



## WE WERE THERE TOO

It's been over 35 years since I returned from my tour of duty in the "Vietnam Conflict". Since then I have read and watched everything I could find in books and in the media and from my point of view, very little has been presented about the US Army Artillery Units that fought side by side with the Marines in Quang Tri Province and along the DMZ in 1967.



In the northern part of I-Corp along the DMZ, three attached US Army Artillery battalions supported the seven Marine battalions there. They included the 105-mm howitzers of the 40<sup>th</sup> Artillery, the big 175-mm self propelled guns of the 94<sup>th</sup> Arty., and of course the Twin 40-mm (Automatic Weapon) (Self Propelled) Dusters of the 1<sup>st</sup> of the 44<sup>th</sup> Artillery Regiment. Attached to the 1/44<sup>th</sup> were the Quad .50s of Battery G of the 65<sup>th</sup> Artillery and the searchlights of Battery G of the 29<sup>th</sup> Artillery. All the units mentioned above were deployed along and above Route 9 From Gio Linh in the east to Khe Sanh in the west. Firebases and other points of interest include: Dong Ha, Quang Tri, Cam Lo, Con Thien, Camp J. J. Carroll, The Rockpile, and Khe Sanh, We were there, guarding and patrolling along the infiltration routes of some 50 or more battalions of N.V.A. regular army units positioned in the area just north and south of the DMZ.



By now most of America has some knowledge of the 77 daylong siege of the Marines at Khe Sanh in 1968. It was an important event in the war because of there would be severe psychological damage to the war effort if America lost a major firebase like the French did many years earlier. News correspondents were able to fly in and out of Khe Sanh to tell their stories and the siege was on the nightly news back home (again with little mention of the Army units stationed there). There have recently been television documentaries on Khe Sanh that did include members of our organization who were stationed there during the siege and lead the relief column that reopened the land route to the base.

Well I for one would like it to be known that there was a longer siege in mid-1967 going on at a place called the Con Thien or "Hill of Angels" from late May to mid-September 1967. Con Thien was being barraged around-the-clock with mortars, rockets, and enemy artillery. The same type of activity was going on at the little known outpost of Gio Linh at the east end of the so-called "McNamara Line". These were much smaller outposts than Khe Sanh and did not have air strips, so it was rare for reporters to get to them and tell our story. Actually I do remember a young Ted Koppel at Gio Linh briefly in early 1967 and I also remember reading an article in the Stars and Stripes in August of 1967; where the reporter mentioned passing the hull of a burnt out tank on his way up to Con Thien. The tank was actually a 1<sup>st</sup>/44<sup>th</sup> Duster destroyed when it hit a landmine. (see later chapters for that story)

Very little else has been said or written about these early battles. Compendiums about the Vietnam War do not even have the words; Duster, Quad-50 or Air Defense Artillery (ADA) in their glossaries. I am recording these personal recollections so that I could document these events and my feelings during my tour of duty. Also to give credit where credit is due and hopefully inspire other ADA vets to tell their stories. The following stories are but a few of what happened back in 1966 and 1967. I hope you enjoy them.

**-Paul Gronski, 1/44<sup>th</sup> ADA Dusters**

On a personal note, I would like to thank Paul Kopsick, the DQS Historian, for all his assistance in helping me organize my thoughts and editing my articles and photos.

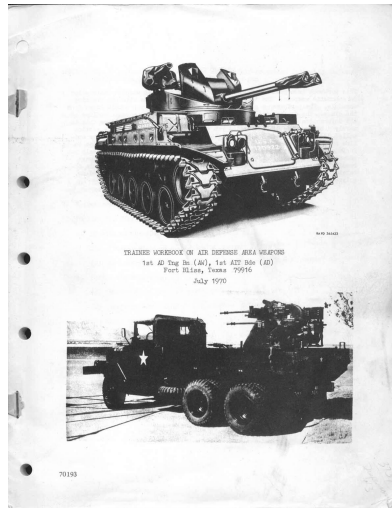
Next: [My Trip to Vietnam](#)





## My Trip to Vietnam

I turned 17 years old in October 1965 and there was a conflict heating up half way around the globe in Southeast Asia. I guess I had seen too many John Wayne movies or too many episodes of Combat on TV because all I knew was I wanted in on the action. All the talk back then was about the "domino theory" of communists taking over Southeast Asia. So I left school one day and went down to the draft board and volunteered my draft (enlisted for 2-years of service). I was sworn in on December 5<sup>th</sup> and was quickly on my way to Fort Knox Kentucky for basic training. After completing basic I went home for a week on leave and then on to Fort Bliss Texas for AIT (Advanced Individual Training) in the MOS of 13F10, automatic weapons crewman. We were taught the nomenclature and functions of the M42A1 twin 40mm "Duster" and the M55 "Quad 50" caliber machine gun mount. These two WWII and Korean War aged weapon systems were being sent to Vietnam to support the effort there.



