

## STINGER GUNSHIPS AT DA NANG AND DISTANT PLACES

December 1971 to April 1973

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This is the way I remember my time with the Stinger Gunships of the 18<sup>th</sup> Special Operations Squadron, 56<sup>th</sup> Special Operations Wing at Nakhon Phanom (NKP) Royal Air Base in Thailand.

My association with the Wing and Squadron dated from December 18, 1971 after approximately eight months service in the States since leaving the Shadows of Saigon. During my absence from Southeast Asia, I was Director of Operations and Training (DOT) in the SAC wing at Kincheloe AFB on the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. There were two seasons there, July and Winter. It was a great short tour of duty. The Deputy Commander for Maintenance told me to just let him know how many B-52 and KC-135 sorties we wanted, when day and night; and how configured and he would provide them. He lived up to his word and we set some flying and alert records in the wilderness there. In fact, Second Air Force invited us down to tell the rest of the organizations how we did it. Never got to make that presentation because a telephone call from Air Force saying that gunship pilots were sorely needed in Southeast Asia and would I volunteer for the assignment. I volunteered for another year of Special Operations and crossed the towering Mackinac Bridge in a November snowstorm and headed south to begin my journey to Thailand.

Upon arriving at Nakhon Phanom in northeast Thailand, about seven miles from the Mekong River, a couple of jobs were waiting for me. First, I had to checkout in country in the AC-119K Stinger gunship which was different from the Shadow aircraft in that it had two 20mm Gatling guns in addition to the four miniguns of a smaller caliber, 7.62mm, that was the Shadow's armament. It also had forward looking infrared radar (FLIR) which could acquire a target by its heat signature, such as a motorcycle engine under triple jungle canopy. After acquiring the heat target, it could then be tracked and fed into the pilot's gun sight for destruction. This was done by a very special operator on board whose crew station was called the FLIR operator. Another use for the heat seeking radar was during the actual engagement of the target where the operator could identify the gunship's tracers from their heat and then put the tracers on the identified target. The last major difference from the Shadow was the two small jet engines outboard of the radial engines and were used to assist the heavier Stinger in takeoffs, landings, and emergencies. These engines (J-85s) were rated at 3,000 lbs. of thrust each. That was the immediate flying requirement that was done in an orderly fashion on some memorable combat missions.

Next, I was given a project to publish a Squadron and Wing Gunship Tactics Manual. There were a lot of good bits and pieces of the Manual already completed, just waiting to be edited and published. My main contribution to the project, which took about a month, was to organize, proof read, edit, and publish it. I also put a glossary of terms used over the radios in Southeast Asia and included some eighty of them in the front of the manual. These terms included: feet wet, big blue, little blue, Winchester, TIC, and so on. I also included some very pertinent and informative cartoons drawn by Stinger flight crew artists to illustrate each chapter's content such as a fierce action depicting combat over the Ho Chi Minh Trail. One picture really said a thousand words and was meant to catch the attention and interest of the reader in the material to be presented but alas, my senior editors were not amused or impressed so the cartoons died a flaming death and were not included. They may have been right to delete the cartoons. Anyhow, the manual was published and proved to be a worthwhile source of information for present and future gunshippers regardless of types of aircraft flown. Incidentally, four years later I visited Brigadier General Bruce K. Brown in the Pentagon who asked for a copy of the manual. I was not surprised because Colonel Brown had been the DCO of the 14<sup>th</sup> SOW at Phan Rang in 1970 and became very well informed in all phases of Special Operations. I was the Shadow commander stationed in Saigon at the time and really admired him for the cooperation and encouragement I received on every occasion. The Air Force must have also admired Colonel Brown because he was promoted to four star general in a very short time.

Nakhon Phanom Air Base reminded me of a logging camp with most of its structures made of

wood and painted brown. It was very comfortable with its own utilities, guard forces, and great flying facilities. The 56<sup>th</sup> SOW had two units who worked together to extract downed airmen, one heavy fighter who laid down suppressing fire for the helicopter to pick up the air crew. **The too**, there was a Forward Air Control Squadron there who flew OV-10s, which the crews said with a grin were made by Mattel, the toy maker. Also there was a squadron of modified C-47s who gathered electronic information in our area. Last there was the 18<sup>th</sup> Special Operations Squadron who flew Stinger AC-119K gunships over some very hostile territories such as the Ho Chi Minh Trail and the infamous areas of northern Thailand and Laos call the Barrel Roll, I believe, in the appropriate operations order for that region. This included the notorious former French section known as the Plaine Des Jarres where people were reported to have been buried in large jars sunk vertically into the earth. Some jar debris was clearly visible flying over the area.

My flying checkout began on Christmas Eve, 1971 with a familiarization mission over the Ho Chi Minh Trail on a beautiful and clear full moon night. I was sitting in the IP seat observing and listening to crew checklists and interphone procedures when all of a sudden some green tracer fire slowly drifted up past the left wing and disappeared into the heavens. I don't think I had ever seen green tracers before. The USAF used red tracers and spaced the tracers every fifth round. A little later in the mission I saw a huge flash as from a large gun firing followed by a white hot ball of an intense smoke ring that expanded evenly across the jungle canopy. Don't know who shot at whom but it was a magnificent scene even in combat.

