



## Hot Pursuit in the DMZ

Alpha One was one of the firebases a few miles south of the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), part of the so-called MacNamara Line. The base was built on the highest sand dune about a mile inland from the South China Sea. Most people think of Vietnam being jungle or mountains, but along the ocean there were beautiful beaches and sand dunes. In the hot season it was nearly unbearable, yet in the wet season temperatures could be in the upper 40's and lower 50's, a humid cold that chilled our Duster crews, especially those from the south.

After nationalist forces defeated the French in the first Indo China War, the DMZ was established by the Geneva Conference in 1954 as a way of separating the nationalist and communist North from the largely Catholic and non-communist South. The DMZ ran roughly along the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel, with the Ben Hai River at the center and five kilometers on either side of the river designated as "demilitarized." In fact the DMZ was a free fire zone, meaning you did not need to seek clearances in advance to bombard anything. The NVA occupied the northern half and had a huge flag that was visible with the naked eye from Alpha Two.\* This irritated us considerably, but the US and Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVNs) did not have any permanent presence in the southern half of the DMZ.

Our unit, 2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon, Alpha Battery, 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion 44<sup>th</sup> Artillery (Air Defense) had a section of Dusters (two Dusters with a crew of about four each, plus a section sergeant) at Alpha One and other firebases along the DMZ. One Quad 50 crew from G battery, a medic, two advisors to the ARVN battalion, and sometimes a Marine was at the base to coordinate naval gunfire from ships off the coast. This made up the non-Vietnamese population of Alpha One, a total of about 15. My tour was from mid-1969 to mid-1970, which was fairly quiet along the DMZ. Too quiet, perhaps, as boredom, drug use, and racial tensions raised their ugly heads.

Alpha One was home to rotating battalions of ARVN infantry whose job was to prevent or slow down infiltration from the North. Some of the Vietnamese battalions were a sorry bunch, sullen and unmotivated. Other battalions were well-led, aggressive and some of the best infantry I saw while in Vietnam. Some of the worst ARVN troops would steal us blind, sneaking into our bunkers during siesta time to take radios or anything that wasn't tied down. When caught, ARVN discipline was harsh. Infractions were often dealt with by being beaten with a bamboo stick in front of the assembled troops, then placed for days in the sun inside a barbed wire cage about two feet high and six feet on a side. The only protection from the sun was some cardboard from boxes of C rations. Sometimes our men would give the prisoner some water, which the ARVNs would not dare to do.

While Alpha One lacked mud and dust, living and working in sand had its challenges. Sand would creep its way into our bunkers, beds, food, and boots. And sand could wreak havoc with the 40 mm guns if not constantly cleaned. Drinking water, food, and

ammunition had to be flown in by chopper, or by convoy on a difficult and often mined road during the dry season. Food was mostly B and C rations, although later in my tour A rations were sometimes flown in for a welcome hot meal. To bathe, the guys would go outside the wire to an old bomb crater that had filled with water. It was customary to throw in a grenade before bathing in order to kill the leaches, but it also stirred up the muck. Our bunkers were made with stout timbers and covered with sandbags. The firebase was surrounded by concertina wire which often became covered with sand blown by wind. Even with the Dusters and Quad 50, I seriously doubt that the base could have resisted a determined attack, because the wire was so vulnerable and the fields of fire somewhat limited.

My job as platoon leader was to ensure the firebases were supplied, rotations coordinated, conflicts dealt with between our troops and the ARVNs, and otherwise ensure that we were helping to defend the firebases. In some ways we were on perpetual guard duty, hoping that our firepower would deter ground attacks. We rarely got outside the wire on offensive operations. I worked out of Battery HQ in Dong Ha, and often visited the Alpha One and Alpha Two firebases to check on things.

We were into a pretty good routine, when a new ARVN mechanized infantry battalion rotated into Alpha One. This looked like a crack outfit, and I got along well with the American advisors. One day they radioed and asked me to come to Alpha One from Dong Ha for a discussion. I feared there was some problem, and managed to catch a chopper ride after sitting on the landing zone for about three hours. But instead of a problem, they and the ARVN commander had a plan. The idea was to send a platoon of ARVN infantry on foot into the DMZ at night to attempt to make some hostile contact at daybreak. Then, acting under the "hot pursuit" doctrine, a company of ARVNs on armored personnel carriers (APCs) would venture into the DMZ to "rescue" their comrades and pursue the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) troops. NVA troops were often infiltrating south through the DMZ, and the advisors suspected that there was a system of bunkers and a cadre to support NVA infiltrators. They argued that if they were attacked, it was permissible to engage in hot pursuit. Would we be interested in coming along to provide some extra firepower?

I had never heard of the hot pursuit doctrine, but the plan sounded good to me. I and most of the Duster crews were fairly bored with the routine and going into the DMZ sounded like a serious adventure. But I knew that going into the DMZ was not a decision a first lieutenant could make alone. I caught a ride back to Dong Ha to discuss the request with my battery commander and the battalion XO. They said "sure, why not?" We began by moving another section of Dusters and an APC to Alpha one, going overland and on some primitive roads. (The only other way to get to Alpha One in the wet season was to take a US Navy Landing Ship Transport from Dong Ha to the mouth of the Cua Viet River, then go up the coast on the beach, then back inland.)

Guns were cleaned, extra ammunition was stocked in the APC, tracks were maintained, and we waited nervously while the ARVNs were seeking contact. Sure enough, by mid-morning we got a call from the advisors that the ARVN platoon has made contact, and it was time to saddle up and pursue hotly. The ARVNs had four or five APC loaded with infantry, and some ARVNs piled onto our three Dusters. With the ARVNs in the lead, we headed out the gate going northeast across the sand: The Dusters, our APC, and the ARVN APCs made up our small convoy. I was hoping that we were just dealing with a small element of NVA, because our force was not particularly large.

