AIR DEFENSE ARTILLERY

ADA in Vietnam—page 10

FALL 1983

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About the Cover

Artist John Paul Jones' cover illustration shows an M-42 "Duster" arriving at a newly constructed firebase in Vietnam. Dusters, denied airborne targets, were mainstays of perimeter defenses.

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Air Defense Artillery was created as a separate branch in the midst of the Vietnam War. Hanoi never risked sending the MiGs south of the demilitarized zone during America's long involvement in Southeast Asia, but air defenders served in a variety of ground support roles. This issue of *Air Defense Artillery* contains a special section dedicated to the air defense artillerymen who distinguished themselves and the new branch in the rice paddies and jungles of America's most unpopular war.

AIR DEFENSE ARTILLERY

Editor
William Blair Case

Assistant Editor
Claire Starnes

Associate Editor
Brian R. Kilgallen

Art Director
Terry G. Smith

Circulation Manager
Trinydad Ramirez

Mowing Grass: ADA In Vietnam

by Blair Case

Nearly a decade has passed since the last American helicopters, laden with refugees, departed the rooftops of Saigon, but critics of American military commitment to El Salvador and Lebanon are quick to draw inexact parallels between the two hot spots and Vietnam.

The television networks broadcast a sense of deja vu with every three-minute spot about the time bomb ticking away in Central America. El Salvador even looks like the same jungle. Shells exploding inside the sandbagged Marine fortifications at Beirut resound like echoes from the siege of Khe Sanh.

Vietnam remains, for better or worse, very much a part of the national consciousness.

The names of air defense artillerymen who died in Vietnam are etched in the black granite of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, but the exploits of ADA units which fought in Southeast Asia have gone largely unrecorded.

This is their story.

Air Defense Artillery was designated a branch in the midst of a war in which the air threat it was to defend against never put in an appearance. The sort of war ADA units fought in Vietnam's rain forests wasn't the sort of war they trained for on the desert ranges of the U.S. Army Air Defense Center at Fort Bliss, Texas. They called it "mowing grass."

Anti-aircraft guns were considered obsolete prior to the American escalation in Vietnam. The Army had turned its anti-aircraft guns over to the Army National Guard and air defense artillerymen were already being called missilemen. The Army was forced to scrounge M-42 "Dusters" and Quad 50s from the National Guard to equip automatic weapon battalions for Vietnam. The automatic weapon battalions, after a crash training course at Fort Bliss, Texas, began arriving in Vietnam during 1966.

"They took us out to Oro Grande," recalled SGM Fred Handley, who trained with the 1st Battalion, 44th Artillery, the first automatic weapon battalion sent to Vietnam, at Fort Bliss, Texas. "We trained on Dusters that had belonged to the National Guard. We practiced against aerial targets. We expected to defend against aircraft in Vietnam, but we never got a shot at

one. We could see them sometimes—NVA (North Vietnamese Army) helicopters flitting around just across the border in Cambodia, but they always stayed just out of reach."

The automatic weapon crewmen went to Vietnam expecting to combat enemy aircraft but took on enemy infantry instead. They fought outside their MOS but in the finest tradition of Air Defense Artillery.

The air threat evaporates quickly in most wars. The U.S. Army hasn't fought a battle without air superiority since 1942. The air defense artillerymen who went ashore at Normandy on June 6, 1944, for the most part, trained their anti-aircraft pieces on German Panther and Tiger tanks. Even the German 88mm dual-purpose anti-aircraft gun, the most famous gun of the war, made its reputation against Allied tanks.

The men who crewed the Dusters and Quad 50s hoped to become the first anti-aircraft artillerymen credited with bringing down an enemy aircraft since World War II but, when the air threat failed to materialize, the Dusters and Quad 50s were assigned ground support roles. Vietnam was on-the-job training for air defense artillerymen trained against aerial drones who had to improvise tactics as they went along.

The Dusters and Quad 50s added their fire to the tremendous volume of fire American units expended in Vietnam. The U.S. reliance on firepower was criticized by those at home who could never visualize a Viet Cong force moving through the jungle in regimental strength, and refused to admit the North Vietnamese Army was a participant in the fighting, but the tactics worked. Firepower wrecked the VC, who never really recovered from their losses in the 1968 Tet Offensive, and it made the trip south down the Ho Chi Minh Trail a one-way journey for the typical NVA recruit. The North Vietnamese knew the tactics were effective. They used the same sort of tactics to fight insurgents in Cambodia and Laos.

Still, the myth persisted that the Army was beaten by small squads of guerrillas even when, two years after the American withdrawal, NVA armor rolled blitzkrieg-style over South Vietnam.

Air defense artillery units had been in the war zone two years when they learned they'd become part of a new branch. Air Defense Artillery was separated from Field Artillery by Department of the Army General Order 25 in 1968, the Chinese Year of the Monkey and the year American public opinion, shaken by the Tet Offensive and campus protests, soured toward the war.

Dusters, because of their firepower and maneuverability, drew a lot of fire. So did Quad 50s and Vulcans and, for that matter, everything else in Vietnam with the missile and crossed cannon insignia attached. That included ADA officers who went out as field artillery observers or served as field artillery fire direction center officers. Some ADA officers went out as field artillery forward observers or served as fire direction center or artillery liaison officers while others who were assigned as advisors to South Vietnamese infantry-type units were awarded Combat Infantryman Badges.

The ADA NCOs and enlisted soldiers on the Dusters or behind the Quad 50s seldom saw their battery headquarters or an ADA officer. They were orphaned out to mechanized infantry or armored cavalry units scattered the length and breadth of Vietnam. They provided convoy escorts on the "Street Without Joy" (Highway 1), "circled the wagons" with combat engineers in places like the Ia Drang Valley, floated down the Mekong in barges and conducted reconnaissance by fire for infantry heading into the Michelin Rubber Plantation.

The Hawk units were the only units in Vietnam whose primary mission was air defense. They protected theater assets like the huge logistic base at Cam Ranh Bay or "the world's busiest airport" at Tan Son Nhut. They played a waiting game in their fortified bunkers, surviving frequent rocket and mortar attacks, fending off VC or NVA sapper assaults and living for the day Hanoi might risk sending the MiGs south.

