



Under Fire

by **Richard Shand**

Duster Compound, 6 June 1969

Two months as a Duster driver for headquarters battery left me little prepared for handling the guns. My total training consisted of firing four rounds in a gravel pit. Two days later I was put to the test and my inexperience showed. Our job was to respond immediately to any incoming fire and, as happened in other actions, we had no time to put on helmets or flak jackets. Note: it was standard operating procedure to fire just one of the twin forties and keep the other gun for backup. (In this account only the names have been changed. Otherwise the event was as reported.)

Now to the right, then to the left! I pump hard, stamping the pedal on the floor of the turret, gripping and turning the handles as I traverse and fire. **BLAM! BLAM! BLAM! BLAM!** The recoiling gun pounds and shakes the turret. Rounds explode in the wire and just beyond. Acrid smoke stings the nostrils.

We are under fire. Three 107mm rockets have just gone over our heads - **SWOOSH**, seemingly just above our radio antenna, and hit the guard tower at the opposite end of the compound. Now the radar dome beside us to our right is under attack.

RPG rounds fall short in bright popping explosions, like flash bulbs going off, right in front of our positions. This was not my first time in action, but it was the first time I ever had to aim and fire the guns. Old Mike behind me is loading away. I can hear him dropping the four-round clips into the loader as Fedor hands new clips to him. They work together like a well-greased piece of machinery.

In front of me is a tide of darkness. RPG launchers in the distance spark like matches being struck. My predecessor has neglected to put on the ring site necessary for aiming so our shooting is wild. The assistant gunner to the right of me calls off one target and I another. The guns traverse back and forth, spraying the countryside with flaring tracers and the percussive **WUMPHS** of explosions.

"Damn! Where's Fox?". Our section chief, Sgt. Fox was unfortunately afflicted of loose bowels when under fire and is behind the bunker taking a crap into an ammo can. (These cans were shipped back to the States for reloading and I used to try to visualize the scenario when their contents were discovered.)

We fire perhaps five clips - twenty rounds, really far fewer than we should have, but we stop when the VC barrage in front of us halts abruptly. Echoes fade, the smoke clears and the ringing in my ears subsides. Purple afterimages of the bright tracer flashes remain burnt into my retina.



"Born Free"

I saw more action on this vehicle than any other I served on in Vietnam.

The following morning the infantry swept the area in front of our position . They reported that the VC had run away so fast that they had left unfired weapons and sandals behind. If I had encountered the same situation a few months later I would have had the sight installed and probably would placed at least another fifty rounds on target. But the past is past and those who fought lived to fight another day.

The official version of the action states:

"At 0140 hours, Duster Compound was brought under an RPG, mortar, and rocket attack. With complete disregard for his own safety (*as if I had a chance to think twice*) PFC Shand immediately mounted the open turret of his Duster and began returning fire at the flashes spotted by his crew. (*Actually we were already in the turret preparing for a fire mission. I think the VC were disconcerted by our almost instantaneous response.*) Their rapid and accurate (*I wish*) fire quickly silenced the enemy guns. Later when Long Binh Post came under a similar attack, the crew again alertly observed the flashes and again PFC Shand and his crewmates without hesitation manned their Duster position to aggressively respond to the attack being launched to their immediate front. Their timely and accurate fires again silenced the enemy positions."

- General Orders Number 678

During the later incident, we blew up a rocket site which was targetting the major U.S. base at Long Binh. The explosion was spectacular and lit up the entire horizon over a nearby village.