After completing my Stinger checkout requirements, I remember vividly the final check ride. A very capable young captain was the check pilot. We started takeoff just at dusk. As the aircraft accelerated down the runway, engines humming and well short of lift off speed, the aircraft without warning lifted off the runway in a very nose high attitude. I pushed forward on the yoke as hard as I could and rolled nose down trim. Some aircraft reaction but not enough. I then asked the IP to help push the yoke forward. We roared over the GCA shack at a low altitude and together we gained control of the reluctant AC-119 and leveled off at a safe altitude, ran checklists and talked over the situation. NKP Tower called us and asked us if we were all right and what our intentions were. We told them that we had experienced severe elevator malfunction on takeoff, that we had control of the aircraft now and following some simulated landing attitudes and speeds, we would return to base and land. Incidentally, I requested maintenance to meet the aircraft. The aircraft was controllable in a landing configuration and I then made a normal landing. On roll out in the dark, Tower called and said that Stinger Operations instructed us to continue our mission in another aircraft as soon as we could park and transfer. The next day, maintenance informed us that the trim tab pin had slipped out of position and allowed the trim tab to force the elevator to a nose high position, resulting in the excitement on takeoff.

Excitement seemed to be on board my aircraft as we flew several more missions in a row. One of these was a night mission over the Trail or somewhere in Laos. Upon making contact with our combat controller on the ground, I asked him to fire the recognition flare of the day. He said roger, firing now. Would you believe it, there were six correct color flares in the air at the same time along a road with a slight bend in it away from our position. We finally established positive ID, I thought, by a combination of questions and answers that only someone familiar with our culture could answer. He then gave us a target to shoot. We flew to that position, had it on our sensors, displayed in the gun sight and rolled in firing on the target. We were really getting with it when after a short time; we began taking heavy and very accurate fire from the target. In fact so accurate that two tracers bracketed the cockpit simultaneously, one on the left side and one on the right side. I like the color red but not so close to me. I broke right out of the firing circle and took stock of our aircraft condition. There should have been four hard nosed bullets in between the tracers but there were none because there was no reported damage to our aircraft. I decided not to press our luck in this combat area. With the confusion of the flares and the ground controller's ID, we may have been lead into a trap.

Another exciting mission took place during daylight over a section of Laos just north of an east to west road. There were a circle of hills that we flew over and down below hidden in them were four combat vehicles, one of which was definitely a communications van. We called in to our controller for permission to fire and received same. This could also be a trap but we would have to see about that. The

situation appeared to be a rest stop in the hills for the convoy. With the targets on the sensors and gun sight, I alerted the crew and rolled in to fire on the sand colored vehicles. This turned out to be quite a duel between our guns and their guns. The wind was so strong that I had to walk the fire up to and through the convoy, meanwhile we were taking intense but erratic ground fire. The strong wind was affecting both the air and ground shooting. After expending most of our ammo on the targets with no explosions, I broke off and headed for home. We called the airborne command post, gave them a situation report and suggested that a couple of fighters could finish the small convoy with bombs but warned that the site was heavily defended. Command post agreed. After landing at NKP, we checked the aircraft for damage and the gunners could not believe it. There was no damage! All of the observers in the aft compartment agreed and reported that we had taken over 1,000 close rounds with several of them being "field goals", that is rounds passing between the two tail booms. Never heard what success the fighters had on the Laotian convoy.

After several more memorable missions, I was told that I was going to Da Nang in South Vietnam as commander of Detachment (Det.) 1 of the 18<sup>th</sup> SOS. So in Feb. 1972 we flew an uneventful daylight combat mission and I made my first landing at Da Nang. We had made our high ILS approach from the north over the South China Sea between two mountains. From the air, this part of Vietnam was absolutely beautiful and would have been a great tourist destination under different circumstances. Nothing could have been farther from the truth at that time for the units stationed there. It was a base with a siege mentality due to the unpredictable rocket attacks at any time day or night. Our primary mission for the Stingers would change later to rocket suppression and the Stinger crews would become the darlings of the base, but I am getting ahead of myself. After rollout from the landing, our aircraft was directed to taxi to the Stinger maintenance area where we had a small welcoming group. I was immediately impressed with the quality of people I met and their great attitude. What a start to my duty at Da Nang which lasted over a year.

Stinger operations and personal equipment occupied a two-story building next to the 366<sup>th</sup> Gunfighter Wing headquarters. As a tenant unit, our location contained some pretty comfortable quarters. On the front of our building was an impressive two-story sign showing the Stinger symbol in great detail and in brilliant color. There were two much smaller signs below the Stinger logo which stated who were the lucky commander and first sergeant at that time. Some efficient individual had already put my name there. The building itself was divided between operations which occupied the second floor and flying equipment situated on the ground floor. This made the personal equipment easy to load and unload for crew flying duties.

Not far away were our living quarters. These two-story prefabricated barracks were comfortable but had certain disadvantages, particularly the second floor. Second floor was not choice living space due to the nasty habit of rocket explosions projecting shrapnel in an ever rising cone from the impact area. My first tour of the barracks revealed that some people on the second floor had piled sandbags neatly around and under their beds.