After AIT the whole class was sent out to Orogrande New Mexico to become part of a recently reactivated (March 1, 1966) National Guard Unit, the 1<sup>st</sup> Bn. of the 44<sup>th</sup> Artillery that was training in the desert of White Sands Missile Range. The Unit trained and gathered forces until September 1966 when we were directed to pack up all of our equipment onto trucks that were then loaded onto flatbed train cars. I was given the assignment of POM detail (Prepare for Overseas Movement); our duties were to do all the packing for the unit. In September I was part of the (AP) Advanced Party whose job it was to go aboard ship two days ahead of the unit and prepare the living quarters onboard the [USNS General Hugh J. Gaffey](#).



It was late September when the rest of the 1<sup>st</sup> /44<sup>th</sup> got to San Francisco. They boarded the ship and we were on our way to Vietnam. Most of the troops went topside as we passed Alcatraz Island and all joined in singing "God Bless America" as we passed under the Golden Gate Bridge. The voyage will take a little more than a month with a brief two-day layover in Okinawa. Since I had completed two major details (POM&AP) I felt that I had already done my part, so when I was called to be given a work detail onboard ship I just made like I didn't hear the announcement over the ship's PA speakers. I took the opportunity to explore every nook and cranny on the USNS Gaffey over the month long Ocean Cruise. Early on in the voyage someone advised me to keep something on my stomach to prevent seasickness so I ate a lot of saltine crackers and I didn't get sick once.

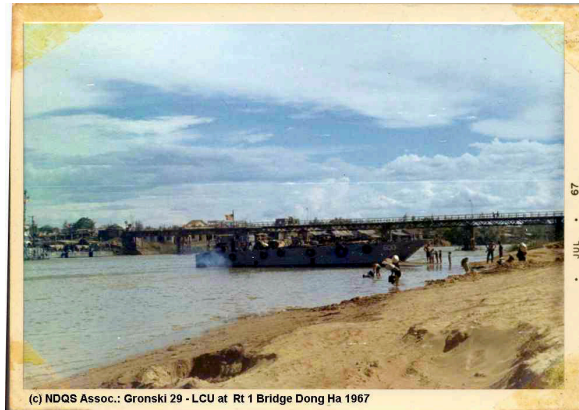


We arrived in [Vietnam](#) in late October at the coastal city of Qui Nhon (generally pronounced Quin-yon). Outside the port, we were given our M-14 rifles, ammo and helmets. Then we tossed our duffle bags over the side of the ship onto the landing craft utility boats (LCUs) tied there. It was then our turn, up and over the side, down the cargo nets and into the LCUs. Boy were we fired up! It was like D-Day at Normandy (without the Germans and bullets of course). When we get to shore, the front of the craft slams down into the surf and we rush out into infamy. We were met not with fierce enemy resistance, but by a couple of guys wearing white shirts. They directed us to a bunch of 2 ½ -ton trucks. We gathered up our gear, boarded the trucks and away we went. Good Morning Vietnam! The Dusters have arrived!!

Within minutes we were traveling up a paved road through the tropical landscape. Nothing like the desert sands of New Mexico where we trained. As we rounded a curve, what pops out of the Jungle but a big ol' red and yellow Shell Gas Station sign. Talk about surreal. Totally unexpected. Then again, we are on the other side of the world. After a few more twists and turns of the road we arrive at a small hamlet (Camp Hammond near Phu Cat) run by the 1<sup>st</sup> Air Cavalry, we set up camp in our pup tents and wait for our orders. There were choppers coming and going the whole time we were there. It turned out that we were originally supposed to be deployed right there in II-Corp but at the last minute we are assigned to the 3<sup>rd</sup> Marine Division. They were located in I-Corp, the uppermost part of South Vietnam, and separated from North Vietnam by the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). We pack up our gear and fly up north to the city of Da Nang. While we were waiting for our trucks (Dusters) to arrive we pitched our pup tents in the sand again. Not the white sands of New Mexico, but the sands of what was then called Red Beach. It was there that I got to see my first VC while in Da Nang, The Marines had shot him and propped him up in the back of a 2 ½ -ton truck then paraded him around the base all day. I still can't figure what that was all about but Marines were always a bit odd.