Air Defense Artillery's new FM 44-1, *U.S. Army Air Defense Artillery Employment,* concludes that the principal air defense lesson learned from the Vietnam conflict concerns the losses suffered by Air Force and Navy aircraft and Army helicopters from enemy short-range air defense artillery. In one

A DUSTER defends the high ground overlooking a U.S. basecamp.

case, a helicopter was shot down by fire from a crossbow. The manual also notes that the North Vietnamese high-altitude air defense weapon systems forced aircraft to fly at altitudes where they were subjected to short-range fire, thus demonstrating the importance of deploying a mix of complementary air defense weapon systems.

The realization that gun systems might not be obsolete after all explains Vulcan's appearance alongside weapon systems borrowed from Air Defense Artillery's past, the Dusters and Quad 50s scrounged from the Army National Guard. Thus Vietnam, even though the air threat never put in an appearance over the southern portion of the battlefield during the American involvement, played an important role in shaping the new combat arms branch by ensuring that gun systems would continue to be a part of the air defense artillery weapons mix.

Vietnam did little to give air defense artillerymen experience in air defense tactics, but it did provide the branch's junior officers and NCOs with combat experience, an important asset now that the Korean veterans are on the edge of retirement. Today, air defense artillery training is geared toward participation in the air-land battle—the battle America can't afford to lose—but if the Army is sent to fight another Vietnam, Air Defense Artillery has plenty of soldiers who remember how to use air defense weapons in a ground support role.

Dusters

DUSTERS delivered effective indirect fire against NVA or VC troop concentrations.

The airborne troopers' uniforms were the color of the Central Highland's red clay. The three troopers had come down out of the mountains just before the monsoon at the end of their one-year tour and had been rousted out for berm duty their last night in the base camp. They belonged to the 101st Airborne (Airmobile) Division and knew next to nothing about tracks, having spent their entire tour miles from the nearest road or overhead cover. They'd never seen a Duster until they came onto the berm line in the gathering twilight.

"What is it?" asked the gunner.

"It's a Duster, an M-42," the track commander answered.

"You guys armored cav?"

"Naw. We're ADA."

"AD what?"

"Air Defense Artillery."

The three troopers mulled that over for awhile.

"Looks like it can really rock 'n' roll," one trooper said.

"Want to see it mow some grass?" the gunner asked.

"Sure."

The gunner and track commander climbed into the turret and fired four

long bursts beyond the concertina wire.

"Pyschedelic!" one of the troopers exclaimed.

"Airborne!" said another.

"Bet it draws a lot of fire," the squad leader said.

"No lie, GI," the track commander answered.

The three troopers picked up their rucksacks and moved on past the fighting positions adjacent to the Duster, which no short-timer wanted to occupy, to other fighting positions farther down the berm line.

The infantry mostly didn't care how high the Duster could elevate its twin 40mm barrels. Many of the 11-Bravos, combat infantry who went to Vietnam straight out of advanced individual training at places like Fort Benning, Ga., or Fort Polk, La., were unaware that the Duster was an anti-aircraft weapon or that such a thing as the newly created Air Defense Artillery Branch even existed. The Duster, with its high silhouette, open turret and bulky configuration, wasn't a sleek or impressive looking weapon, but the infantry and cavalry, who recognized a good anti-personnel weapon when they saw one, liked what they saw. They put Duster to work as point security for convoys, assigned it the most likely avenues of approach to cover on perimeter defense and used it to conduct recons by fire.

Convoy duty was dangerous and nerve racking. Normally, the lead Duster covered the left side of the road while the rear track covered the right side. Dusters caught in an ambush pulled off the road, traversed their guns and provided covering fire for the convoy's other vehicles as they hurried to escape the kill zone. The tactic was effective, but it meant Duster crews spent eternities in the kill zone.

The twin 40mm, fully automatic gun mounted on an M-41 light tank chassis gave Duster a combination of devastating firepower, mobility and strength. The 40mm projectiles it fired were often mistakenly compared with 40mm grenades. Both projectiles were of the same caliber and both were equipped with point-detonating fuzes, but there were few other similarities. The 40mm high-explosive, incendiary, anti-tank projectile weighed approximately two pounds and traveled 2,870 feet per second while the 40mm grenade projectile weighed eight ounces and was propelled at approximately 250 feet per second. The effect of the HEIT round against personnel in the open or inside hasty fortifications was appalling.

The Duster also delivered effective indirect fire. Enemy units learned to set up mortar, recoilless rifle and rocket positions just outside the maximum range of the Duster's regular 40mm, self-destruct ammunition. The NVA tried this tactic during the siege of Ben Het in June 1969. The Duster crews responded by loading one gun with regular ammunition and one gun with long-range ammunition. The crews, upon observing mortar, recoilless rifle or rocket flashes, made their direct-fire adjustments with regular ammunition, lulling the enemy into a false sense of security, and then switched to long-range ammunition.

Most Dusters towed a trailer that served the crew as a baggage car for personal belongings, C-rations, clean uniforms, extra ammunition and "SP" packages filled with stationery, chewing gum and cigarette cartons. The trailer that SFC Steve Nash's track was towing took a direct hit from a 122mm howitzer in Cambodia. "We lost all our worldly possessions," Nash said. "Our extra uniforms, the letters from home. Everything."

The normal load also included culvert halves, chain-link fencing and empty sandbags. When the Duster pulled into a nighttime defensive position, the crew would unload the culvert halves and emplace them near the gun. Once the crews had covered them with two to three layers of sandbags and had constructed a blast wall, the culvert halves became bunkers that provided effective protection from mortars. The chain-link fencing, when staked out in front of the weapon, stopped rocket-propelled grenades.

Duster crewmen, like field artillery cannoneers, were vulnerable to mortar fire because they manned their guns during mortar attacks and returned fire while riflemen sought the shelter of bunkers and foxholes.

SFC Jerry Kiker and his Duster crew were dueling VC 60mm mortars at LZ Oasis near Pleiku when their track took a direct hit that killed the gunner and disabled the gun. The explosion blew Kiker and the driver off the track. They got back on the track and continued to return fire with M-16s and the track's M-60 machine gun.

