



## A Path Not Taken

by **Richard Shand**

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*At **Firebase Bold** it seemed that we had disappeared into some forgotten part of the war. Our section of Dusters supported three self-propelled 155's who fired in support of allied operations against an NVA (North Vietnamese Army) division in the area. I was informed that the NVA had already attacked all the other allied bases in our vicinity. What follows is a somewhat rambling discourse about events at Bold.*

A camp of ARVN's just down the road had been wiped out and we could hear the shooting and explosions and see the green and red tracers dance in the sky. We fully expected to suffer the same fate. The following night, as darkness fell, I stood guard with Dan on the open turret of the Duster. "Night, man" said Will . "

Goodnight," I replied. "It's been nice knowing you." Will and I shook hands, then he ducked into the bunker to go to sleep.

One of the crewmen from the 155's walked by and called out, "Hey, we're depending on you!".

"Don't depend upon us too much," I whispered to Dan in the turret beside me. It was true that the Duster's firepower was a sight to behold - a stream of fiery tracers would arc into the sky like meteors and impact on the target in a series of sharp crackling explosions, each burst with a fifteen meter killing radius. The Viet Cong feared Dusters and called them "fire dragons". But I thought the confidence in us by the 155 battery was misplaced. We were only two Dusters, one at each end of the firebase, backed up into the earthen berm that provided protection from enemy fire. Although the artillery unit manned M-60 machine guns in a series of bunkers along the berm and a company of ARVN infantry often dug in near our position, I knew that if the NVA made a concerted push on us, we would be in real trouble. I joked that the NVA, reportedly 2,000 strong, could accidentally walk over us and wipe us out.

Our weakness in numbers was not our only problem. First of all, the fighting resolve of the ARVN's was questionable. There were some good units that we worked with, like the Tigers, but I remember one conversation I had at Bold with an ARVN soldier as dusk fell. "Why Vietnamese fight Vietnamese?" he said. "We are brother against brother." I watched him, thin and small under his seemingly oversized helmet and flak jacket, and could read the apprehension in his eyes.

"One day the Americans will go home," I replied. "Maybe then the war will be over and there will be peace." He smiled. I wonder if he survived the war, and if he did, was he placed in an internment camp or did he join the thousands of boat people who fled the Democratic Republic of Vietnam for a better life?

More troubling than the lack of resolve of our Vietnamese allies was the inexperience of the 155 unit we were supporting. True, their howitzers provided a formidable backup and could shoot beehive rounds with thousands of tiny arrow-like flechettes to shred enemy flesh at close range. But the crew men were green and untested in combat. I was told that the battery had been stationed at Long Binh where they had served as a demonstration team for visiting officers. They had never been out in the field before and

their fear was palpable. They relied heavily upon us in the Dusters to bolster their confidence. Dusters had never operated in this area before and the commanding officer of the 155 battery considered us a secret weapon to be kept in reserve in case of a ground attack. Consequently, we were not allowed to fire, even when an ideal target for our 40mm guns presented itself.

I can recall one such occasion. One of the men from the artillery unit who was pulling guard in a nearby machine-gun bunker walked over to our Duster. "One of our guys saw a light up on mountain. Do you see it?" He pointed and I looked out towards the Nui Chua Cham mountain which loomed nearby, black against the fading light of evening sky. I thought I could make out a faint light near the center.

"I'll check it out." On the Duster we carried a starlight scope which was capable of amplifying ambient light, however faint, and presenting the field of view as a luminous green image. On previous occasions I had watched unseen figures advancing under the cover of darkness stand out as distinctly as though they were taking a daylight stroll in a park.

With the artillery man's guidance, I pointed the starlight scope set on a small tripod towards the mountain. I peered in, adjusted the focus and scanned the area. Yes, there! A single brilliant pinhead of light shone on the mountain side.

"It's there," I confirmed. I pulled out the field phone and cranked it to ring fire control. I told the lieutenant on duty the situation and gave him rough coordinates for the target. I expected permission for the Duster to fire on the light, a easy target at that range for our guns, but no such permission came. Instead, the darkness behind me suddenly became alive with activity. Men ran and manned the guns. The azimuth, number of charges and fuse setting was called out. Machinery whirred as the guns rotated and **CLANGS** sounded as the breeches were locked shut.