Our tracks finally arrived by ship and were unloaded covered with cosmoline (a preservative). We cleaned them up; test fired the twin-40mm cannons and loaded them and all our gear onto Navy LCU's for our trip in the China Sea (Gulf of Tonkin) along the coast up to Dong Ha. The day we started out the weather was pretty bad. We would go 5 feet forward and the waves would push the flat-bottomed LCU's 3 feet back. At this rate it was decided we would go back into port. After three days of trying, we finally get underway. Meanwhile Sgt. Robbins our "less than lovable" Platoon Sgt. was laid out on a pallet on the LCU's deck covered with his poncho. The whole time he was white as a ghost and sick as a dog. What a grin! We had been living off C-rations for three days now but the Navy LCU crew always got two hot meals a day. I was able to make friends with them and their cook would prepare some extra food. I would mooch a hot meal from them and go out on the deck and eat it in front of the sick sergeant, just to taunt his ass. My revelry was short lived because after the trip he never did like me much and I paid for it with extra K.P., shit burning, guard duty, slow promotions, etc.

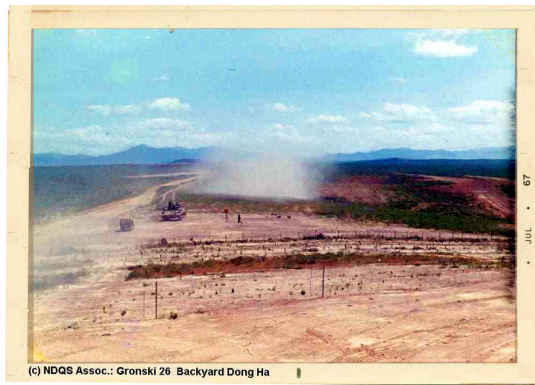


(c) NDQS Assoc.: Gronski 29 - LCU at Rt 1 Bridge Dong Ha 1967

When we got to Dong Ha there was nothing there but bare ground. We pitched our 16-man tents and started filling sand bags and stringing barbed wire. I got stuck with two short guys on barbed wire duty. With me being over 6-ft tall, I got the sledgehammer. I swear I drove in every post on the SW perimeter of the base.



(c) NDQS Assoc. Gronski 05 Dong Ha '67



Once we were squared away at the HQ area it was time to start building our perimeter track positions. Our spot was at the Route 9 Gate at Dong Ha. The Seabees came with a bulldozer and cut out a spot for our track and we started building our bunker.



The next morning a  $\frac{3}{4}$ -ton truck pulls up in front of our position. Six Vietnamese get out of the back and started unloading shovels and wooden ammo crates. Come to find out our bunker was located atop a local burial ground. So for the next week or so as we filled and stacked sandbags we watched them dig up skulls, bones and loose body parts and put them into the crates.

What an interesting omen to start one's Trip To Vietnam!

**- Paul Gronski**

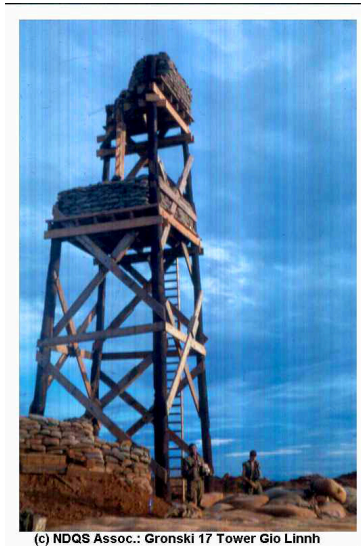
Next: [Building the McNamara Line](#)



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## Building the McNamara Line

On one day back in the early part of 1967, Dusters from A Battery 1<sup>st</sup>/44<sup>th</sup> Air Defense Artillery left out of our firebase in Gio Linh to support the Marines & Sea Bee's who were going to set up an observation tower, all went well. They dug the holes and along comes the crane helicopter and sets the tower in place - job done - back to Gio Linh for another evening of NVA mortar and artillery "entertainment".



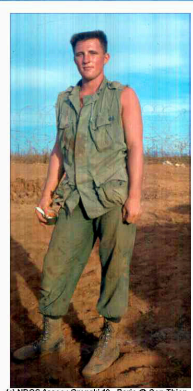
Next day we are out in the field again. Grunts are out in front sweeping for mines for the two M-48 tanks, a bulldozer and two Dusters (A-141 & A-142). A-142 is just ahead of us trying to stay in the tank's tread-tracks to avoid mines. I am on A-141 bringing up the rear with our Platoon Leader Lieutenant who was riding with us.





(c) NDQS Assoc. Gronski 04 A-142 '67

We get a little over a mile or so out on a 300 yard wide, coast to coast, barren strip where nothing thinks of growing and BOOM! Our sister track (A-142) hits a mine. Peiro, the driver of the track, was hurt when the explosion broke the driver's hatch loose and cracked his head open. That track needed to be towed home.

