



Serving With Hawk Missiles

by **Max Whittington**

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I served in Headquarters Company, 6th Battalion, 71st Artillery (Hawk Missiles). I was with the unit when it left Ft. Bliss, Texas, and traveled by troop ship--the General Hugh J. Gaffey--to Viet Nam, in September of 1965.

On the way to Viet Nam, we had two interesting experiences. One day we were all called up on deck to see an rare phenomenon: two major ocean currents had met head-on and created an area where the sea was higher on one side than the other. For as far as we could see, from horizon to horizon, there was a line a couple of hundred feet wide where the sea looked like it was boiling. As we went through the area where they converged, we rose several feet, according to the message over the loudspeakers. We also went through a horrible typhoon off of Okinawa, and many of the troops were horribly seasick.

In mid-September I made PFC onboard the ship, and celebrated by giving my friends cigars and starting a game of poker. Some Merchant Marines came into our bay, and one of them told us it was against ship's rules to smoke below-deck or gamble on the ship. Feeling full of myself because of my promotion, I told him that we only took orders from our own officers, so he could **** off. He smiled, and they left. A short while later, I was called to the Battalion Commander's cabin, where I was told the man I had just insulted was the ship's captain, and even our Battalion CO took orders from *him.* I was put on permanent KP for the rest of the trip; but I think the colonel was secretly please, as he didn't take my stripe.

We made port at Naha, Okinawa, for a day. Since I was on KP at night, I was allowed off-ship for the day, and spent it in the Airman's Club--the most beautiful servicemen's club I ever saw.

When we landed in Qui Nhon, Viet Nam, we disembarked on old LSTs. We were very disgruntled at not being issued any ammo for our M-14s. We were trucked to a small cleared area off the highway, quite a ways outside of Qui Nhon. After we set up, we were so closely packed together that our tent ropes crossed. According to rumor, a captured VC had said that his unit had been instructed to not attack us--since we were such an inviting target, we must have been bait for a trap.

While we were at Qui Nhon, an engineer right down the road from us was clearing some brush with a bulldozer, so that the nearby U.S. Marines unit could expand. A huge cobra crawled up over the dozer's blade, and the engineer jumped from it without shutting it down. The dozer kept going, right through a village, demolishing half-a-dozen houses, though no one was injured. Later, many of us went down the road to see the mess.

Like a number of others, I caught both dysentery and dengue fever while at Qui Nhon. I lost twenty pounds in a couple of weeks.

A month or so later, we moved south to Cam Rahn Bay, to guard the air base there. I had a light-vehicle-driver MOS, and drove the battalion rations truck, picking up and delivering the daily food and ice. The food was horrible, especially the wienies; I think it was left over from the Korean war. Many of the cans had rusted all the way through, but our cooks did their best. The potable water was also disgusting: it had so much

chlorine in it that it tasted like water from a swimming pool. Once, while on guard patrol on the beach, we caught a couple of sea turtles, which had come on land at night to lay its eggs, and the cooks made a great stew out of the turtle meat.

Headquarters Company was situated on a large dune, directly above the South China Sea. Just north of us was a swimming area, primarily used by the Air Force personnel at Cam Rahn Air Base. Just south was a cape running off the beach, right near our unit, and I caught a bazillion barracudas there with spinning gear I had smuggled from the states; we didn't eat them because we were afraid--erroneously--that they were poisonous.

Soon after arriving at Cam Rahn Bay, we were hit by another typhoon. At that time, our GP-medium tents were floored with interlocking perforated steel plates (PSP), with the sides of the tents and poles tied to it. Even though we moved in trucks and trailers as a windbreak, the wind caught the tents like sails, and actually bent the PSP, which we had to remove and bury in the sand after the storm. Later, the engineers came in and poured us cement floors for the tents.

A while after the missiles were set up, someone noticed a funny powder on the sand, directly under the rear of one. On closer inspection, it turned out that the primer for the propellant was flaking off and dribbling out the back of the missiles. Experts were quickly flown in from Redstone Arsenal and corrected the problem; but for awhile, many of our missiles would not have fired, had they been needed.

One night there was a huge commotion. A Vietnamese had been found stumbling around inside our perimeter, after getting through the wire. It turned out that he was a fisherman who had capsized off our coast and barely made it to shore after swimming for hours. No one on guard duty and seen him, and the fur really flew the next day because of it. One of our more gung-ho officers actually wanted a guard shot for sleeping on duty.

One of our higher-ranking sergeants died of a heart attack, our only fatal casualty while I was with the 71st, as I recall. There was a rather big flap when the Army delivered the wrong body to his widow, back stateside.

After six months with the 71st in Viet Nam, I extended my tour by six months, so I could transfer to a combat unit. I transferred to the 129th Assault Helicopter Company, based directly across the bay at Dong ba Thin. I became a gunner on a Huey "slick" for the rest of my tour.

Two things later happened to me that relate to the 71st:

While I was with the 129th, anytime we were back at Dong ba Thin from the field and wanted to test our guns, we'd fly out to the sea, near the 71st's position, and shoot sharks. We saw many huge ones cruising all around the swimming area. It was fun to start shooting and see all the guys in the surf frantically head for shore, once they figured out what we were shooting at.

Once, after I had been with the 129th for a few months, we flew back to Dong ba Thin for maintenance. I asked my pilot to drop me off at the 71st, so I could visit with a couple of buddies. He set down on the landing pad, just below Headquarters Company. Apparently, while we were coming in for our landing, someone saw us approaching and figured a VIP was paying an unexpected visit. A jeep full of brass came racing down the hill, just as I jumped out. They were quite displeased to see they had made the trip for a lowly Spec-4, but they did let me ride back up the hill with them in their jeep.