**BOOM, BOOM, BOOM!** The three guns fired almost simultaneously and the mountainside flashed orange as the rounds hit amongst the trees. A few seconds later a rumble echoed down from the mountainside and reverberated in the jungle around us. The lieutenant's voice sounded on the phone. "Give me a correction. How close are we?" I made a quick guess. "Drop fifty and fifty to the left," I told him. **BOOM, BOOM, BOOM!** The guns fired again and the shells hit the mountainside, closer this time.

"Adjust fire," I relayed into phone. "Drop another fifty". **BOOM, BOOM, BOOM!** Only slightly above target. I confirmed by peering through the starlight scope. The single light still burned in the night. Only a few more meters and we would be dead on target. **CLANG.** I heard the breeches close.

Suddenly a frantic voice sounded. "Check fire! Check fire!" What's going on, I thought to myself. As it turned out, one of the officers decided to check the coordinates on a map. Our target was real all right, but it wasn't the NVA. It was a Buddhist monastery. I came within a couple of seconds of dispatching several saffron robed individuals to a different Bardo state.

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After pulling my four hours of guard duty, I returned to the sweltering confines of the culvert. I lay awake in the darkness and planned what course of action to take in case of a ground attack. I was as concerned about being shot from behind by .50 caliber machine gun rounds fired by panicking GI's as I was being blasted from the front by the NVA. It was clear to me that if I was to survive, I would have to work out a plan. The earthen berm and RPG wire place in front of the Duster would give some initial protection against RPGs (rocket propelled grenades) but eventually the Duster would be hit. Of that I was certain. I decided that if the Duster was knocked out of action and my crew mates killed, I would crawl underneath and hope the NVA would not discover me as they swarmed over the base. Only a week or so before, the NVA had overrun the perimeter of the American base at Xuan Luc. They shot the GI's in the bunkers as they cried and pleaded for their lives. I would be damned if I would let that would happen to me.

There was a problem with my plan, though. Unlike almost every other ground vehicles in Vietnam which were powered by diesel fuel, Dusters used gasoline. This meant that once the gas tanks were ruptured, a Duster would quickly ignite into a fiery inferno. The several hundred high explosive rounds inside the Duster would cook off in the heat and

add to the conflagration. I could be roasted alive if I hid underneath the Duster. I mulled over the options in my mind but I couldn't find a satisfactory solution. Eventually, fatigue overcame me and I drifted off to sleep.



### **Destroyed Duster**

The burned out hulk is grim evidence of this vehicle's fiery demise.

Hours later, in a reverie between dream and sleep, I awoke in a cold sweat. I was convinced that something had happened - something profound and disturbing. Reality had split into two branches, two separate universes. In one I had been killed and in the other nothing had happened - I was still alive. And being alive was the only branch I could ever traverse!

It was as though each of us persist in a continuous present, shuffling images from our past to divine our future. And in this continuing present we never die. Others may see us lowered into a darkened grave and we may see others meet a similar fate, but the only branch you or I are ever able to experience is the branch where our consciousness survives. The car swerves at the last moment, the plane flight is not taken, the mortar round does not explode...

(In physics, the concept of ever bifurcating paths spawning new parallel universes is known as the "many-worlds view". Most cosmologists prefer the idea that the universe is self-consistent - that all probabilities combine to produce one singularly logical outcome. Parallel universes then are merely "ghosts" of possibilities that never came to be, yet their combined presence surrounds and forms the fabric of our own reality.)

The attack we had been expecting for days never came. Oh, there were a few incoming rounds but nothing different from what we had already encountered in other actions. Yet something within me had changed. Although I could not articulate it at the time, I knew that I had passed a turning point and now possessed the certainty that I would make it back home, no matter how dangerous the odds. Perhaps it was hubris (my friend calls it "arrogance of survival"), but whatever it was, it was not bravado nor foolhardiness. It was simply an acceptance of what I felt to be true. (Of course there is the nagging possibility that the branch I now occupy is actually the one in which I died, and I exist here on this plane of travail in a state of delusion along with all the other lost souls.)