Rocket attacks of 125 rockets, more or less, sometimes a single rocket, were always in the back of one's mind. I was so busy learning people and procedures that I was not really aware of this mindset until one day I was standing in the Officers Quarters on the first floor talking to a small group when this very loud bang occurred over our heads. They all dropped to the floor and I belatedly joined them. Then they got up laughing and told me that by preplanned action, a case of drinks was thrown on the floor above to simulate a rocket attack. It was a great initiation to the real world of Da Nang.

Now let me regress to the day of my arrival at the Stinger maintenance area. After meeting our people, operations and maintenance personnel took me inside our big hanger and pointed out a very sobering sight. Parked there was a Stinger gunship with about 17 or 18 feet of its wing blown off over the Ho Chi Minh Trail and yet made it home due to superb airmanship by the pilot and crew. I believe the pilot won a high national Award for that feat of demonstrated professionalism.

This narrow Stinger gunship miss with disaster over the Trail, pretty much spelled fini or end to Stinger missions over the Ho Chi Minh Trail and other hot spots. Prior to 1972, Stinger gunship and crews had written a proud history of mission accomplishment over the Trail. During 1970 and 1971

Stingers had been particularly effective as evidenced by the number of vehicles destroyed during those years. I have heard of 20 to 30 vehicles destroyed on a single mission. Also another Stinger crew was put in for decorations after that crew destroyed 8 tanks during a single mission. Another reason that the Stinger sorties over the Trail diminished in 1972 was that the anti-aircraft defense over and along the Trail had improved to the point that the Stingers were not meant or able to perform in such a hostile environment. However, the 1972 North Vietnamese Easter Offensive was perhaps the main reason for the change in mission because our world at Da Nang changed with the offensive. Now our unit would be flying missions which responded primarily to troops in contact (TIC).

The North Vietnamese Offensive began without warning on 30 March 1972. In I Corps coordinated attacks were made across the DMZ by North Vietnamese professional Army units in large numbers and supported by heavy artillery and tanks. The North Vietnamese forces overran South Vietnamese defensive positions and captured Quang Tri City north of us in April. Their next objective was Hue, just 35 miles from Da Nang. Our flying missions at that time had to be flexible, responding to the combat situation on that day. During April, I also had to plan for the worst that Da Nang would also be overrun or within the estimated 30 mile range of enemy 130mm artillery; so we, in conjunction with the Gunfighter Wing, started to write a planned evacuation of aircraft, equipment and personnel. We could save all the aircraft and crews plus additional people by packing our aircraft to the maximum allowed by the weight and amount of fuel to get them to safety in Thailand. The rest of our people would have to evacuate over the beaches for pickup by US naval forces or any other friendly ship or boat available, like Dunkirk in WWII. We had learned that another North Vietnamese force had invaded the Highlands of South Vietnam in II Corps in an attempt to cut South Vietnam into two parts by reaching the South China Sea. We had also learned that a third North Vietnamese force had attacked the South from Cambodia and after capturing An Loc in III Corps, was aiming at Saigon. Thailand was certainly the best place for haven at that time.

Thank God that plan was never needed. The plucky South Vietnamese forces stabilized their positions, particularly in our area in May and the North Vietnamese forces never took Hue but they came very close to achieving that goal. I remember flying a mission northeast of Hue just before sunset when I looked out of the side window and saw a small appearing ground to air missile pass the aircraft from nose to tail. I said that must be a big missile from the DMZ area that was fired at us and missed by a good distance. Only after landing and in intelligence debriefing were we told that what we thought was a big missile a long way off was indeed a small missile up close and personal. The North forces had become equipped with shoulder-fired SA-7 missiles with heat seeking warheads and had also launched them at other aircraft that night in our area.

This introduction of SA-7s into the War that night caused our gunship missions to be flown at higher altitudes than before and needed immediate countermeasures for us to remain effective in the new environment. The Stingers adopted a B-52 defense tactic I had remembered. We would cruise at 6,000 feet which was near the max altitude of the SA-7. Then when we had to descend to a lower altitude to perform our mission, crew members who were missile lookouts would upon sighting a missile launch, would say over the interphone, missile launch, break right or break left and a big flare would be launched ASAP. We only had to use this procedure once. We were cruising over the base at 6,000 feet one evening at sunset when an excited voice said over the interphone, break left, missile launch, and the IO said flare away and ignited. He also said that the missile was following the one million candlepower flare. The he gave us the welcome news that the missile exploded in the flare and no other missile launches had been observed. This procedure worked for us but other aircraft never saw missiles launched behind them and a single engine fighter landed at Da Nang with a heat seeking head lodged in his right exhaust pipe unexploded.

We had a close relationship with 7<sup>th</sup> AF Operations. I had told them that with our procedure for defense against SA-7s, that we could still be useful for troops in contact, etc. The Easter Offensive ground to a halt in May, and in June and July, the South Vietnamese forces counterattacked which resulted in the recapture of Quang Tri City in September.

Meanwhile, during the period of fighting in I Corps, the 366<sup>th</sup> Wing Commander requested that

7<sup>th</sup> Air Force change the Stinger mission to missile defense of Da Nang. The 366<sup>th</sup> Wing had given us almost no notice to this request but when 7<sup>th</sup> AF agreed, I concurred that we should give the base defense mission a try. Da Nang was known all over Vietnam as Rocket City and well deserved the name. Rockets had been fired at the Base since 1967.