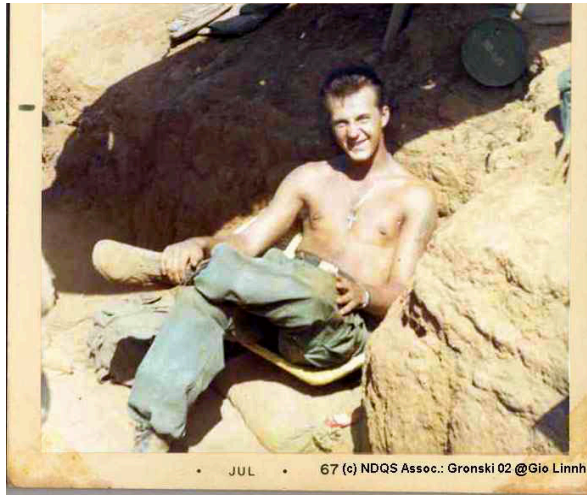


(c) NDQS Assoc. Gronski 18 - Peiro @ Cam Thien

We waited about a half an hour for the tank retriever to come and get them. When the retriever arrived and just about had them hooked up, BOOM, BOOM, BOOM, mortars started coming in all over the place. Our Lieutenant spotted the smoke from their tubes and called up to me and pointed them out. So we started to return fire with our twin 40mm cannons. Next thing you know the incoming rounds started moving towards us. First to the left and front of us, then to the rear and right of our position. Being and artilleryman, I could see from my position in the turret that Charlie was zeroing in on us. Meanwhile Parker who was substituting for Cloudt, our regular driver who was on R&R, was trying to get our track started. All the while the incoming rounds kept getting closer and closer. They had us pretty well lined up. One landed about 40 yards behind us and the next one only 20 yards out but more centralized.

When Parker finally got the Duster started, for some reason he put it in reverse and we started to back up. I grabbed on to the sight bar and stood up in the turret and screamed down to him "NOT IN REVERSE!!" Then he put it into drive and we started moving forward. Right then there was another loud BOOM as a mortar round exploded this time not more than five feet behind us! It's a good thing I had on my helmet and flak jacket on because when the round went off, it felt like I was being sandblasted from behind. We got the hell out of there in a hurry. We were about half way back to Gio Linh when our Lieutenant finally got Parker to stop. We returned a few more rounds of counter-fire just as our jets showed up and dropped Napalm and some high explosive (HE) bombs. The planes were so close you could see the difference between the Napalm and the HE bombs as they left the planes. Napalm would tumble when released and the HE bombs would glide straight. Even from where we were located you could still feel the heat from the Napalm. Too close for my comfort baby. The party was over and it was back to Gio Linh for another evening of "entertainment". Tomorrow is another day - hopefully.





**- Paul Gronski**

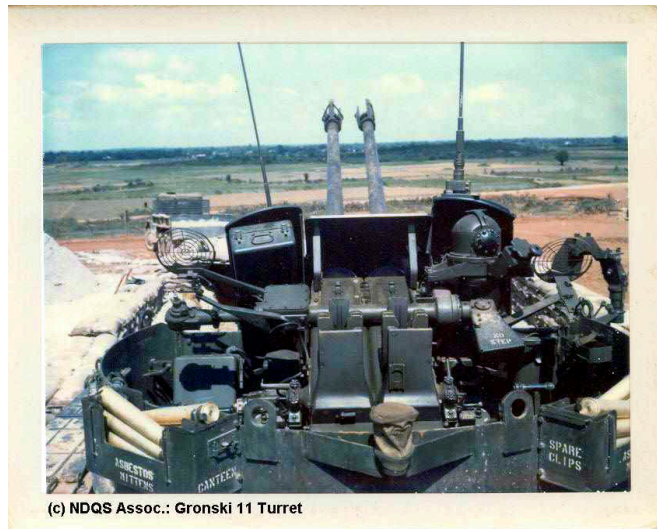
Next: [First Rocket Attack](#)

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## First Rocket Attack

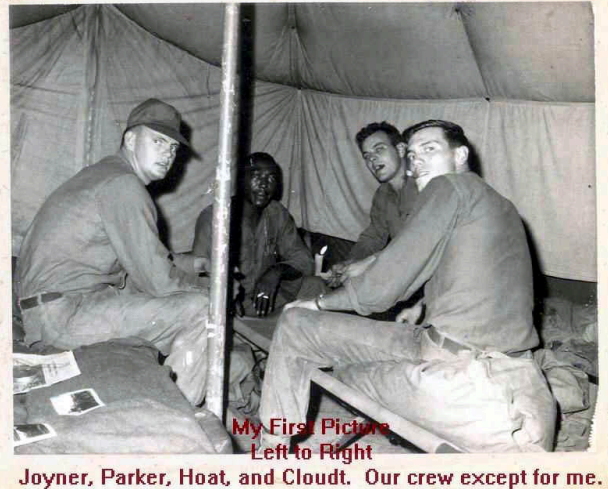
It is early 1967 and for the most part we, were settled in here at Dong Ha. Our 1<sup>st</sup>/44<sup>th</sup> Artillery Dusters were assigned to the 3<sup>rd</sup> Marine Division in I Corp, and those guys generally didn't care much for us Army folk. To the Marines, we were just lowly "Dog Faces" and to us they were "Jar Heads". However, at least for the enlisted men, those feelings didn't last to long. Once they saw what a Duster could do in action, we gained a lot of respect from most foot soldiers. They quickly learned to love what our Duster's could do with their twin 40mm cannons in a firefight. Our typical duty assignments were to guard the firebases and escort convoys but we also often found ourselves doing close ground support for the infantry out on patrols.

