to get into this fire base and that is on the roadway coming straight into camp through the three fence lines. If the Vietcong or North Vietnamese Army elements launch a full scale attack, then I think they will try to breach the fences along that roadway. With a 105 howitzer and the flechette rounds we could sure make them pay a heavy price.” General Richardson thought about my response for a few moments, then said, “Let me see what I can do Captain.”

Two days later we received a call on the radio that two Chinook helicopters were on approach to the fire base and requested assistance in directing them where to drop off their respective loads. One Chinook had a 105mm howitzer suspended by sling load; the other Chinook had a sling load of ammunition. As soon as the howitzer and ammunition were on the ground inside the fire base, one of the Chinooks landed near our helicopter pad and offloaded the gun crew for the howitzer, then took off for home base. The Chief of Firing Battery and the 105 howitzer section chief got together and laid out plans for emplacement, ammunition storage, and personnel bunker. This task was completed during the following two days.

By September 12 the Vietcong and North Vietnamese Army activity was really picking up. The road from the fire base to Tay Ninh was shut down and closed off. As a result, all supplies came by air – when they came that is. We learned that Sergeant Barfield was due to leave Vietnam and return to the USA on September 20. He would leave the fire base on September 16 going to Tay Ninh where he would stay a day or two before going on to Long Binh and from there a flight to the USA.

Each night from September 12 on we were getting small scale probes, probably platoon size elements of the Vietcong or North Vietnamese Army. And more frequent harassing mortar fires during the day resulted in even more soldiers getting wounded,

though none were serious. You could almost taste it; an attack was coming, but when. We could only guess, but we were ready to defend Fire Base Saint Barbara.

On September 15 I received a letter from Mom telling me that her brother Ben, an Air Force Lieutenant Colonel, had died of a heart attack. His burial would be in Arlington National Cemetery. I wrote a letter dated September 15 to Mom and Dad telling them how sorry I was to learn that Ben had died. [My letter was postmarked September 18; Mom and Dad received it on September 19] A helicopter picked up Sergeant Barfield on September 16. Later that night the probes were heavier but broke off before midnight.

Between 1700 hours [5:00pm] and 1800 hours [6:00pm] on September 17, the mortar fires changed from what had been harassing type of a round or two or even a few over a period of an hour or so to what seemed like a barrage.

There were explosions going off all around, then nothing.

“I thought I knew more or less what to expect, but I didn’t. Not Really....I guess I’m glad I went, because I learned something....I learned that the price you pay for seeing the show is steeper than you think....I guess I’ll spend a lot of time wondering if it was worth the price of admission.”

- Vulcan’s Fire
by Harold Coyle and Barrett Tillman