Our new Da Nang missile defense mission would require sorties to seamlessly cover the period from sundown to sunup. It would require two or three sorties each night and would be stated by 7<sup>th</sup> AF in a general order and executed daily. We performed this new mission for about three nights and I came to the conclusion that this boring mission would not be an adequate defense of Da Nang. It was only a show of force with no teeth. I explained this conclusion to the Wing representatives and said that the base missile defense had to be coordinated with all the military in the area, especially with the South Vietnamese units. We needed radio call signs and frequencies of all the units in order to get clearance to fire, to receive ground observations and to request artillery suppression if being directed into an ongoing artillery fire action. Above all we could use a Vietnamese interpreter flying with us to communicate with the ground units. This airborne interpreter solved a lot of problems with Shadows operating out of Saigon. I told them that our Detachment did not have the capability or horse power to call such a meeting to coordinate all the units involved. If this defense mission could not get the proper organization, then I would ask 7<sup>th</sup> Air Force to change our mission back to TICs, etc. where we could be effective. The Wing got busy and coordinated a great, well attended meeting for all concerned units and the basic ideas of missile defense were presented. This general briefing was followed by the request for cooperation and the necessary information such as call signs and frequencies, to allow the Plan to work. There was very little animosity or defending one's own program because missile suppression was absolutely in the best interest of the base and the surrounding area. It also had the advantage of much closer coordination of all units with Stinger in case of a ground attack by enemy troops. This of course was never required but the missile defense plan turned out to be a great idea and very effective as the Stingers put the plan into action. I can remember only one rocket attack of limited numbers in June and another small attack that occurred close to Christmas after the defense plan was initiated. There may have been an attack sometime in late July 1972, but I am not certain that it occurred. I am certain of the Christmas attack because of its spectacular impact on Christmas celebrations.

This is how we put the Base missile defense plan into action. I went next door to Wing intelligence and asked them for planning information such as the range of missiles being fired at us, history of previous attacks, any thing that could help us forecast impending attacks such as time of day or night, wind direction and velocity, previous positions from which rockets had been launched, holidays, full moon, anything that could help us to anticipate the firings. One piece of intelligence gave us was that our rocket defense range should be at least a ten mile arc from the outskirts of the base. With this vital piece of information, our sorties began.

We established a series of takeoff and landing times in order to have a short overlap in changing the guard from old Stinger to just airborne Stinger. This stabilized crew life and crew rest so that everyone knew when they were flying, etc. This also simplified maintenance schedules and its production of aircraft for sorties. Finally I wrote a single page of tactics to be used in flying these missions with the watchword being the use of unpredictability to keep the enemy below in the Zone guessing what the Stinger was going to do next. Generally, in the rocket zone, we flew at 3500 feet with the aircraft commander having the option to change firing altitude as the situation demanded.

Wing intelligence worked hard and long to supply us with information that we could use to anticipate rocket attacks. They researched data from all the rocket attacks against the Base including date, time of impact, number of rockets, weather conditions, phases of the moon and approximate launch site/sites. There seemed to be no common denominator to help us figure out when the next attack would come, from what direction, night or day or day of the week. Then we came to the conclusion that it took some time to set up and set off a rocket attack of a large number of rockets. We then received additional information from ground patrols that the rockets were fired by crude flashlight battery operated times; that they were sighted in and the rockets elevated by the crude system of wooden supports that had been adjusted to the proper degree of elevation for the distance from the target. Not a very accurate way for

precise target impact; but with a large number of rockets, quantity made up for quality. This told us that the real purpose of the large numbers of rocket launches in a short time was for destruction and not merely for a psychological program of a single rocket explosion randomly day or night. This individual rocket attacks at random was used, I thought, pretty effectively at Phan Rang in III Corps a couple of years ago in 1970. We did try to tighten up the control of battery disposal on the base as we suspected that we may have been supplying the batteries to shoot the rockets at us.

With the North Vietnamese Army units contained and being defeated up north of us, thing, like the old cliché, settled down to a dull roar. This was a mission that motivated everyone because it was a win / win situation. We also received notification that the unit would, at a later date, be training VNAF crews in gunship operations and tactics. Like the Shadow VNAF training by my old unit, the 17<sup>th</sup> SOS in Saigon, we would train the Stinger crews and maintenance people and then turn the aircraft over to them. This was the very heart of the Vietnamization program in Vietnam; Train, give equipment and leave the VNAF to continue the fight. This meant that we had to identify how many future instructors such as instructor pilots, copilots, navigators, engineers, illuminator operators, and gunners that would be required, and then train them with our current instructors. This also meant additional sorties, from time to time, that were not combat sorties in the rocket belt. None of this seemed to be a problem because we were scheduled to receive additional aircraft and maintenance people before the training started. We would eventually have all the AC-119Ks in the Air Force inventory to use and turn over to the VNAF. We also had to acquire a much bigger building than our present one. The new building, a large hanger, was found across the runway from us and housed what became the training division of our unit. I appointed Lt. Col. Philip Deering as chief of the VNAF AC-119K training program. Of course, Major Robert Kruger was greatly involved as the Stinger operations officer.