The track's mascot, Tiger, a Vietnamese dog with a keen eye for defilade, survived the mortar attack by hiding under the track. Tiger was still with the track weeks later when Kiker returned from having his wounds patched up at Pleiku. One of the crewmen took Tiger home with him to Ohio.

ADA crews assigned perimeter defense worried mostly about sapper attacks which were sometimes followed up by infantry. A typical attack against an isolated firebase or nighttime defensive position began with a mortar barrage designed to drive the defenders into their bunkers. Once the sappers, incredibly brave men who stripped to loincloths and slung satchel charges around their bodies, were snaking through the tanglefoot and concertina wire, the enemy would switch from mortars to RPGs, hoping the defenders would fail to distinguish the RPGs from incoming mortars and remain in their bunkers. Having cleared the wire, the sappers would dash through the firebase or NDP, hurling satchel charges into the bunkers. If the sappers caused sufficient havoc, the enemy commander might follow up their success by launching a full-scale infantry assault. Being overrun became the ultimate Vietnam nightmare.

SGT Mitchell Stout of Battery C, 1st Battalion, 44th Artillery, a Duster battalion, was in a bunker with members of a searchlight crew the night an NVA sapper company hit the Khe Gio

TIGER, who hid beneath the track while SFC Jerry Kiker and his crew dueled a VC mortar, was the only crewmember to emerge from combat at Firebase Oasis without a scratch. The mascot was still with the track when the wounded crewmen returned from the hospital. One of them took the Vietnamese mascot home to Ohio.

Bridge. An enemy grenade was thrown into the bunker. Stout, a 20-year-old Tennessean, ran to the grenade, picked it up and started out of the bunker, cradling the grenade close to his body to protect the other soldiers in the bunker. As Stout reached the door, the grenade exploded.

A Duster spitting fire on the perimeter during "mad minutes" was sometimes so intimidating that it prevented ground attacks from being launched. The Duster was often the number one objective of attacks that were launched. Knowing that the enemy would attempt to silence Dusters at the beginning of an attack, units made it SOP to move Dusters from one alternate firing position to another after dark in order to conceal their position.

Duster crewmen inside perimeters pulled four-hour shifts on the gun, peering out through the concertina wire at the darkness. Some GIs swore the jungle moved at night. Sometimes VC or NVA sappers would slither up in the darkness and turn the claymores around so they were pointing toward instead of away from the perimeter. Then they'd make a little noise, hoping a GI would squeeze the firing mechanisms hooked up to the claymores. Some units went on a full alert at 4 a.m. so that everyone in the perimeter would be awake during the hours just before dawn which were considered the most likely hours for a sapper attack.

The Dusters spent most daylight hours pulling road security or convoy escort duty. They spent nights in basecamp or firebase perimeters or simply "circled the wagons" with the unit they were supporting.

Three Duster battalions served in Vietnam. Each battalion had a battalion headquarters, four Duster batteries, an attached machine gun (M-55) battery and an attached searchlight battery. The automatic weapon battalion, with a personnel strength, counting attachments, of approximately 1,000, was one of the larger-type battalions in Vietnam.

The Duster batteries had a battery headquarters and two firing platoons. The machine gun batteries had a battery headquarters and six machine gun sections, while the searchlight batteries consisted of a battery headquarters and three searchlight platoons.

The 1st Battalion, 44th Artillery, was the first automatic weapon battalion to reach Vietnam, arriving in November 1966. A self-propelled Duster battalion, the 1/44 Artillery was to become one of the most decorated artillery units in history, supporting the Marines at places like Con Thien and Khe Sanh as well as Army divisions in South Vietnam's rugged I Corps region.

The battalion was assigned to I Field Force Vietnam Artillery and was located at Dong Ha. In 1968, it was attached to the 108th Artillery Group. The 1/44 Artillery became part of XXIV Corps Artillery and moved to Da Nang in 1970, later coming under control of the Da Nang Support Command just prior to its departure from Vietnam in 1971.

The 4th Battalion, 60th Artillery, arrived in Vietnam in March 1967 and became part of the 41st Artillery Group of I Field Force Vietnam at Qui Nhon. In February 1968, it was attached to I Field Force Vietnam Artillery and moved to An Khe in June 1968. The battalion moved to Tuy Hoa in late 1970 and left Vietnam in December 1971.

The 5th Battalion, 2nd Artillery, arrived in Vietnam in November 1966 and was stationed at Long Binh. The battalion left Vietnam in June 1971.

A Duster arrives at a firebase still under construction. Duster's withering fire made it a mainstay of perimeter defense.

Quad 50s

QUAD 50s were often airlifted into isolated firebases and assigned the most likely avenue of approach to cover.

The Quad 50 looked like a spiny crustacean that had crawled out of the South China Sea. Quad .50-caliber machine gun batteries were attached to the Duster battalions, but they went wherever the tactical situation dictated. Some were mounted on trucks to provide convoy security while others manned perimeter defenses. Some went places tracks couldn't go. Quad 50s floated through the Mekong Delta on barges and were airlifted onto remote firebases in trouble.

There was a Quad 50 on Firebase Hellen which perched on a razorback ridge overlooking a mountain stream called the Rao Trang. Sheer cliffs surrounded Hellen on three sides, but the ridgeline tapered downward at the southern end of the firebase. The 101st Airborne troopers who manned the firebase figured any ground assault would have to come over the landing pad at the south end. They positioned the Quad 50 at the edge of the landing pad.

Firebase Hellen was expecting rain. A company of the 101st, caught in an attrition trap within mortar range of the firebase, had been reduced to 26 men in five days of fighting and three NVA regiments had knocked a battalion of the 101st off Firebase Ripcord a few kilometers to the west.

The Quad 50 crew lived in the mud at the low end of the firebase, waited for enemy sappers and listened to war stories told, with slight variations, from the Mekong to the DMZ. They heard stories about MiGs streaking down the A Shau Valley, a major infiltration route, on moonless nights; of NVA resupply helicopters painted solid black. No one knew for sure if the story about the NVA helicopters were true, but the air defense artillerymen dreamed of catching one in the sights of their Quad 50.

