Allan Penwell, C-5/2d '67-68

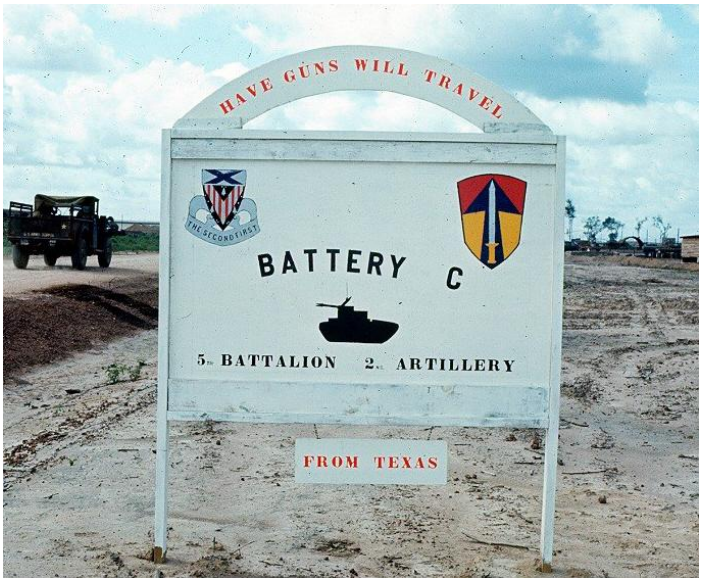
Some of my Vietnam Story

I am writing my memoirs which are almost completed. Only five copies are being made — one for each of my four children and one for me. This is a condensed version of my Vietnam experience I offered to share with our historian.

After arriving in-country and being assigned to the 5/2d (Duster) Battalion, BN CO Lt. Col. Churchill told me I was being assigned to Charlie Battery which was attached to the 9th Infantry Division. The 1st and 2nd Brigades of the 9th ID were headquartered at Bearcat which was at Long Thanh only a 40 minute drive from Duster Compound near Long Binh. The Riverine 3rd Brigade worked out of Dong Tam which was south of Saigon on the Mekong River. Within the next year, the entire division would move to Dong Tam.

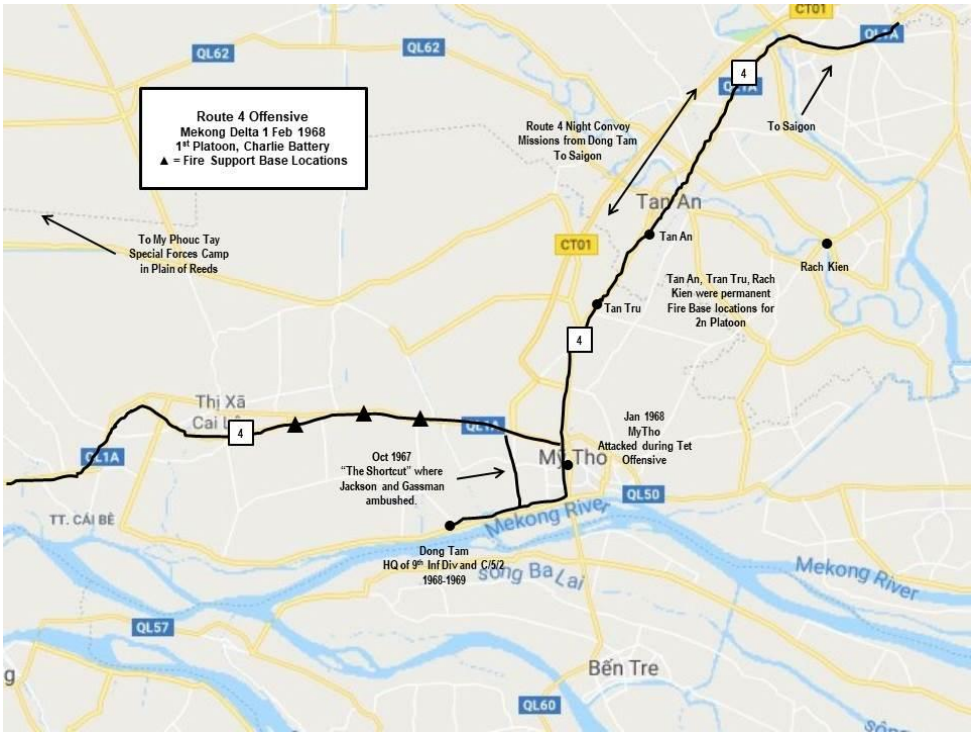
Captain Hollis was the C Battery commander in Sept 1967. He came over on the boat with the battalion in the fall of 1966 and directed the battery through the first year. Initially the battery was assigned to the 1st Infantry Division if I recall correctly and participated in several significant offensives in the Iron Triangle.

