

Chapter Four

Da Nang Is Calling

Although our Emergency Engineering Team was home based at Bien Hoa AB we reported to the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) at Tan Son Nhut AB in Saigon. They gave us direction on priority efforts remote from Bien Hoa that we needed to attend to. MACV Headquarters pictured below.



At one point in our tour we received a request from MACV to send a team to Da Nang AB in the northern part of Vietnam to assemble a field hospital. We knew the hospital as the Marine Evacuation Hospital to be used as a staging location for the evacuation of injured US Marines back to the Continental US for medical attention. Sargent Ebbert volunteered to accomplish this mission so he selected a cross-section of 17 personnel from our roster to take with him to this location. To give the reader a perspective of what we experienced at this US Military Bases in Vietnam I attached a link to a series of videos of Da Nang AB shot in the 1966-68 time frame. (May have to paste into your browser to make it play).

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XYavDV00k8Y>

This was a pre-fabricated hospital with sections 10 feet by 40 feet, some weighing 16,000 pounds. Typically the pre-fabricated sections were composed of floors, sides and roof sections. Some 10 X 40 Sections were preassembled looking like a house trailer. These could be operating rooms, totally intact. The foundations for the building were poured by a previous Prime BEEF Team. I presume, because of the lack of concrete we found that the center foundational support was not poured which

complicated the assembly. Our contingent began assembling the hospital the week of 12 September and completed the assembly on 28 October.



SSgt Ebbert and the Da Nang Marine Evacuation Hospital Erection Crew

SSgt Ebbert led our two remote construction efforts when we were in Vietnam, one to Qhi Nhon where a revetment was constructed around a communications site and this one at Da Nang. These men were reinforced with 3 more September 1966.

As one can read in our report in the Appendix of this book, the availability of equipment was a continuous issue. The men had to accomplish many tasks with human labor. The prefabricated hospital was shipped from the States months before and was sitting in the staging area sinking in the mud during the rainy season. Some looting of parts had been going on through the storage period so the erection team found that most of the plumbing components were missing from the pre-packaged materials. That led to a decision where we arranged for funds (cash) to be provided to one of the NCO's and a plane took him to the Philippines where he purchased thousands of dollars of plumbing supplies and flew them back to Da Nang. You just had to play the hand you were dealt and not complain. I do not know how we arranged the flight over to the Philippines and back. I remember assisting a Colonel that had a "Spook Outfit" flying U-2's out of Bien Hoa AB and remember him telling me he got refrigerators for his men brought back from the Philippines (He had a C-130 assigned to him), maybe he returned the favor we did for his men in constructing or improving his work area. Maybe the Base Commander at Da Nang provided his plane. Hard to say, things happened very fast, and my sergeants were very innovative in getting things accomplished.

I would fly up to Da Nang every couple weeks and spend a day watching what was happening and seeing if I could assist in any way. Sgt. Ebbert was doing a great job and the men had a very high "Esprit de Corp". Equipment shortages were his biggest headache. Several weeks into the project I received a call from the Da Nang Base Civil Engineer wanting me to attend a meeting at Da Nang. I would typically take "milk runs" of aircraft out of Bien Hoa or Ton San Nhut that would hop from base to base up to Da Nang. I cannot remember this exact flight. I remember taking one trip on the Bien Hoa AB, Base Commanders DC-3, maybe this was it. (On that trip I sat directly behind the cockpit and had the aircraft log there, so I was browsing through it and noticed that the aircraft was fabricated in 1937, older than myself).

Anyway I ended up at Da Nang and attended a meeting at the Base Civil Engineering office. I was surprised on entering the conference room because there was a senior representative from the Base Commanders Office, the Marine detachment at Da Nang, the Base Civil Engineering office, etc. I then learned the purpose of the meeting was to find out why the Marine Evacuation Hospital was behind schedule. Up until this meeting I did not know we had a deadline to meet. Everyone was looking at me to answer the questions and the only thing I could say was we were short of heavy equipment, had damaged wall sections, pilfered plumbing supplies, etc. Everything was going alright until the Base Civil Engineer (a full Col) began chewing me out. That raised my temper and I told the group that we were doing the best we can with the support we were getting. Anyway, I was really mad at that point. I called my commanding officer at MACV, Ton San Nhut AB and told him I was coming down there to talk to him. The following day I flew down to Ton San Nhut and went directly over to the MACV facility to see my commander, who I had never met previously. I told the Colonel that I was really "pissed off" at being blamed for being behind on the construction of this facility when we were busting our butts. I told him that the Base Civil Engineer was just using me a whipping boy for their failures, and that I was not going to stand for that. The Colonel listened to my tirade and we discussed what was happening there.