One night a helicopter swooped out of the night and strafed Firebase Hellen, spewing .50-caliber bullets the length of the firebase. The helicopter caught the Quad 50 crew, awakened by the clattering of the .50-caliber door guns, as they scrambled for their gun. One of the crewmen went down with a .50-caliber slug in the leg.

The helicopter turned out to be a command and control ship from a neighboring battalion. The ship, out for a nighttime recon, had wandered out of its area of operations and the battalion commander had mistaken kerosene lanterns being carried down the middle of Hellen for lights aboard a VC sampan. The neighboring battalion commander realized his mistake when Firebase Hellen began firing illumination rounds. He radioed the firebase tactical operation center that he wanted to land and apologize.

The crew of the Quad 50 was in no mood for apologies. They had the gun elevated and were praying the helicopter would try a second pass.

The firebase's artillery liaison officer telephoned the Quad 50 position. "The helicopter is friendly. It's going to come in at the lower pad," said the liaison officer.

"Good," said the Quad 50 crew chief, "we'll get him when he hovers."

The TOC had to radio the helicopter to stand by, out of range, while the infantry company commander ran down and ordered the Quad 50 crew off the gun.

Four Quad 50 batteries fought in Vietnam.

Battery E, 41st Artillery, assigned to the 41st Artillery Group of I Field Force Vietnam, arrived in March 1967 and departed in December 1971. The battery, headquartered at An Khe and Tuy

Hoa, served with the 4/60 Artillery.

Battery G, 55th Artillery, arrived in Vietnam in February 1967 and left in July 1971. It was stationed at Chu Lai and was attached to the 23rd Infantry Division.

Battery G, 65th Artillery, arrived in Vietnam in October 1966 and departed in December 1971. It served with the 1/44 Artillery at Dong Ha until it was attached to the 108th Artillery Group in 1968. The battery was sent to Da Nang as part of XXIV Corps Artillery in 1970.

Battery D of the 71st Artillery served two tours in Vietnam. During its first tour (November 1966 to June 1971) it was stationed with the 5/2 Artillery and later the II Field Force Vietnam at Long Binh. During its second tour (September 1971 to March 1972) the battery was attached to XXIV Corps and stationed at Da Nang.

QUAD 50s were often mounted on trucks to increase their mobility.

Hawk

HAWK positions resembled sandbagged fortresses. During the monsoon, trenches dug through the fortifications turned into moats.

The Army could never figure out a way to use Hawk in a ground support role, though many probably spent sleepless nights pondering the possibility.

The 6th Battalion, 56th Artillery, a mobile Hawk unit, arrived in Vietnam in September 1965. The battalion was assigned to the 97th Artillery Group and was stationed at Tan Son Nhut and Long Binh. In 1968, it was posted to Chu Lai and attached to the AMERICAL Division. Battery C of the battalion was inactivated in Vietnam June 5, 1969. The 6/56 Artillery left Vietnam in August 1969.

The 6th Battalion, 71st Artillery, a mobile Hawk battalion, arrived in Vietnam in September 1965. It was stationed first at Qui Nhon and was then assigned to the 97th Artillery Group and relocated at Cam Ranh Bay in 1966. The 6/71 Artillery left Vietnam in June 1971.

Hawk personnel provided manpower for base reaction teams, were frequently subject to rocket and mortar attack and spent many hours on "red alert" when unidentified aircraft were detected penetrating the DMZ. But it was mostly a waiting game. The missilemen fired live missiles during annual service practices on islands in the South China Sea, complained about the lack of target drones, petitioned higher headquarters to move a Hawk unit north to take on NVA helicopters rumored to be operating in and just below the DMZ and protested the move of some Hawk batteries to Korea and Thailand.

They also became masters at field fortifications, building sandbag fortresses that could withstand mortar attacks with virtual impunity.

Approaching a Hawk position, you got the feeling of entering a walled city. During the monsoon season, the Hawk positions were protected by moats.

"We took 'ditchers' and dug trenches all through the perimeter," remembers Joe Riddell, today a civilian training specialist at the Air Defense Artillery School. "The trenches were for drainage and for protection against rockets. If you were walking through a position when the rockets started coming in, you'd take a header into one of the trenches. During the monsoon, they filled up with water."

The Hawk positions, however, were not invulnerable.

SSG Kenneth Freeman, today with the 7th Infantry Division at Fort Ord, Calif., won't forget the day a 122mm rocket plunged through the roof of his battery's TOC and splintered the operations table. Luckily the rocket was a dud.

Vulcan

CSM Vincent De Santis' Vulcan silhouetted by sunset glow. The night belonged to "Charlie" until massive firepower produced by weapons like Vulcan decimated Viet Cong ranks during the Tet 1968 Offensive.

The GIs thought Vulcan was sexy, almost as glamorous as a Spooky or Cobra gunship.

The 1st Vulcan Combat Team was deployed to Vietnam for combat evaluation in November 1968. They were scheduled to leave in March 1969 but stayed an additional 45 days to finish mopping up after the Tet 1968 Offensive. The team consisted of five Vulcans, two officers and 21 enlisted men.

A typical Vulcan action took place

close to Firebase Thunder III on Highway 13 near Quan Loi. A force of six armored cavalry assault vehicles and one Vulcan was clearing the road for a convoy from Saigon when they were ambushed by about 200 NVA. Five of the six ACAVs were hit by rockets during the first 15 seconds. The two lead ACAVs were stopped in the road. The cavalry commander, CPT Harold Fritz, was hit and seriously wounded. His column, with the damaged ACAVs blocking the road, was pinned in the kill zone.

The Vulcan, third in line, pulled to the left around the second ACAV and then back onto the road. It traversed its guns to the rear and fired a 30-round burst. The track commander then switched to 10-round bursts to conserve ammunition and radioed Thunder III for help. During the first critical minutes of the ambush, the Vulcan was the only weapon delivering effective fire against the ambush.

Despite his wounds, Fritz, who won the Medal of Honor that morning, was able to move to the Vulcan and direct its fire into the enemy assault. The Vulcan delayed the attack long enough for Fritz to regroup his unit, remove machine guns from the destroyed ACAVs and establish a defensive position.