In fall 1967, Captain Hollis was replaced by Captain Tom Casey as it was customary for an officer to be in a command position for only six months. A command position might look good on a resume, but just as soon as one battery commander became experienced, a new one had to be broken in. I then became XO of the battery but was replaced within a week or so by Pete Cangilos who had date of rank on me by only a few days. I was assigned as platoon leader of the 1st platoon along with Pete Cheney who was assistant platoon leader.



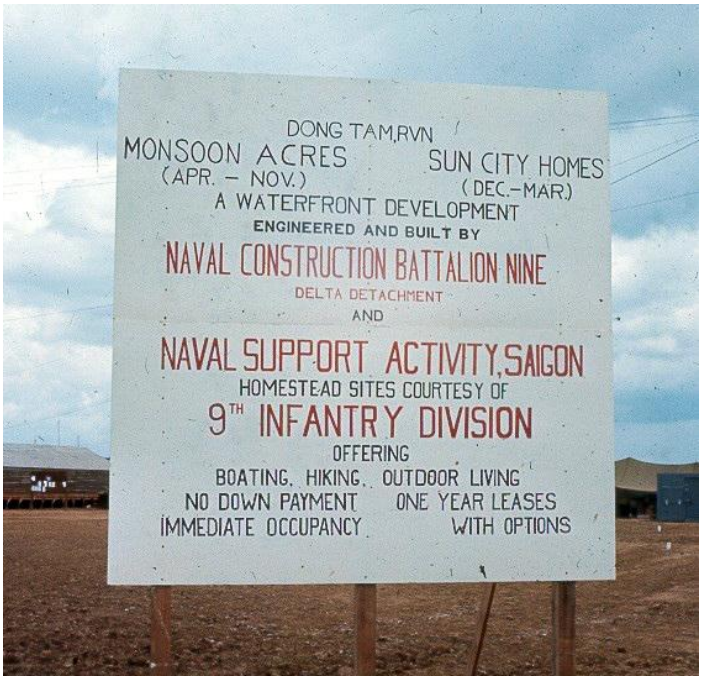
In October 1967, word came that Sergeant Frederick Jackson and SP4 Gerald Gassman of Second Platoon in the Delta were killed in an ambush on what was known as "The Shortcut." There were fire bases on Route 4 north of Dong Tam, and the safest, but longest way to get to Route 4 from the division base was through My Tho. There was also "The Shortcut" which was dicey, but safer if you were in a convoy. It turned out that Jackson and Gassman took The Shortcut in late afternoon unescorted which proved fatal. Their shot-up

jeep was brought up to our motor pool for disposal. The battalion chaplain came down for a memorial service for both of these men who gave their lives for their country. Later, when we joined second platoon at Dong Tam, I took The Shortcut twice in convoy resupply but could not help but think how dangerous it really was.



Google Maps now calls this Highway 1, but an article in *The New Yorker*, June 17, 1967 clearly refers to it as Highway 4.

The only significant event in 1967 was Operation Santa Fe which was east on Route 1 toward the South China Sea. Pete Cheney and I took two sections of Dusters and were mainly in static defense of Fire Support Base Wildcat for several weeks. Although Intelligence reported there was a well-developed, fortified NVA base on the nearby May Tao Mountains, the enemy laid low and not much went on. The ACAV troop next to us was made up of characters and was a free-wheeling outfit. Their leader, Captain Thompson, would pop out of his commander's hatch from time to time with mouse ears on his head, and yell, "What kind of Mickey Mouse outfit is this?" One afternoon, the ACAV returned from one of their missions with a huge Boa constrictor. Thompson lined up six or seven GIs holding the stretched out snake which they named Houston. Somewhere there is a picture of it on the internet, and the caption notes that Houston was shipped stateside and lived out his or her life in a zoo. That was highly unlikely, and knowing Captain Thompson, the troop probably had snake soup for supper.