For my tour of duty in Vietnam, it felt as though the whole year was spent on guard duty; two men 4 hours on and 4 hours off. Every time we would pull into a new guard duty position, it was my responsibility as gunner to set up red and white "aiming steaks" and establish a "field of fire." Using a plotting board I would draw out the lay of the land within my field of fire. I would draw in the houses, buildings, rice paddies, knolls, valleys and just about anything and everything I could see. With each drawing I would have to include the azimuth and elevation. The reasoning behind all of this is so that under nighttime conditions I would know where things were and not shoot upon "friendlies".



It was important to do this each time we set up as evidenced by one evening in January of '67 when our track (A-141) was stationed at our Route #9 gate position at Dong Ha. Just before sundown a Marine self-propelled 8-inch gun left the base. Our squad leader Sgt. Hought informed the crew that the Marines were going out to a firing position they had established near a Buddhist Pagoda that was within our field of fire and clearly identified on my plotting board.

Well I was on the 4 hours on shift with Pvt. Parker, which happened to be from midnight to 4 in the morning. We were sitting there board stiff when all of a sudden we spotted several flashes a mile or so out in front of us and a few seconds later we hear Roar, Roar, Roar, Roar, Boom, Boom, Boom!! It was then that the shit had hit the fan. Incoming rockets were falling all around us. I jumped up in the gunner's seat and got my twin 40's ready to return fire. Parker runs to alert the rest of the crew (which I thought was really unnecessary because the ground was shaking so much and the loud explosions pretty much kept everyone from even thinking of sleeping).



Once the gun crew was mounted and ready in their positions, Parker let Cloudt, our driver who was at the Azimuth controls, know where to aim the turret and then we got going. I started out with my guns shooting low and walked out the rounds little by little to where the flashes came from. I yelled to Cloudt to swing the turret back and forth across the area. We got one large secondary explosion and a few smaller ones that indicated we had made contact! We sent out well over one hundred rounds at the targets in less than 3 minutes. At four rounds a clip, I really gave the loaders Joyner and Parker a workout. Our sister track, Duster A-142, fired less than 30 rounds during the battle since their position was more inline with the airstrip and they were concerned about being zeroed in on by the enemy rockets. Within 3 or 4 minutes it was all over and the gun crew came down off our track to find Squad Leader Sgt. Hought still on the phone trying to get permission to fire back!

It was just about sunrise when the dust had settled and we had cleared and stacked all of the spent brass from under our track. Just then a jeep pulls up in front of our position and jumps our company commander Captain Camillo grinning from ear to ear. He had come out to congratulate us on our actions and on a job well done. He told us that a Marine observer in a tower in Dong Ha was trying to contact our track to tell us of our successful mission and to direct our fire to other enemy targets. Unfortunately, he could not get through to us because our Squad Leader tied up the phone line the whole time. Captain Camillo asked me why we didn't destroy the big yellow Pagoda out in front of us. I told him that an 8-inch gun was sent out to that location the night before and we did not want to blow them up. He just shook all of our hands and told us good job and left to go visit our sister track.

It was less than an hour after our Captain had gone and up pulls another jeep, this time it was the Marine Major who jumps out and HE WAS PISSED! He starts yelling at us about how we almost killed his men out there last night and that a couple of our rounds glanced off of his 8-inch gun as evidenced by the paint scraped off their track. I don't know where Sgt. Hought was so I replied to the Major that my gun did not go anywhere near the Pagoda where his gun and his men were reported to be. It was then that he told us that after the sun had set he moved his gun out of the position at the Pagoda and a little further out on a hilltop so they could fire into the DMZ. I told him we were not informed of their move so how could we even know where the hell they were. Besides, it may not have been our rounds, it could have been from our sister track. He stormed away from us cussing and still hot under the collar but from then on we started to get better communication from them on troop movements. Fortunately, we all lived to fight another day and I believe that this incident was the first time the NVA had experienced twin 40's fired at them along the DMZ.

