



Living Conditions

by **Richard Shand**

FBS Bold, Trang Doan, June/July 1969

Our section of two Dusters helped to establish Bold, a remote fire support base in the midst of jungle near the Nui Chua Cham mountain south-east of Gia Ray (80 km NW of Saigon). We were the first Dusters to operate in this sector. We were expecting to be there only one week but our stay was extended at least twice. Morale was less than spectacular.

From a letter (exact date unknown) sometime in June, 1969:

Our purpose is to provide security for three self-propelled 155's (*tracked artillery pieces*) so there are approximately 50 Americans here as well as ARVN's in the surrounding territory. It was a real pioneering effort on our behalf. When we arrived we had to build bunkers, hump ammo, string razor wire, set up trip flares and put up RPG nets. (*Note: RPG nets were linked metal screens in front of Duster positions designed to explode enemy rocket propelled grenades before they did any damage.*). A lot of hard, dirty work. We have been here a week already and are slated to stay an additional two weeks. Meanwhile I have only two shirts, two pairs of socks, two towels and one pair of pants with me. Everything else was left behind. Conditions are so primitive here that we had to buy our shower water at first from the ARVNs in exchange for cigarettes.

From a letter dated July 1, 1969:

I will try to give you a better idea of the living conditions here at Trang Doan, or Fire Support Base Bold for, believe it nor not, I am still here.

LIVING QUARTERS

I and three other guys share a spacious culvert approximately 10' X 5' and 3' high at the highest point. It is heavily sandbagged and this gives the bunker a certain rustic charm. The inhabitants lounge comfortably on a floor made of wooden 155 ammunitions palettes which serve to keep some of the omnipresent mud off their clothes and belongings.

PERSONAL HYGIENE

Showers are taken in the spacious freedom of nature by dipping a coke can into an ammo can filled with water and pouring the contents over the body. The Americans now supply the shower water and it is free of charge. For the washing of clothes, a laundry bar of soap, a plastic pan and much elbow grease is required. The clothes are hung out to dry on the RPG wire, which looks like a playground fence. Lately there has been more response in taking malaria pills since our section chief took ill with all the symptoms of malaria and had to be evacuated to a hospital by chopper.

RECREATION

Unfortunately the present 155 battery is dry unlike the last one so the lack of beer puts a serious crimp in recreational activities. Except for the time devoted to the maintenance of gaming equipment (40 mm guns, m-60 machine guns, M-79 grenade launchers, M-16s, hand grenades, flares, claymore mines and protective masks) there is little to do but sleep, read and listen to the radio as no games have been scheduled recently.

FOOD

When C rations are available, the cans containing the first course are heated over grills made of 40mm ammo clips and the fuel - either gunpowder pellets from 155 powder bags or C4, a plastic explosive, is fed into a pit below the grill. The present battery has built a primitive mess hall to supplement our diet with regular army chow. Meanwhile the VC and NVA prisoners nearby eat rice with fish heads or dogs (or even snakes). *(Dog would be turned on a spit over a fire, barbecue style.)*

FLORA AND FAUNA

No plant life exists inside the base, which is a small sea of mud surrounded by tall grass and, further out, a thick growth of deciduous trees. As for animal life inside there is the usual collection of dogs, frogs, and flying and crawling insects of all descriptions. In the walls of our bunker alone we have found scorpions, a rat *(a huge sucker which scuttled across my body one night)* and a snake. I just returned from the machine gun bunker nearby and watched a four foot long bush master get killed. Outside the compound, birds and monkeys can be seen although other animals remain out of sight except for occasional glimpses of predators at night *(NVA, tigers?)*

THE CREW

With the section chief taken ill and two men returning home, the crew has only one man with any experience at leadership left. He has been a squad leader for one month. We received two new men who have never even seen a duster fire. Everyone else, except the above mentioned squad leader, has been in country five months or less.

THE BASE

Stand in the center and you can throw a stone outside the perimeter in any direction without much effort. It is surrounded by a mound of raised earth called a berm. Beyond are two rows of razor wire, each having a top layer coiled on two bottom layers. Trip flares have been set inside the wire. Directly in front of the Duster positions between the berm and the razor wire is a long stretch of RPG wire stretched like a linked fence, and claymore mines which shoot out a swatch of steel ball bearings. An infrared searchlight that can convert to white light of one million candle power in an instant, as well as a starlight scope, provide the eyes at night. The men on the berm in machine gun bunkers and the two Dusters provide the ears.

PULLING GUARD

Guard consists of two shifts of four hours every night in the turret, two men on, two off sleeping. Note that this is not considered a form of recreation. *(Although it was monsoon season it took us weeks to get any suitable rain gear so we were often soaked and chilled to the bone.)*

In the meantime it is just a matter of waiting to be relieved from this position. The men feel like this is a forgotten sector of the war as our battery brings us mail only occasionally and not much else. Our section chief, before his departure, was unable even to get them to send him a personal weapon.