Flowers were another thing that did not change from the Shadow building in Saigon to the Stinger building in Da Nang. In Shadowland South at Saigon, our Vietnamese maid put about six inches of dirt on top of concrete bunkers on the south side of our Flight line building. She was the young widow of a deceased naval officer and could use some extra money. We had asked her to also get some blooming flowers, plant them, and keep them blooming by watering, etc. She did what was asked very well, with some help from some big guys who just wanted to help. I cannot remember any other flowers on the base there. In Stingerland North, flowers were already growing on each side of the walk entering the Stinger building, just south of the 366<sup>th</sup> Headquarters building. This small group of flowers was lovingly attended to by a gnarled old Vietnamese warrior. It was told about our unit that this old gardener had served valiantly with the French Foreign Legion and had been released due to wounds. He never came in the building but came and went on his own. He only smiled and to himself when he was working with the flowers. For all I know, he could have been a spy and was laughing at us but I don't think so. I do know that the Stingers had the only flowers that I saw on the Base at that time. Funny thing, I do not remember any one remarking about the old Vietnamese and his flowers. Both were just there. I also don't remember hearing any birds singing in Vietnam during my multiple tours there. I do remember birds singing in Thailand with great gusto; and as for beautiful flowers, Thailand had a large supply of both natural and cultivated flowers. I was once offered a dozen very long stemmed red roses for the outrageous price of fifty cents for the lot.

Back to the Stinger war in our corner of South Vietnam. The aircraft maintenance at Da Nang was superb. It was run by a real professional, Chief Master Sergeant Marion McGee who knew exactly what he was doing and his maintenance crews and specialists believed in him and trusted him. Having your own dedicated unit maintenance run by professionals is absolutely one of the nicest things that a Commander can inherit from his predecessor. We also got support from the Gunfighter maintenance. It was run at the time by an old friend of mine, Col. Jack Shaffer. We had flown C-124s together from Hill Air Force Base in Utah from 1953 to 1956. His replacement gave us the same amount of attention.

The constant changing of personnel each month as one year tours of duty were completed for individuals sure made life interesting for everyone, particularly unit commanders. Mathematically, this meant that almost seventeen percent of one's unit changed in two months. Individuals had different ways of calculating how long before they would return to the World, the U.S. of A. I've heard them going

down the hall saying I'm one bar of soap, two bars of soap, etc. away from going home. Each bar represented one month left on the tour; and when the final month arrived, that individual let everyone know by saying I'm short, I'm short. Of course not everyone used the one bar a month routine. In Saigon, I heard a Shadow NCO going down the hall saying loudly I'm short, really short. I did not think that this individual had been there that long so I asked admin. to check out his arrival and departure dates. He was short all right. All he had left on his tour was five months and 29 days.

Talking about Da Nang being Rocket City brings to mind an Air Force policy that non-combat aircraft would stay on the ground at Da Nang for a maximum of one hour. Never saw it in writing but saw it in action. Consequently we never had a parade of higher headquarters inspectors coming to call. In fact I remember that our 56<sup>th</sup> SOW Commander visited us unannounced and got a good idea of what we were doing and how our mission had changed. This was a very welcome show of interest by our boss, Colonel Norbert L. Simon, whom I had never met. I remember that only a very few other Wing officers, maybe two, came to see what the situation was in over a year at Da Nang. I know this. I will always treasure the visit by our 56<sup>th</sup> Commander, not that we needed help, but that Colonel Simon came to Da Nang and exposed himself to hazardous conditions that he did not have to. He did not want to inspect buildings or barracks. He did not want to criticize but to learn. He just wanted to meet his people. This is the hallmark of a great commander and person.

Back to the Rocket Belt. The flight of Stingers just off the base perimeter in early evening and at night became a large attraction for base personnel. The sound of the engines, the flares and light from the aircraft search light were quite a sight; and when a target /targets were located and permission to fire was obtained, the sound and tracers from the Gatling guns and cannon were spectacular to behold and hear. It was a cat and mouse game being played just off the base, but it was on most occasions, long periods of dark aircraft patrolling the air space. Over 100 rockets had been discovered on back to back Stinger missions. Other sorties had seen what turned out to be hostile people and received permission to fire on them. Things were going fine for the old Stingers and the Base and area, but we were never certain that the bad guys would not change their tactics unnoticed.

A short time after we had been working the rocket area, a very welcome and much needed addition to our detection force was added. These were low flying helicopters call Night Hawks from the 7<sup>th</sup> or 11<sup>th</sup> or 17<sup>th</sup> Air Cavalry, U.S. Army, collocated at Da Nang. The Air Cavalry commander and I got together to work out their participation in the hunt. These gutsy fliers volunteered to fly about 30 feet off the ground to better observe conditions at that altitude, than a 3500 feet where the Stingers habitually flew. Here is how the two aircraft worked together in the Belt. The low flying helicopter would spot a target, drop a flare on it, describe the target and the clear the area so Stinger could put some fire on it. At first, the low helicopters took some ground fire from time to time; but when ground fire at Little Buddy brought the Stingers over the bad guys, the word spread that you don't mess with Little Buddy. Even the most dedicated Viet Cong did not want to experience The Wrath of God put out by Stinger in the form of cannon and minigun fire with red tracers, and themselves exposed like day by large flare and searchlight illumination.