- Paul Gronski

Next: [Two Week "Vacation" In Con Thien](#)

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## Two Week "Vacation" in Con Thien

Here it was July 1967 and once again two Dusters from A battery 1<sup>st</sup> of the 44<sup>th</sup> artillery were part of a convoy being put together for a relief rotation. We all were hoping it was going to be down to Khe Sanh this time with all its amenities like airstrip and its greater distance from the DMZ. In early 1967 going over to Khe Sanh was like an R&R assignment compared to Gio Linh or Con Thien. As luck would have it we were headed to Con Thien for a couple weeks. This time out our sister track A-142 wasn't going with us another Duster from A battery got the assignment.



Once the convoy formed up we found our two Dusters bringing up the rear with us (A-141) in the last position and our sister Duster just ahead of us. We moved out in the morning heading west on Route #9 just before the village of Cam Lo the convoy stopped for a while so we had our lunch (C-Rations) and as usual wherever we would stop, the village children would come up to us mooching cigarettes, candy and anything they could con us out of. It was always great fun playing with the kids and making them smile.



(c) NDQS Assoc.: Gronski 08 Kids Cam Lo



Hell I was just a kid of 18 myself.

After an hour or so we were on our way again. Just before Cam Lo the convoy turned right on to a dirt trail, I guess it was a country road; we crossed a river and kept moving northward at a slow rate of speed. These cross country convoys traveled at 3 to 5mph on average or so it seemed. It was well into the afternoon as we were moving through a wooded area, when suddenly there was a huge explosion just ahead of us, the Duster in front of us had run over a land mine. Their turret had broken loose and spun around several times before they were able to get it stopped long enough to get out and away from the track, which was now on fire. The crew got out without injury so all we could do was to back away and watch her blow up as the ammo soon caught fire and started going off so we backed up further and waited for the fire and explosions to subside enough for us to get around her and continue the convoy. It was well over an hour before we got moving again.



It was getting late in the day so they decided to stop for the night. We pulled off the road into the woods and set up camp. OH BOY this was going to be fun spending the night out here in no mans land! We dug our fox holes after setting up a perimeter, had supper (more C-Rations) and started our watch rotation of 4 hours on 4 hours off two men in the fox holes and the other two sleeping under the track while our Sergeant stayed in the driver's compartment safe and sound as usual. It was in the middle of the night and I was on guard with either Joyner or Parker keeping low in our fox holes when out of the silence came this loud roar TOOOOOOOT! TOOOOOOOT! To me it sounded like some sort of a horn; all I could think of was how in the war movies back home the Chinese would blow a horn to signal the start of a human wave attack! TOOOOOOOT! TOOOOOOOT! Oh shit here we go!

There it went again so I took my M-16 off of safety and was going to alert the rest of the crew when TOOOOOOOT! There it went again but this time I looked up to where I thought the sound was coming from, what I saw was a solid red line reaching from the sky down to the ground and I breathed a sigh of relief when I realized it was "PUFF" a gun ship with G.E. vulcan mini guns eating up the enemy on the ground below them. They kept circling the area just to our north, which was the firebase at Con Thien.

The red line I saw were tracer bullets placed at five round intervals. The gun fired so fast (2,200 rounds per minute I believe) that the tracers looked to be a solid red line in the night sky. Along with the twin 40mm Duster I trained on the Quad .50 caliber Machine Gun mount at Fort Bliss, Texas. I thought the Quads were saying a lot until I saw a G.E. mini gun Equipped Gun ship in action WOW! It was quite a sight.

Morning finally came around along with daylight came the rain. We ate breakfast, the convoy formed up and we moved out. On the final approach to the firebase it was an up hill climb on a muddy, slippery trail with no vegetation so it was real slow going. The N.V.A. artillery and mortars were taking pot shots at us all the way, and we couldn't return any fire at the enemy because the incline was too steep and we couldn't control the turret when it was unlocked. We were about half the way up the hill when we got called back down to assist a 105mm towed artillery piece who couldn't make it up the hill. So we went back down and hooked up the 2-1/2 ton truck with the howitzer behind it to the track and headed back up the hill only slower this time. We were like sitting ducks in a shooting gallery. The mortars got close but couldn't hit us.

Somehow we made it in one piece.

Living at Con Thien was pretty bad with incoming all the time day and night. It was so bad that we couldn't get any water up there for over a week. We had to ration our water to drinking only no shaving or even washing our faces. Then a helicopter finally arrived carrying a water tank on a sling beneath it. I was more than glad to take out two 5-gallon water cans down to where the water trailer was set up, wait in line and hump them two heavy mothers back up the hill to our position.



(c) NDQS Assoc.: Gronski 31 Action at Con Thien 1967

Incoming and firefights were always going on in the bush up there. Early one evening our crew was sitting around heating up our dinner when a firefight broke out about a half a mile below our position where the grass and trees were starting to thicken up from the defoliated ground around the firebase. This was "normal" so we finished our meal and kept low to the ground. When some bullets started buzzing over our heads, I called the guys to man the guns so that we could return some fire.