A ready reaction force, consisting of a tank platoon and a Vulcan, roared out of Thunder III. The relief force broke through to the beleaguered column about 30 minutes after the firefight began. The battle lasted about four hours. When it was over, the cavalrymen counted 41 enemy dead.

"Without the single Vulcan, the unit would have been annihilated," Fritz said. "The survival of my unit during the first critical minutes of the ambush can be attributed to the Vulcan's ability to engage the enemy quickly and place a high volume of fire on the target.

"Initially, the Vulcan gunner could not see the assaulting force because of dust and smoke, so the Vulcan gunner started firing into the most likely area of enemy concentration. The shock and sound caused the assault to waver.

"On that day in Vietnam, it was just a case of having the right gun, at the right time, in the right place. We just would not have made it without the Vulcan," Fritz said.

Vulcan had passed its combat test.

Prelude to combat, 1st Vulcan Combat Team crewmen inspect their newly arrived tracks near Saigon.

"The NVA made a big mistake by firing first at the ACAVs instead of the Vulcan," says CSM Vincent De Santis, who missed the fight near Thunder III but served with the Vulcan team in Vietnam. "They probably didn't know what Vulcan could do."

De Santis, one of the five Vulcan squad leaders picked for the evaluation team, recalls that Vulcan passed its combat evaluation test with flying colors. "Vulcan worked all the time. You didn't get the mechanical jamming you get with Dusters."

The evaluation team commander, CPT John S. Wilson, who was wounded during an earlier tour with the 1/44 Artillery, died when a rocket crashed through the roof of a bunker. The Vulcan crewmembers, most of them veterans of previous tours, returned to Fort Bliss after their six-month tour.

Members of the 1st Vulcan Combat Team are decorated at the end of the team's tour in Vietnam.

Snap Shots

A member of SSG STEVE NASH's crew took this photograph of him standing near a typical Vietnamese "hootch."

SFC Steve Nash

I volunteered for the draft and did three tours in Vietnam. I was just 17 and wasn't about to be drafted, but I wanted to go. I wanted to be in the Army. I did three tours in Vietnam. I did the first two with the 5th Battalion, 2nd Artillery, in '68 and '69 and the last one with the 1st Battalion, 44th Artillery, in '70 and '71.

My first track was called the *Triple Deuce.* We were the second track in the second squad of the second platoon. I started out as an assistant gunner and worked my way up to track commander and squad leader. I spent the second tour on a track called *The Dirty Five.* I spent the third tour with the 1st of the 44th up in I Corps on a track called *Pa Kettle.* We were the "front door" on convoy duty and *Ma Kettle* was the back door.

I was wounded twice. The second time was worse. I was on *Pa Kettle* when it happened. We were pulling convoy duty not far from Firebase

SSG STEVE NASH and the crew of *The Dirty Five.* "There were four of us and the track made five," Nash said. Nash, the track commander, is wearing the "boonie hat." SP4 Richard Allen (left), the driver, is now a civilian and lives in Ohio. PFC David Johnson (center), the cannoneer, died in Vietnam. SP4 John Kravatz, on the track with Nash, went home to Texas. The photograph was taken near Cu Chi in 1969.

Tennessee near Dau Tieng and had to leave the second track behind because it had a blown engine. We made a looping left turn and Charlie hit us with B-22 and B-40 rockets. A rocket came through the ready rack and exploded inside the tub. The explosion knocked the track off the road into a rice paddy. My assistant gunner lived just long enough to scream my name. I got hit by shrapnel in the abdomen.

We got the track back on the road and were headed for LZ Bird, the nearest firebase, when we saw a Huey. We popped smoke grenades and the Huey came down and picked up the wounded. I was taken to the 24th Evac and ended up in Japan.

I didn't know anything about the protest movement. I must have been the biggest dummy around. I thought we were fighting for the American way of life. Then Jane Fonda started her "send the boys home" campaign. The GI got no support. We had to support ourselves.

I got a "Dear John" letter my first tour.

SFC Jerry Kiker

I was drafted. I figured "go over, do your job, serve your time and come home alive." Vietnam made you grow up. I went over at 19 and took everything—the way we live here at home—for granted, and then I saw the way the Vietnamese lived.

I was with Delta Battery, 4th Battalion, 60th Artillery, in '69 and '70. We were in the Central Highlands near Pleiku. At Fort Bliss, we were trained in anti-aircraft tactics, not in ground-support tactics. In Vietnam, you learned as you went along.

I was wounded at LZ Oasis. One night we started taking incoming. We could see the mortar flashes and were on the gun returning fire. I was the squad leader acting as cannoneer. We took a direct hit from a 60mm. A lucky shot. It blew me and the driver off the track and killed the other two guys on the track. The driver—we called him Moose—and I climbed back on the track. It was inoperable because of the mortar hit. We continued returning fire with M-16s and the M-60 machine gun on the track.

SFC Jerry Kiker's temporary home, a sandbagged bunker.

The next morning, they took me into Pleiku where they cut the shrapnel out of my legs. It wasn't that serious. I stayed in the base camp for 30 days and then went back to the track.

There was a purpose to begin with, but now I don't know what it was. I feel we let the Vietnamese people down. I feel America let the Army and the country down.

When I got home, the only reception I got was from my family. My friends didn't seem to realize I'd been gone. I don't think about Vietnam much anymore. Not unless someone asks me a direct question.

CSM Vincent De Santis

I was a missile man. They put me with a Hawk battalion at Cam Ranh Bay. I looked around and said, "I want to go and fight the war." I kept putting in paperwork. Finally, I met a sergeant who worked in personnel assignments and he told me about Dusters. I asked what Dusters did and he told me. A couple of weeks later, I was with the 1st Battalion, 44th Artillery, on a Duster with the Marines on the DMZ. The crew taught me everything I needed to know. I learned on the gun.

CSM Vincent De Santis crewed Dusters and Vulcans.

When I got back to Bliss, they were putting together a Vulcan team for combat evaluation in Vietnam. I volunteered. We trained on Vulcans with an AIT unit. They handpicked five

squad leaders and five crews. The squad leaders were all Vietnam vets like me. The crews were about half professionals and half draftees.