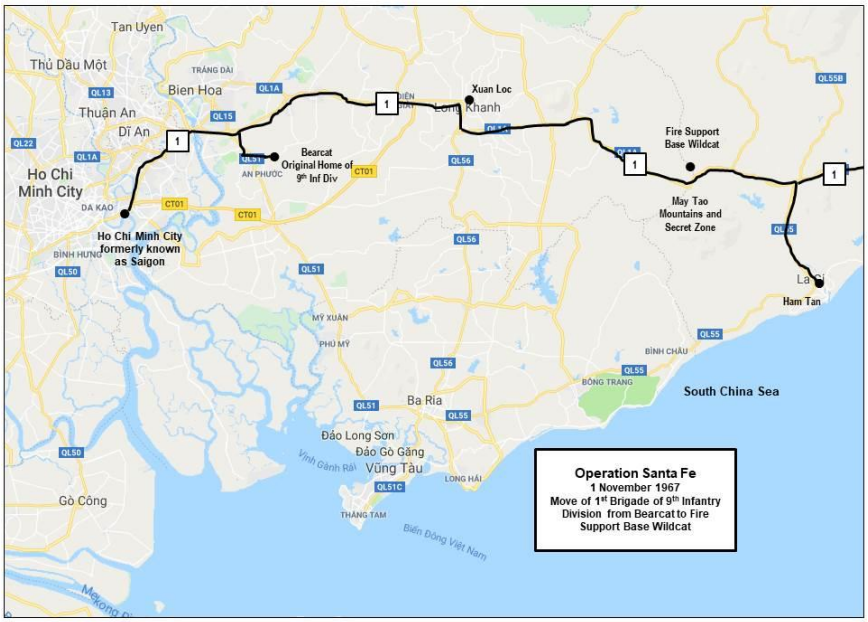


In February, my first platoon began a serious move south to Dong Tam. I took orders from the 1/11 Artillery Battalion and set up my platoon headquarters with them in Dong Tam. In addition to this combat assignment, I worked with the engineers at Dong Tam to build our battery area. Compared to Dong Tam, Bearcat was a sea of tranquility. The only enemy activity I remembered at Bearcat was the rocketing of the helicopter strip next to us.

Life at Dong Tam was punctuated by nightly mortar and rocket attacks. We slept in sandbagged bunkers usually accompanied by a friendly rat or two scampering around. Despite the frequency of the mortar and rocket attacks which came for weeks, there were surprisingly few casualties and limited damage. It also became habitual to have a couple of AH-1 Cobras in orbit over the nearby canal, and occasionally a Spooky AC-47. The fire from these aircraft was nothing less than spectacular, and they sounded like a chain saw.

Now that the 9th Division was consolidating in the Mekong Delta, its mission became obvious. The Delta was the breadbasket of Vietnam with hundreds of square miles of rice paddies interspersed through tributaries of the Mekong River. The Viet Cong used it as their major supply of food in the southern part of the country as well as to extort tax money from the local farmers. The job of the infantry was to hurt the Viet Cong whenever it could and keep commerce flowing on Route 4. Incidentally Route 4 today has been renamed Route 1 which begins at the South China Sea, and it looks like an interstate.

Second Platoon had sections in Tan An, Tan Tru, Rach Kien and Ben Luc. These towns were roughly in a north-south direction between Saigon and Dong Tam, but now operations began moving west as Route 4 turned toward Cai Lay. New firebases were established for the artillery to support the infantry which helicoptered out of Dong Tam or from the fire bases. One of my sections was left at Bearcat, and the other three were on Route 4.