We laid down 15 to 20 rounds in a sweeping path where the bullets were coming from and in less than a minute we ended a firefight that had been going on for quite some time. We had gotten down off of our track and were lounging a while when a Marine officer came up to our track all upset and started screaming at us who gave us permission to fire? Our sergeant was once again nowhere to be found so I replied to him, "Sir, bullets were flying over our heads up here and we were told we could return fire when we were being shot at." So he left us and went off to find our squad leader. I'm not exactly sure where our officers and NCOs would disappear to when we were at places like Gio Linh, Khe Sanh or Con Thien, they were rarely at our line positions. They were probably holed up at the base command/communications bunkers, which were constructed mostly of a corrugated comex shipping container buried deep in the ground with earth back filled around it and about 4 to 5 feet of sand bags stacked on

top. One could stand up and walk around inside them plus they had electric lights and a generator to run the radio, real safe and cozy.

Finally after two to four weeks up there our relief showed up and we were on our way back to Dong Ha for some rest. We were lucky, we made it back again without injury.

**- Paul Gronski**

Next: [FNG at the DMZ](#)

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## FNG at the DMZ

It was mid to late August 1967 and my track gets its first taste of "fresh meat", a new guy is rotating in. His name was Evenrude and his duty was to be a replacement cannoneer on A-141. The Good News: his arrival meant that some of us were getting short, and close to be going home. The Bad News: We find out that we are on your way to make yet another trip to Gio Linh for another 2 week tour of the DMZ. Back to the same old grind of ducking and dodging incoming enemy fire. After a couple days up there we get a call in the afternoon to assist the Marines just inside the DMZ. The patrol had found itself some trouble and they needed help. With our sister track (A-142) we hooked up with two M-48 tanks loaded with Marine infantry and headed north.



There we were cutting and blazing our own trail through the woods when Evenrude, the F.N.G. (F'ing New Guy), taps me on the shoulder and says, "Paul, there's a gook with a gun out there in the woods, what should I do?" I look up from the gunner's position and say "Shoot the Mother F'er". Just then that he tells me that the gook vanished. Several minutes later we turned left out of the brush and broke into a clearing where there was a just enough to get the tanks in front of us to stop, identify the targets and make sure that each unit knew what was happening.



Ahead of us the land was mostly cleared. To the left of our track, there was a 5-foot deep valley and just beyond that was a grass hut. Just then, out of the corner of my eye I see some rapid movement coming out of the valley. What do I see? A gook charging the tank in front of us with his rifle at port arms. I grab my M-16 with one hand and with my other hand I grab the sight bar from the gunner's position and I stand up. I begin to raise my M-16 to shoot the gook when a Marine with an M-60 machine gun jumped off the threatened tank and just opened up on him sending his bloody body back into the depths of the ditch.

Just then our tack commander, Sgt. Hought, instructed us to destroy the grass hut in the field with our twin 40's. Within seconds the hut was mulch. By that time the Marine tanks had spread out and there was a clear field of fire in front of us. Sgt. Hought called up to us again and directed us to sweep with our guns the far edge of the clearing that was about a quarter mile from where we were sitting. As we were peeling off the rounds, we can see body parts flying into the air as our shells exploded. It only took a short quick sweep with the guns and the party was over. The North Vietnamese Army (NVA) slithered back into the woods and was gone as usual. So we dutifully headed back again to Gio Linh for another day of the usual, ducking and dodging.

- Paul Gronski

Next: [AWESOME SIGHT](#)

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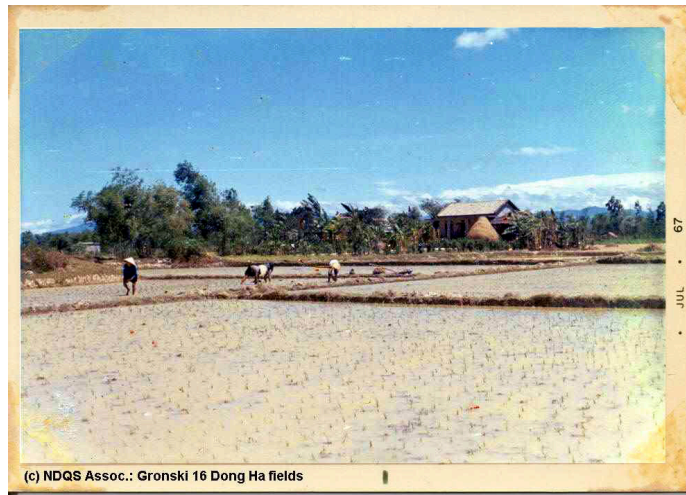
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## AWESOME SIGHT

It was mid summer 1967 and our 1/44<sup>th</sup> Duster crew was back at our "hooches" at the Battery H.Q. near Dong Ha. By this time we were finished building our living quarters from bare red ground. Our hooch had a wooden floor, walls and screens, a metal roof, and of course lots of sand bags.