The tracks went by rail and then by sea to Saigon. We flew over and picked them up. We stayed down south. We had two sections with two guns to a section. The fifth Vulcan was used as a backup. One gun per section had a working radar. I asked for one of the guns without a radar because I knew the radar wasn't going to be any use in Vietnam.

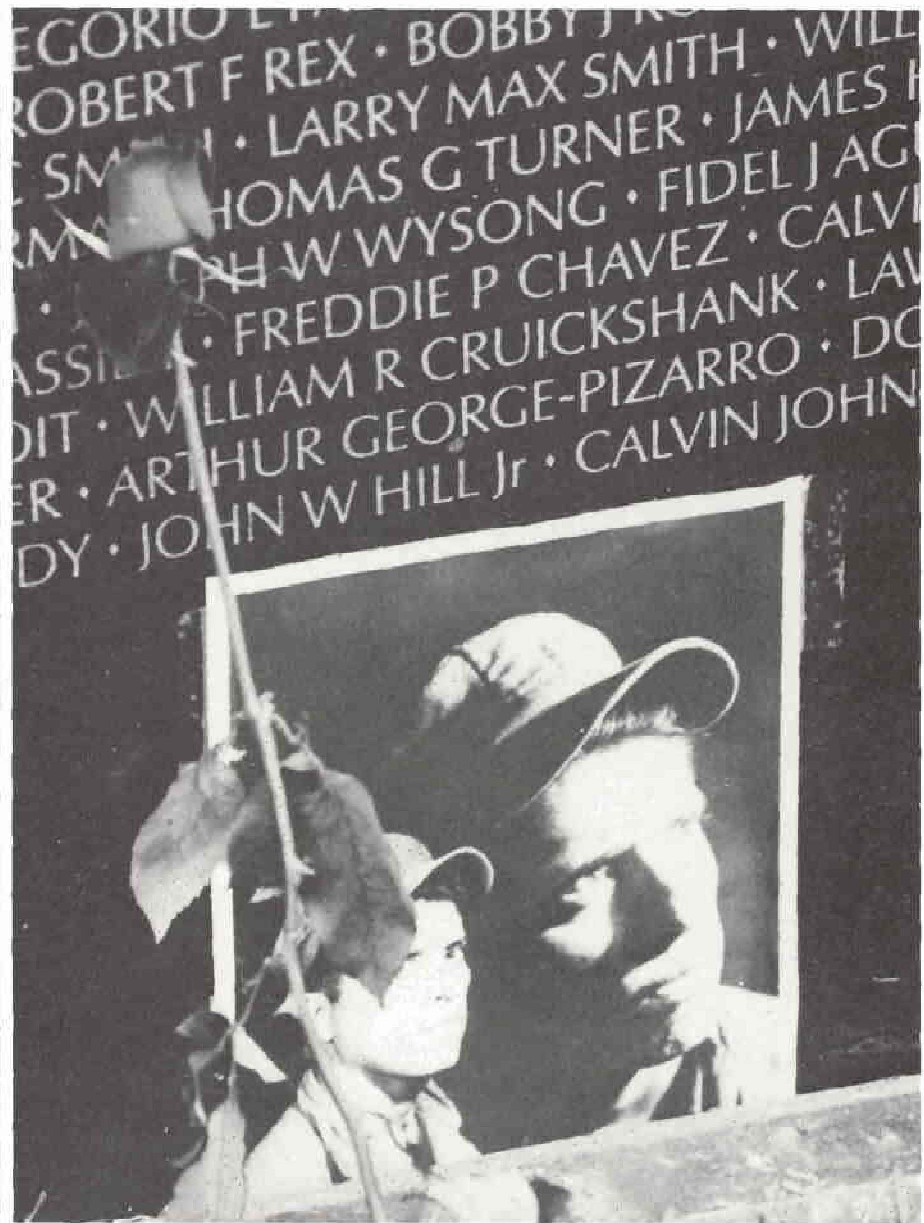
We did a lot of different things. We pulled convoy security, checkpoint security, a lot of perimeter duty and conducted a lot of sweeps with the Cav. We had only four guys to a track and we fired H and I fires through the night. At places where they had engineer equipment, we buried the track in a hull-down firing position so only the turret was showing. Other times, we set up for the night covered-wagon style. We also fired a lot of demonstrations. The gun was new and it attracted a lot of attention. We fired one demonstration for General Abrams.

The team did really well, but I've never seen any mention of what the team did there. We were there to test the effectiveness and durability of the gun, and the gun's performance was excellent. It always worked. There wasn't any mechanical jamming like you get with the Duster. It worked with minimum operational maintenance. When we got back to Bliss, there wasn't a single member who didn't have a feeling of accomplishment. I think the team did a super job.

Captain Wilson, the leader of the evaluation team, was killed and the lieutenant lost a leg when a rocket hit a bunker in one of the base camps. They have a portrait of the captain in one of the buildings here at Fort Bliss now. We'd been playing basketball together on Christmas Eve just a few days before he was killed. We had a support team that went around with us for awhile in an APC with a mini-gun but it was hit by a mortar. None of the guys on the Vulcan tracks were hit.

I think the soldiers who served in Vietnam have a lot to be proud of. The draftees may have been disillusioned because of the demonstrations back home, but they did their job. I think they did a hell of a job.