Also the Army of Vietnam (ARVN) 3<sup>rd</sup> Division started to make armed daylight sweeps of the areas fired upon or other reported sites that were suspect. This was a very welcome and logical addition to the night patrolling of the Belt. It confirmed what had been reported by the night crews and passed suspect targets for the following night for Stinger and helicopter to monitor for enemy activity. This was how the missile defense mission had evolved to a high level of sophistication and in a short time. Nothing can completely stop a determined and crafty enemy from launching rockets; but as stated before, huge rocket showers had been avoided and everyone was grateful, including Stinger.

The ARVN 3<sup>rd</sup> Division was commanded by a Brigadier General who was respected and admired by Stinger crew members, well at least 30 of us. We were invited to bus over to his headquarters to receive Vietnamese decorations, the Vietnamese Cross of Gallantry. The Division Headquarters was on a small hill just west of the base. There we were lined up and received our medals from the General as he had the citations read in both English and Vietnamese and pinned the medals on our flying suits. We also received the citations in Vietnamese which I have to this day. What a proud feeling on that occasion. The

only thing that would have made it better would have been for the entire Stinger unit, including maintenance and life support, to have been included in the recognition of a vital job well done.

I am a little ashamed to admit a bone head decision I made in association with the ARVN 3<sup>rd</sup> Division and our closeness of operations together. The spirit of cooperation had just evolved and took on a life of its own. It was not unusual for the Vietnamese officers who flew with Stinger to drop by my office and talk about a particular mission they had flown with us. Most of the time I had already heard of what happened on the mission but it was nice to hear their side. In fact, one day I looked up at a knock on my door and saw several ARVN soldiers standing there with big smiles on their faces. I was astounded to see that this group was carrying a real 122mm missile to present to the Stingers who had helped them take back some territory what had been the wrong hands for years. This missile was part of the cache they had found and wanted to share it with us. It took four chairs put fairly close together to hold the monster. I had seen debris from earlier 122mm explosions and knew that the missile casing was about one inch thick and some of it broke up into 12 to 18 inch corkscrews which caused grievous injuries or destruction of property. It was a hell of a weapon. Anyhow, the missile was displayed on those chairs in my office for several days and people in our area came to look and marvel at the trophy. After about a week a USAF weapons officer came to look at it and asked, "Has it been disarmed?" I told him I assumed that it had but we ought to make sure. His men came and gently carried it away to find out, armed or disarmed. To this day, I do not know for certain if that missile was armed or not. I choose to think it was unarmed.

Everything was going Stinger's way until it happened. On a dark night in early June as a young Stinger Captain pilot was walking to Stinger Ops to fly a sortie over the Belt, a rocket landed almost at his feet and exploded. Captain Thomas R. Hamman suffered from life threatening injuries and never regained consciousness for almost a week, but then could fight no more. One of the imponderables of life is the timing things happen to us and our crew mates. You see, Captain Hamman was getting to operations earlier than necessary to fly his mission that night as was his habit. He did not want to let Stinger or his crew down by not being completely prepared for the mission. The Memorial Worship service for Tom Hamman was conducted by Chaplin (Col.) Ersmund Swaffer on 20 June 1972 in the base chapel. Printed on that program were these words, "Captain Hamman gave a full measure of life, with his Stinger team members, during his nearly four months of special activity." He was 27 years old.

The rocket suppression mission, of course, continued after this loss of Captain Hamman in June. In the Da Nang base newspaper, THE GAZETTE, Stinger had a two page spread with big headlines saying STINGER SAVES DA NANG FROM ATTACK. This was the August 19, 1972 issue which had Miss America and her group featured on the front page. Stinger, as always, was in presentable company. Here are two quotes from that paper that say it all. The first quote below started the story, and the second quote ended the story.

"Personnel at Da Nang Airfield and the population of the city of Da Nang are sleeping more comfortably lately because of the efforts of the dedicated men of the 18<sup>th</sup> Special Operations Squadron, Det. 1 of the 56<sup>th</sup> Special Operations Wing and their ugly but well loved 'Stinger' aircraft." AND

"The Stingers pride themselves in being the best, and to the men of Da Nang they are the best in the whole world because they save our butts from rockets. Da Nang may not have the best living, working, or recreational facilities, but to the men here, it is home and the Stingers are making it a safer place to live and work in. Enough praise and thankfulness cannot possibly be heaped on these men who are trying and succeeding in making Rocket City rocketless."

We kept on flying our coordinated missions in the Rocket Belt successfully and in the fall I came due for another annual flight check ride in Vietnam. A fine young Stinger pilot, Chief of Standboard Bob Dydo, who replaced Bill Lodge, was giving me the check ride which had to be cut short due to a blown engine. The engine had to be shut down, thus keeping intact my record of having emergencies on check rides in Thailand and Vietnam. Come to think of it, on a non-check ride, I had a backfiring right engine on a daylight mission over Laos but kept it running for an hour until in sight of NKP. Then we shut it down, declared an emergency and landed. On rollout, Tower asked if we want the fire trucks to stay with us to the parking area. I replied yes and parked the aircraft. The fire trucks stayed with us and a good thing because when the left engine was shut down, it caught on fire and the fire trucks promptly put it out.



Someone from maintenance gave me a beat up piston head from the back firing engine. It is now on display in my library.