At that point the Col said "Lieutenant Tomich, let's go to lunch at the Caravelle Hotel in downtown Saigon while my sergeant sees what he can do in solving your problem here". He said, you can leave your rifle here in my office. Anyway, that was a very interesting experience eating lunch at the Caravelle. There were several of us, he drove us around downtown Saigon showing us the Catholic Cathedral, the US Embassy and other facilities before we parked at the hotel. I remember the hotel being very pleasant in comparison to what I had experienced in Vietnam up until then. As I remember it we had a view of Saigon from where we ate.

After lunch we returned to MACV headquarters. While we were away his sergeant had performed wonders. He briefed us on the situation at Da Nang when we returned. He told me, "Lieutenant, right now as we are speaking there is a 20 Ton crane at your construction site with a Marine staff sergeant that will be there every day until you say he is not needed any more".

The Colonel then told me that I can return to Da Nang and check with my team to ensure they have everything they needed to complete the Marine Evacuation Hospital effort. So that afternoon I flew back to Da Nang.

I arrived back at Da Nang after dark and checked into the Bachelors Officers Quarters (BOQ) for the night. I remember the sergeant giving me a flashlight because the BOQ consisted of a few "houches" and the general area was dark. I threw my things onto the floor and crawled into a bunk. I remember during the night hearing scurrying around and I switched my flashlight on and saw some rats looking back at me. Quite a change in accommodations compared to the Caravelle Hotel, in just a few hours. Anyway I slept very lightly that night.

So the following morning I visited the Marine Evacuation Hospital job site. As I was told by the Sergeant in Saigon, there was a Marine Staff Sergeant there on site who was a 20 ton crane operator and he told me he was assigned to assist us until the erection activity was completed. That took a tremendous amount of pressure off of Sgt Ebbert, they could now go full steam ahead. That afternoon I took a milk run back to Bien Hoa.

I do not know if it was this trip back from Da Nang or not but I can remember one trip where I found myself at Na Trang AB and was looking for a ride back to Bien Hoa or Ton San Nhut. The flight operations center told me there was an Army Caribou aircraft across the tarmac that was leaving for Ton San Nhut and that they had room for me. They gave me transportation across the airfield to where they were located. I introduced myself to the Load Master and he said to have a seat. The Caribou was a two engine (internal combustion engine) transport aircraft. As was my usual procedure I took a seat at the rear of the aircraft by the loading ramp. There was only 4-5 Army fellows on the aircraft and they were all sitting up front by the cockpit. The seats were aluminum framing with nylon netting, not very substantial.

Anyway the pilot cranked up the engines and we taxied to the end of the field and aligned with the runway. As the pilot revved the engines to full power I yelled at the Load Master, "aren't you going to close the ramp"? He yelled back, "No Lieutenant, we leave the ramp down for our flights, too hot". I thought to myself as we began our run down the runway, too late to unbuckle this seat belt and move to the front of the aircraft. We broke ground and this underpowered aircraft just hung on its props as we climbed out at a 45 degree inclination gaining altitude with the engines going URRR, URRR, URRR. It became apparent that the only thing between my left shoulder and the ground was a few thousand feet of air, a great view of the base. We continued our climb out and turned towards the coast taking a southerly track towards Saigon. The scene was beautiful, green emerald islands surrounded by white beaches and a deep Blue-green sea. So I took my camera out and began taking pictures all the way down the coast. The visual scene was much more beautiful than the pictures I took. A filter was needed to remove the haze. Needless to say we made it too Ton San Nhut that day. As I got off the aircraft the Load Master was smiling. Some way or another I made it back to Bien Hoa to continue our efforts there.