War Stories

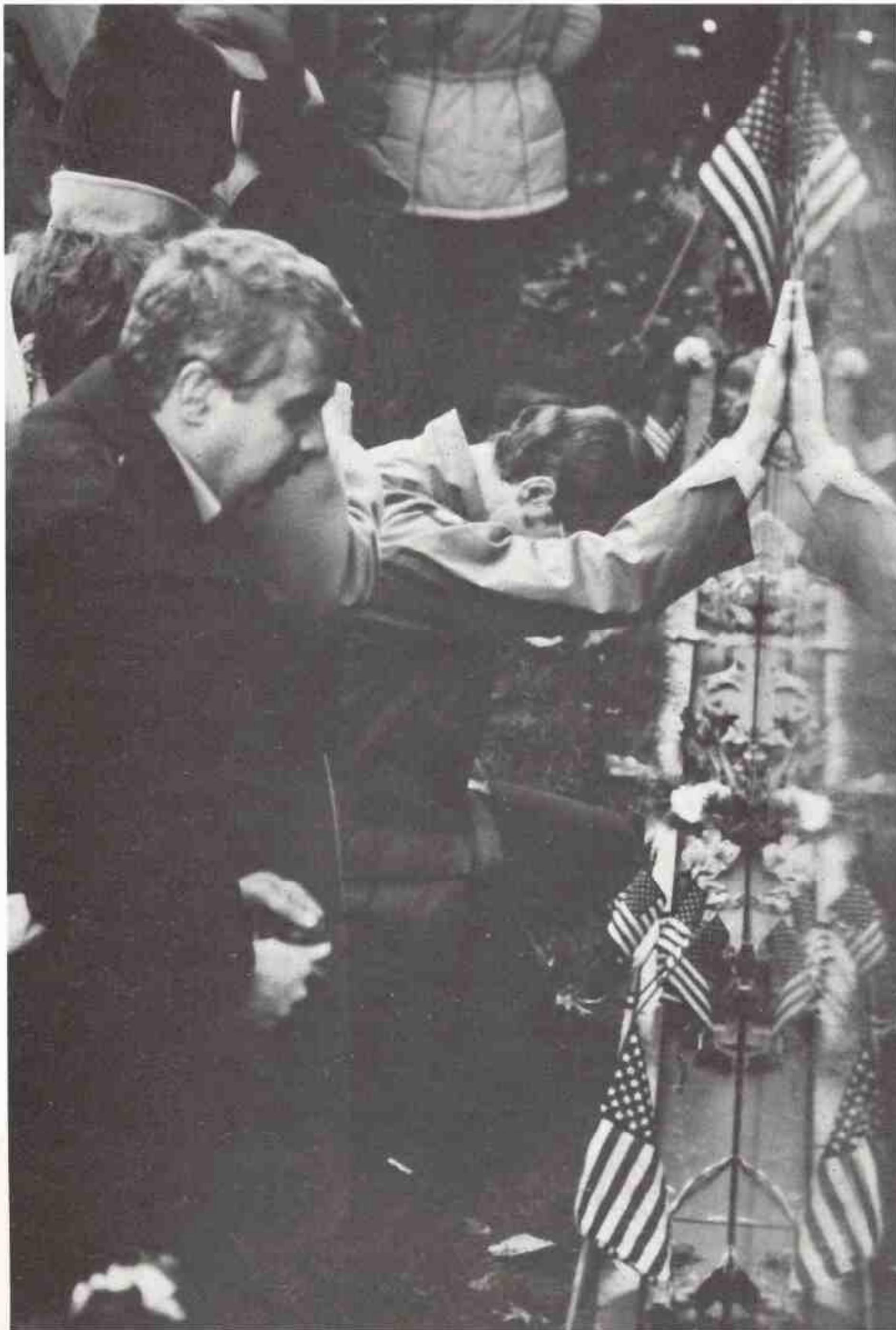


Names etched in the black granite of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, Washington, D.C., are a roll call of the nation's Vietnam War dead. (U.S. Coast Guard photos of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial by PA2 Tom Gillespie)

In *On Strategy: The Vietnam War in Context,* Harry Summers records the following conversation between an American and North Vietnamese colonel after the war: "You know you never defeated us on the battlefield," the American colonel said. "That may be so," the North Vietnamese colonel replied, "but it is also irrelevant."

The soldiers who crewed the Dusters and Quad 50s were mostly draftees who weren't eligible for college deferments. "These kids are kids who got stuck at the end of the pipeline. They know that, and they know that we know it," a colonel told a correspondent.

They were the last of the civilian soldiers. When the inequities of a draft which sent the children of the working class to war but granted deferments to the sons of the middle and upper classes gave way to the lottery system, middle class support of the war vanished with the college deferments.



Some believed in the war. Some were superpatriots like the replacement who told a squad of 101st troopers that, "It's better to stop them [the communists] here than on the beaches in California." They stared at him in disbelief.

Some didn't believe in the war but fought it anyway. Their fathers had fought in World War II and their older brothers in Korea. Canada was out of the question. They drew peace symbols on their helmet liners and flashed "V" signs that stood for peace instead of victory, but they did their part in a firefight.

Their setbacks, which were few, received more publicity than their victories, which were commonplace.

When a VC squad stormed the American Embassy in Saigon during the 1968 Tet Offensive, and were gunned down by a handful of Marine guards in the embassy courtyard, the press made it sound like another Kasserine Pass. When a platoon refused its lieutenant's orders to advance down a particularly hazardous trail, the media made it sound as though American troops had never before refused an order. Lieutenant Calley replaced SGT York and Audie Murphy as America's most publicized soldier.

They developed a sort of fatalism that World War II and Korean veterans found disconcerting. "There it is," they'd say, after being assigned the rottenest mission or hearing news of the death of friends in other tracks. They fought on even after the schedule for troop withdrawals was announced and the war didn't seem to make much sense anymore.

The professional soldier had an easy answer for those who asked: "Why did you go to Vietnam?" "You sent us," they'd reply. The question was a more difficult one for civilian soldiers who listened to their peers brag about beating the draft.

The teenagers on the Duster tracks purchased cars on the layaway plan and carried around photos of the Ford, Chevy or Pontiac they knew would be waiting in the garage the day they got home.

They rigged showers by suspending buckets from the Duster's twin barrels or bathed in monsoon rains, though the last was tricky business since the rain sometimes quit before they had time to rinse the lather off.

Lessons Learned: Clean people smell more than people who haven't bathed for a couple of months.

They went on R&R in Sydney, Hong Kong and Bangkok with a thousand dollars in their pockets and just one week to spend it.

They photographed everything. Some photographs were obligatory: (1) the crew drinking warm beer atop the track; (2) the girl back home; (3) the girl in Bangkok; (4) the Viet Cong dead on the edge of the perimeter. They showed the snapshots (including the one of dead Viet Cong) to "doughnut dollies," Red Cross volunteers who served coffee and doughnuts to troops coming out of combat.