We had only gone a little ways when I noticed an anti-tank mine just visible in the sand. Looking around, there were lots of them that had been partially uncovered by the wind. We stopped the convoy, and carefully, very carefully backed up the tracks

because my lead vehicle had straddled one of the mines. This was not an auspicious start, but we set off again, trying to stay out of soft sand. Later we would find that the minefield was designed to protect Alpha One from NVA attack, but its location had been largely forgotten.

We were again making good time heading northeast toward the beach. . I confess to being both totally exhilarated and quite apprehensive at the same time, a feeling I will never forget. Unfortunately, one of the Dusters tried to shift gears in a soft spot and got stuck. By this time we were cruising toward the beach at a good clip, and the ARVNs did not want to stop to tow the stuck Duster. I looked back to see Lt. Dick Wiedenbeck of Florida and the rest of the crew on the stuck Duster with the most disgusted looks of disappointment. I felt that they could get unstuck and make it back to Alpha One on their own, so on we went.

Our convoy got to the beach, then headed north for a mile or two. There was no sign or marker indicating that we were in the DMZ, but by map and compass I knew we were inside the boundary. The beach did not seem like anything extraordinary, but as soon as we climbed a dune running parallel to the beach, we were really, really inside the DMZ. The Ben Hai river which was at the center of the DMZ was still a bit to our north, and the terrain was still sand dunes, but littered with hundreds and hundreds of rounds of unexploded ordinance: mortar and artillery rounds, bombs of all sizes, and naval gun rounds, including 16 inch shells fired from a US battleship, probably the New Jersey. It was somewhat surreal as we picked our way around the ordinance, and soon located the ARVNs, who had been in a bit of a firefight, but with no serious casualties. The NVA troops, probably a platoon, had retreated out of the sand dunes to the west across some old rice paddies into somewhat fortified tree line.

We advanced more or less on line in the sand when an ARVN APC hit a land mine. All the infantry quickly bailed out, and the APC soon began to burn. Again, no major injuries, but it was sobering. We continued on line to where the sand dunes ended and the rice paddies began. We were about 50 to 75 feet above the old rice paddies, still on sand dunes about a quarter mile from the tree line. The advisors called Quang Tri for a couple of Cobra gun ships, who arrived about 15 minutes later. Meanwhile, we found some recently abandoned bunkers and blew them up with C4 that I had brought along in the APC. (I suppose carrying the blasting caps in a wooden box on the pocket of my flack jacket was not the smartest thing to do.) I was worried that not moving could make us vulnerable to NVA artillery or mortars from the north side of the Ben Hai River, but we were not shelled.

The Cobras raked the tree line, and we could hear the pilots talking excitedly about the NVA that they had spotted, even though we did not see any enemy troops. Then they ran out of ammunition and headed back to Quang Tri to "get a load of nails", meaning flechette rounds. When the Cobras returned they were asked to circle overhead, as the ARVN infantry and APCs decided to advance toward the tree line. The ARVNs wanted the Dusters to provide covering fire over their heads while they advanced. We wanted to shoot some rounds since we had come this far without firing a shot. So we did as asked. Our APC had a .50 caliber machine gun, and one of our battalion mechanics, who loved to see some action, was manning the .50 and rattling off rounds. The Dusters began accurately pounding the tree line as I directed fire using smoke rounds from my grenade launcher. We had designated guys whose only job was to slap the gunners on the helmet when I gave the cease fire order because the noise and smoke was terrific and the danger of hitting the ARVNs so acute. Our guys did a magnificent job of keeping accurate fire on the tree line. When the ARVNs got close to the tree line, we ceased fire and the ARVNs took it fairly easily with small arms and the M60s on

the APCs. I don't think the instructors at Fort Bliss envisioned 40 mm anti-aircraft guns being used as close infantry support, but it worked.

The ARVN claimed a body count of about 15 or 20 NVA. I could not confirm or deny the body count, but the number seemed reasonable. The ARVNs and the advisors thought it was a good idea to get the hell out of there while we were still in good shape, which is what we did. Everyone made it back to Alpha One safely, and we were wired as we rehashed the days' events. To this day I carry the vision of the rusty 16 inch shell, fuse intact, laying on the sand. The Duster that got stuck had managed to extricate itself and made it back to Alpha One on its own.

Apparently the ARVNs were impressed, as they threw some medals our way. The Battalion HQ made some reports up the chain of command, and about a week later we got the word that General Abrams had sent a telex message that said that we were "not, repeat not" to enter the DMZ again. No one seemed really upset. Clearly the NVA didn't worry about being in the DMZ.

Thirty eight years later, as I recall the tale, I am sorry and embarrassed that I do not remember the names of most of the fine men with whom I shared the incursion into the DMZ. And I cannot recall which Dusters went into the DMZ. These were first rate soldiers who had their acts together, and I was proud to serve with them. While I can't be absolutely positive that I have recalled all of the events accurately, I have made every attempt to do so.

If you were on this little expedition or have information on it, please share your recollections. I would love to make it more accurate and acknowledge those who participated.

Phil Millam  
Winthrop WA  
[Millam.Morgan@methownet.com](mailto:Millam.Morgan@methownet.com)

\*I was not at Alpha 2 on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July 1970, but it was reliably reported to me that our Duster crew had a few beers and decided to see if they could hit the NVA flag using long range 40mm ammunition (rounds which did not explode when the tracer expired). It was also reported that the flag came down for the duration of the day. Later I saw a news clipping that the NVA had complained to an American journalist that they had been shelled by "light artillery". I recall that it was the Avenger Section under Sergeant Robinson. Tsk, tsk.