In early December, I don't remember when, we started to train the VNAF in our gun ships and to prepare them to take our place. We started getting more aircraft assigned on base and the VNAF crews were not far behind.

Also early in December the Base Commander of Da Nang put out word that he would like each organization to send a Christmas message to the rest of the base. Each organization would check out a piece of 4x8 plywood and paint their Christmas card and then hang that card on a long straight fence along the main road. This was an ingenious idea. Every group, no matter how large or small, planned carefully and executed according to the talent level in that unit. I am not sure but some of the better artists may have had a richer Christmas by painting for other organizations also. I do know that the long fence of Christmas cards was spectacular and seem to change the more times we passed as we saw more and more details unnoticed previously. Do not believe any prize was given for best card. Of course Stinger would have won because our card combined the Christmas spirit and language with the realities of Da Nang. It was the menacing red Stinger logo with cannon high on a white background and with these prominent words proudly stating WE GIVE YOU SILENT NIGHTS. Mostly true. We did have a small group of rockets impact one night just outside the Base Exchange just before Christmas. It set the liqueur stock afire which I believed burned for three days and nights.

Another thing I remember about Christmas at Da Nang was that Chaplain Swaffer invited me to accompany him on his rounds to the barracks around Christmas, which I did. We were welcomed everywhere by the troops as we wished them Merry Christmas, and then do you know what this outstanding Chaplain did on Christmas Eve and Night? Chaplain Swaffer visited 175 lonely sentry posts around the perimeter of the base. I was glad he did not invite me to accompany him on those visits. I don't believe that this old Stinger could have kept up with Paul Revere Swaffer. Truly a dedicated and great man and Chaplain.

In December I was promoted to Colonel effective 1 April when I would change insignia. Due to the promotion and other things, I was designated Task Force Commander on orders listing me 6498<sup>th</sup> Air Base Wing Commander effective 30 days before the mandatory exit Vietnam date of 29 March 1973. My mission was to shut down the rest of the USAF interest there such as personnel and equipment and to turn the base over to the Vietnamese Air Force (VNAF). To do this task, I picked a group of thirty people of various specialties such as medics, supply, etc to do this job in an orderly fashion and on time. Except for the gunship training facilities and various isolated exceptions, the Task Force would move into the main walled compound of Da Nang. This area contained an Officers Club, an NCO Club, a mess hall, barracks and Task Force Headquarters with the Stars and Stripes and the South Vietnamese flag flying side by side. On 29 March 1973, I would terminate USAF interest in Da Nang and turn over our interests to Lt. Col. Tran Thu, the VNAF Air Base Wing Commander.

Also in early December the Paris Peace Talks to end the Vietnamese War almost ground to a halt. The talks had been going on for years and looked like a settlement could be reached but once again the North Vietnamese stalled the talks. To us at Da Nang the peace talks were like background music stuck in the same groove, playing the same sad notes of non-compromise from the North. The North thought that they had all the time in the world until the around the clock Christmas bombing campaign by B-52s taught them the power of the BUFF, (Big Ugly Fighter). The Paris Peace Talks resumed and the Paris Peace Accords were signed on 27 January 1973 thus ending the United States direct involvement in the War, and temporarily ending the fighting between North and South Vietnam. This flawed in place cease fire left many pockets of North Vietnamese troops all over South Vietnam. The North troop pockets could be supplied by the North but could not be increased in personnel or weapons, etc. This flawed cease fire was very evident on a flight from Da Nang to Saigon as we passed over pockets of the North flying their flags surrounded by the South flying their many yellow flags.

I got into trouble again when later a couple of 3<sup>rd</sup> troops presented the Stingers a muddied Viet Cong flag that had been found in one of our joint operations with Stingers flying shotgun over the troops as they cleared another area. This was a time period before the cease fire took effect; the time when some

of the most intense fighting took place to take back as much of the North occupied areas of South Vietnam as possible. Of course, we displayed the flag proudly on the office wall and forgot about it until later when that flag was not good news at all. Just before the war ended, a Vietnamese officer came by the office and got irate when he saw the Viet Cong flag on our wall. In a few days, if not taken down, it would mean that Stinger was an enemy of South Vietnam. Needless to say that flag came down while that officer was in the office. This officer's attitude was typical of South Vietnam's reaction to the approaching cease fire which seemed like a betrayal to them by the United States and they were right.

After the cease fire, an eerie quiet settled over Da Nang as we trained the VNAF full time in the Stinger and gunship operations which were limited mostly to the Rocket Belt. During the several months of this training, the fighter and other aircraft were flown off to other destinations except for all of the AC-119Ks in the Air Force inventory and two C-47s for courier duty and emergencies such as air evacuations, etc. Da Nang was one quiet, almost deserted base except for the fully manned gunship flying training and maintenance personnel associated with it. There was also an important group of people that had been scheduled to leave Vietnam a month before the treaty deadline but were held hostage by the North Vietnamese ploy of equal release of one Vietnamese returned allowed on Yank to go home. Among the 200 odd unscheduled detainees at Da Nang were the 366<sup>th</sup> Gunfighter Wing Commander, Colonel Bill Hoover and staff plus others who had been scheduled to depart a month before the treaty deadline of 29 March 1973.