The engineers completed work on our battery area which was on the north side of the base. A sandbagged commo shack, a battery office, and a maintenance tent were finished but really nothing else was completed. When the rest of the battery moved down to Dong Tam (along with our new battery commander, Bill Stender), everyone slept in tents and had to make mad dashes to bunkers when we were rocketed and mortared. The battery headquarters had one side for Mike Renwick, the battery clerk, and the other half was my office where I put my cot. When the VC started their evening activity, I used the commo shack next door as my bunker.

Loads of lumber were delivered, and First Sergeant Michenow supervised construction of three two-story enlisted barracks. As I recall the engineers were there to assist us, but the engineers were more likely comprised of privates who had some classroom instruction on sawing 2x4s with little to no hands-on construction experience. The second building was under construction when one night we heard a crash. I jumped off my cot and ran around the corner. The barracks had folded up like an accordion. It must not have been braced properly before some of the shear walls were hammered in. Luckily, they were unoccupied, but all we were left with was a pile of lumber that looked like match sticks.

There were three significant events that I remember as platoon leader in the spring of 1968. The first was the attack on FSB Jaeger which was on Route 4 near one of our sections at FSB Lambert. The Cav had just moved to its night defensive positon with no time to dig in. The VC attacked in numbers and 11 out of 25 APCs were

destroyed along with 20 dead and 68 wounded of our troops. I was up all night listening to the radio, and luckily our guys were fine.

The enemy took significant losses during Tet 1968, but they correctly sensed the support of the war by the American public was waning after realizing the enemy could marshal sizeable forces and strike at will — particularly the major cities. A plan was developed to hit the cities in South Vietnam in May 1968 although on a lesser scale than Tet. The U.S. command anticipated this through intelligence sources and in April took measures to reinforce defenses around the cities. Our battery had two missions in the May Offensive.

The first mission was in April to include Quad 50s which were quickly assigned to our battery. As soon as the Quads showed up, I was sent with them to a Special Forces camp at My Phouc Tay in the middle of the Plain of Reeds near the Cambodian border. The enemy had bases in Cambodia to move supplies from their strongholds to forces west of Saigon to jump off for an attack on the city, and the camp was in their way. The camp was an old French fort which was triangular and surrounded by rolls of concertina wire. There were friendly mines as well as an unknown number of mines the French had buried. The middle of the camp had two 155mm ARVN howitzers and a heavily bunkered command center. The camp was manned by a Special Forces A Team along with an ARVN detachment for the howitzers as well as infantry and their Vietnamese families. It was the first firebase that I was in that had chickens running around. We were there for a week or so, and all was quiet.

My memory is less clear as to the second mission our battery had as part of the May Offensive which at the time we called the Second Saigon Offensive. Troops of the 9th Division were moved into Saigon along with artillery units we supported to defend the city. I took two sections into Saigon for several days where we defended fire support bases of 105mm howitzers. There was significant enemy contact made over a period of three weeks, and ammunition supply for the artillery was critical. Our firebases were never attacked, but there was street fighting around us. Both the enemy and civilians took major casualties.

As my tour was coming to its end, early one morning in August, I grabbed my duffel bag and caught the 6 a.m. mail shuttle to Long Binh. Over the roar of the rotor blades, I asked one of the pilots if he could drop me off at Duster Compound. I sat down among the mail bags for my last Huey ride. About half way there, the helicopter went into a screaming dive from 3,000 feet down to tree top level. All I could do was sit there and say to myself, "This has been a pretty good life." The helicopter came out of the dive, and we landed at the helipad at Duster Compound with no clue as to what had happened. I hopped out and stayed overnight to process out of battalion.

The next evening a bus load of us dressed in our khakis were driven to Tan Son Nhut and off-loaded into a large military hanger. We waited at least an hour under the darkening sky before the landing lights of a Boeing 707 appeared in the distance. The plane landed and taxied beside the hanger and a set of stairs was wheeled to the plane. Over 150 soldiers came off the plane and silently walked past us. They were just starting their year of service. This was startlingly reminiscent of the last scene of "Close Encounters of a Third Kind" when the missing airmen and sailors walk off the mother ship. Our group was leaving, but sadly some of those taking our places would not be returning home. We boarded the 707 and were on our way to San Francisco.

M42A1 "DUSTER" AW SP "TWIN 40's"

"If the left one don't…the right one will"

"Have Guns Will Travel"