There was little resentment among GIs still in Vietnam toward the Vietnam Vets Against the War who everyone figured had their right to protest, and not as much as you'd expect against student demonstrators.

Some signed up for second tours, discovering the type of jobs their old high-

school buddies were doing back home couldn't compare with the responsibility assigned 20- and 21-year-olds in the Army. Some, who would have never dreamed it possible the day they got their induction notice, stayed on and made the Army a career.

Automatic weapon crews listened to the Armed Forces Network on their transistor radios. The DJs played songs like *The Green, Green Grass of Home* and *We've Got to Get Out of This Place,* an early sixties rock 'n' roll hit whose popularity lasted the length of the war.

They carried cassette players into battle and would sometimes turn the volume up full blast during firefights. A Jimmie Hendrix album was considered good background music for a firefight. It was something they'd picked up from the movies, a need for a soundtrack.

Lessons Learned: GIs who try to burn off leeches Hollywood-style with cigarettes usually give up before the leeches.

The GIs invented a new language. CIA agents were "spooks" and the Special Forces were "Science Fiction." No one was killed. They were "zapped," "wasted," "blown away" or "gone to do a little recon work in the sky." Dead enemy soldiers were "believers." Napalmed VC or NVA were "crispie critters." Point men carried their M-16s on "rock 'n' roll" (automatic) and "Lurps" (long-range reconnaissance patrols) set up NDPs (night defensive positions) along "blue lines" (rivers) or atop a "prominent terrain feature" (mountain).

"Packs" (soldiers) drew short-timer calendars on their helmets, marked the passing days and waited for their "turtles" (the nickname for replacements because they were so slow in arriving). The United States was the "real world" or, simply, the "world."

It got so bad that soldiers new in country couldn't communicate.

At night, the automatic weapon crews on mountain firebases watched firefights in the valley below: red tracers from U.S. or ARVN weapons and pink and blue tracers from NVA or VC weapons.

They called the jetliners that ferried troops to and from Vietnam "freedom birds." The war ended for most of them the day their freedom bird lifted off the runway at Cam Ranh Bay or Tan Son Nhut.

It was one of the weird things about the war. A Duster or Quad 50 gunner coming out of action Monday would hear the wheels touch down on the runway at Fort Lewis near Seattle on Wednesday. If he were eligible for an early out, he might be a civilian Thursday morning sitting in a civilian airport, suffering from startle reactions and clutching a ticket home to someplace like Decatur, Mich., or Mountain Home, Ark.

For the most part, people in airports ignored him. No one asked "What unit were you with?" or "Did you see any action?" No one offered to buy him a beer.

He wondered what the guys back on the track might be doing at that very moment.

Lessons Learned: Wrap everything in plastic.

The monsoon was breaking up the night of December 31, 1970. The Quad 50 crews manning firebase perimeters atop the rugged ridges of northern I Corps watched base camps and firebases scattered up and down Vietnam's narrow coastal plain celebrate the new year with barrages of flares, rockets, tracers and cannon fire.

Every Duster, Quad 50, howitzer, cannon, machine gun and M-16 on every perimeter from Quang Tri to Hue opened up with everything they had at midnight. It was beautiful. It was psychedelic. It was "number one." It was the ultimate mad minute.

The action junkies, soldiers who were high on war and had signed up for tour after tour, worried about adjusting to peacetime. Things were bad enough already, they complained. The VC weren't what they used to be in the 60s. Genuine black-pajama VC made up only 20 percent of the communist forces operating south of the DMZ after Tet of 1968. You had to go to Cambodia or into the mountains near the Laotian border to find NVA to fight.

Lessons Learned: Drive in the ruts.

There was a sense of optimism and foreboding. Everyone was "short." President Nixon had announced the schedule for American troop withdrawal and the final "Vietnamization" of the war. The last air defense artillery unit would be home—back in the real world—by the end of the new year, but there was a feeling everything had gone wrong, that all the killing and dying had been for nothing. No one expected Hanoi to honor any piece of paper that might be produced by the Paris Peace talks. "Peace with honor" was a euphemism for throwing in the towel. The only Vietnamization about to take place was "North Vietnamization."

"I felt we were running out," SFC Jerry Kiker recalls. "We were running out on the people we'd gone there to protect."

"I thought the North Vietnamese

would come across the DMZ with tanks the moment we pulled out," SSG Steve Nash remembers. "That's what ultimately happened. They waited a little longer than I thought they would."

Kiker and Nash stayed in the Army, but most of the Vietnam-era draftees took their discharges and went to college on the GI Bill or to work in factories near their hometowns.

PVT Charles Boyle didn't make it home. He died when the rocket slammed into *Pa Kettle,* Nash's track, near Firebase Tennessee, living long enough to call out Nash's name.

SGT Mitchell Stout of the 1/44 Artillery didn't live to pin on the Medal of Honor he was awarded. He died cradling the grenade in the bunker at the Khe Gio Bridge.

They named a building in honor of CPT John Wilson at the Air Defense Artillery School.

A decade later, their names were etched into the black granite "V" of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C.

The air defenders who served in Vietnam won't be forgotten by the field artillery cannoneer who watched a Quad 50 stop a sapper attack in the wire, by the cavalry platoon leader who rallied his platoon while a Vulcan stood off an enemy ambush or by the infantrymen who embraced the Duster leader who broke through to the infantry position early one morning.

The automatic weapon battalions fired more than four million rounds of Duster ammunition and more than 10 million rounds of Quad 50 ammunition.

They participated in every major American campaign during the conflict in Southeast Asia. Some reached the outskirts of Phnom Penh.

Each battalion won either a Presidential or Meritorious Unit Citation. The soldiers who served in them won more than 450 medals for valor and earned more than 1,000 Purple Hearts.

They proved anti-aircraft guns belong in the Army arsenal, but they were never able to stop the flow of communist replacements down the Ho Chi Minh Trail, make front-page news as often as the peace demonstrators, convince people back home that Vietnam might be worth the price they paid or make South Vietnam over in the image of America.

Lessons Learned: There are some things you can do with a gun and some things you can't.