In spite of the events taking place on the base as discussed above, things went very well with the gunship training, and the Vietnamization Program was also making rapid progress on the rest of the Base. The tower controllers, navigation aids, and weather station responsibilities were now run by the Vietnamese. Also run by the VNAF were the instrument approach systems such as Ground Controlled Approach (GCA) and the Instrument Landing System (ILS). Maintenance of these systems and duties were also the responsibilities of the VNAF. All in all a very satisfying time for the vital gunship training program that was well on the way to completing its check out and transfer of aircraft program and the base Vietnamization Program was on schedule.

The Stinger training program was almost completed when the Vietnamese Air Force called six representatives of the Stinger Vietnamese Training Program, lead by Lt. Col. Philip Deering, division chief, down to Saigon to present VNAF awards and decorations in recognition for the excellent instruction received. The six Stingers also were treated to an awards Parade in their honor. Now this was heady but well earned recognition for the training division's excellence of training and personnel.

And then it happened without warning. It was almost like a flight simulator training mission that no matter how good the crew was, it was going to have to bail out at night over water. Here is how it happened. Training mission after training mission had been flown in beautiful clear night weather in the Rocket Belt, just 10 miles from the runway. Then with a forecast of clear skies, good visibilities and light winds, an ill fated mission took off for the Belt. On board were the VNAF lieutenant colonel squadron commander with 10,000 hours of C-119 flying time and the lieutenant colonel USAF instructor pilot with 10,000 hours of C-119 flying time. This was truly a blue ribbon crew of both Vietnamese and USAF personnel. Upon completion of the mission, never more than 10 miles from the runway, the pilots headed north for a south ILS approach to the base. As the aircraft passed abeam the north end of the runway, they noticed some haze coming in beneath them but visibility was good and they continued out to make a scheduled ILS approach. The visibility was getting worse so the pilot requested a radar monitored ILS approach to the field. They were informed that the radar was down for periodic maintenance, according to forecast weather but would bring it back on line as soon as possible. The AC-119 started its ILS approach but as the aircraft got lower, the visibility got far worse. Somewhere on the ILS approach the crew was notified that the radar equipment was working, that radar had a positive contact, and told the crew that the aircraft was approaching minimums for landing and to either land or go around. The sea fog was so thick that a safe landing was not possible. Radar was advised that the Stinger was going around, would execute an approach from the south heading north and asked radar to monitor their turns and give a GCA approach. Radar was with them all the way but the fog had gotten even worse and landing was impossible. Nothing to do with low fuel but take the aircraft out over the South China Sea and bail out.

After coordinating with Air Sea Rescue on a bailout route close to shore and abeam an agreed location, the crews bailed out into the fog. It was a successful bailout and pickup in the water except for one VNAF crewman who did not get out of his parachute and was drowned when the rescue boat's propeller got entangled in the crewman's parachute lines. Higher Headquarters cancelled the rest of the VNAF training program and started to conduct an aircraft accident investigation but stopped when they found out that the aircraft had already been transferred to the VNAF. A collateral investigation had already been completed without blame to the unit, but that was not the end that any of us would have written for an outstanding and professional group of people called the Stingers.

On a happier note we Stingers left some permanent good in Vietnam by donating the rest of a fund from donations run by First Sergeant Guidry to Hoa Khanh Children's Hospital in northeast Da Nang. This hospital stands as a memorial to U.S. servicemen and servicewomen in the area who had a genuine compassion for children affected by the war. The hospital was started by Marines supervision and Vietnamese labor in 1967, financed by \$300,000.00 in voluntary contributions from servicemen and U.S. patrons and completed in January 1969. This 120 bed hospital had specialized equipment worth an estimated \$450,000.00 at that time and included two modern air-conditioned operating rooms, three emergency rooms, X-ray machines, etc. Over 1600 children were admitted for treatment the first year while over 10,000 were treated as out-patients at sick call. Between 15% and 20% of patients treated during Tet 1968 were adults and included Viet Cong and North Vietnamese troops who were treated and then detained by U.S. authorities. During my last visit there, Dr. Robert G. Long was the Director on behalf of the World Relief Commission which financed it from voluntary contributions from the U.S. What a wonderful way to leave a little of ourselves, helping children after we have departed Vietnam.

The Da Nang base newspaper, The Gazette, had earlier printed perhaps a fitting epitaph to the Stingers. On the front page of one of the last editions of that paper, a touching poem was written by someone on base. The first two lines seem to say it all:

I wake up each morning twice blessed,  
To Stinger my heart, to Charlie the rest.

On 27 March 1973, the rest of the group of detainees headed by Colonel William W. Hoover, now 6498 Air Base Wing Commander due to the long delay, departed Da Nang for their next assignment. There were a lot of Stingers in that group also. On 29 March, I and the Task Force members also departed for our next assignments. For me, my life as a Stinger and a Task Force Commander ended on a bizarre note. The United Nations team of four representatives, two from communist countries and two from non-communist countries watching each other, semi-escorted us to our departing C-130 aircraft, counted us aboard, and insured no one got off. With no USAF Stingers or crews left in Vietnam, it was a relief for the ramp to close and block out a world at Da Nang, that for us, would be no more.

Tom A. Teal  
Col.USAF (Ret.)  
25 July 2008