With nothing else to build and to keep us from being bored, the Brass added a little something to our normal duties of K.P., guard and latrine duty. They had us walking miles of search and destroy patrols out in the southwest (backyard) area at Dong Ha. Our platoon was very lucky that we did not run into anything out there because we did have the faintest idea of what we were doing. *We were Artillerymen, not the friggin Infantry!*



Once we found a hole in the ground large enough for a small man to enter. Perhaps it was an enemy tunnel so we dropped a couple of grenades down it and got the hell out of there. Another time we were just coming over a rise when something black and billowy went over the next rise about 75 meters out. Our Platoon Leader Lt., who was out there with us this time, just about crapped his pants as he withered to the ground for cover. We pursued the object for a while but we never saw it again. Maybe it was just a water buffalo, who knows?

It was another one of those long hot summer days; the sun was down for about an hour or so when I decided to go take a shower to cool off a bit. When I was done with my shower and was going back to my hooch (walking northward towards the DMZ) I spotted what at first appeared to be an illumination round, a white light, climbing into the night sky. But when it continued going up beyond 40° or so above the horizon I stopped to watch the light. As I continued watching, it kept coming southbound at a high rate of speed, all the time thinking, "What the hell is that?"

Suddenly when the object was about 80 ° above the horizon, two bluish-orange flames appeared out of nowhere and one went east and the other went west. A fraction of a second later the white object when "KABOOM!" and the sky lit up like about 40,000 Fourth of July sparklers. What an AWESOME sight!!

It turned out the white light was a North Vietnamese surface-to-air (SAM) missile that was fired at a pair of our jet fighters in a mission. Just as the SAM got close, our jets kicked in their afterburners (bluish-orange flames) and peeled out left and right to evade the missile. The SAM exploded right where the jets separated either on its own or from a missile from our jets. It was awesome.

NOTE: It was very rare for an "air defense crewman" trained on Dusters and Quads to actually see any enemy air defense weapons in operation during the war. There was a U.S. Air Defense Battalion of Hawk missiles stationed in Da Nang but to our knowledge, no U.S. Hawk missiles were ever fired at an enemy plane or helicopter.

- Paul Gronski

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## In Closing....

About the mud bog photo.....NO it is not snow; it was wet sand. The picture was taken while we were on an Operation Prairie IV with the Marines in mid to late April 1967 east of Dong Ha along the coast, it was rainy and cold. We (A141 & A142) were following four huge Marine amphibious personnel carriers that were speeding over to a hot zone teeming with enemy troops.



Our track A141 was the 5th heavy vehicle to go through a deep puddle and we started to bog down, but got out. A142 was behind us, she got stuck and couldn't get out. We on A-141 tried to pull them out but snapped a 2 inch tow cable. We had to hook up to all 4 amphib's to get them out . Tom Macon Jr. (WALKING) Robert Asencion (DRIVER).

It was during this Operation in April and May 1967 that the 1/44th recorded their first combat casualties, losing 15 men with many more wounded. On April 6, 1967 a PFC Charles Walker Ford from D-Battery is listed as KIA. On April 20, 1967 the entire gun crew of a Duster from A Battery was killed when an RPG hit the gun turret. Killed in action were: SSG Garrell Teatsworth; SP4 Rufus R. Croom; SP4 Gary R. Fox; and PFC Larry Wilkerson. On April 26, 1967 another Duster was similarly hit killing three crewmen of C Battery: SGT Joseph Royster; SP4 Leonard Thompson; and PFC Joshua Atkins III. Also on April 26th, SGT Robert Henry from B Battery was killed and on May 7th SSGT Thomas Evans, SGT Franklin Lewis and PFC Talmadge Rhoden of C Battery were also killed in action. The heavy toll on the 1/44th continued on May 8 when SSGT Willie Pendergrass (5/12), SP4 James Cribbs and PFC Gerald Schneider we lost to enemy fire. The high silhouette and open turret design of the M-42A1 Duster put many a crewman in harms way. We would also lose a number of Dusters to landmines. Still the crews kept to their missions and distinguished themselves throughout their tours of duty.

Well all things come to an end and when my DEROS time came I was bound for the "Freedom Bird". I am proud to have been with the 1st/44th and with the first Dusters in Vietnam. By the time I left, the two other Duster battalions and attached Quad and Searchlight Units were well on their way to providing the same types of support throughout the entire Republic of South Vietnam. By the time we all left in late 1971 we had distinguished ourselves to the people that needed us the most, our fellow soldiers.



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**- Paul Gronski**

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