

Fire Support Base Jaeger

We were on a fire support base built in the middle of an open field in the Mekong Delta, about 40 miles southwest of Saigon. The base was a temporary home for four 155 mm howitzers (B Battery, 1st Battalion 84th Artillery) that could lob 100-pound high explosive shells 5-10 miles with virtually pinpoint accuracy. The mission was to provide security for highway 4, for rice to be transported from the delta to Saigon and further north. February 25, 1968, was about three weeks after the Tet Offensive and things were uncertain, but seemed to be settling down a bit. I had been in Viet Nam just about a month. The nice thing about being assigned to an artillery unit, I thought, was that most of the fighting was done from 5-10 miles away.

Fire Support Base Jaeger was approximately one acre in the middle of a dry rice paddy, surrounded by coils of barbed wire and machine gun mounted armored personnel carriers positioned about 25 yards apart, with tree lines about 1000 feet to the north and west. It had taken most of two days to dig and build the sandbag bunkers for sleeping quarters and barriers shielding the howitzers.

On this particular Sunday night we relaxed and enjoyed old radio shows played on the Armed Forces Radio Network. Listening to the drama of Matt Dillon and *Gunsmoke* took us away from where we were and what we were dealing with, and made us feel close to home even though our homes were really eight to ten thousand miles away.

There were approximately 200 of us on Fire Support Base Jaeger. Eighty assigned to the artillery unit and 120 with the infantry company (Company C 5th Battalion, 60th Infantry) providing security for the big guns, and a contingent from the 15th Combat engineers. I was the only medic assigned to the artillery battery. The infantry unit had five medics but as of yet I had had no contact with them.

Two nights previous, we had been setup in the yard of an old hotel. I had been asked to assist some Vietnamese Medics treating a couple of civilian

children wounded by Vietcong shrapnel. I helped them locate veins to begin I.V.s. The children had lost a lot of blood and were in shock, but there was no chance of getting them to a hospital in the night. All we could do was clean them up and try to make them comfortable. I really felt inadequate with just 10 weeks of medical training and virtually no field experience, but just last week, I had successfully removed some calluses from one of the gun chief's feet with a pair of manicure scissors. He had convinced his gun mates that I had the skill of a surgeon. So my guys believed in me and really treated me well. Everyone was glad to have a medic nearby and I always felt flattered when they called me "Doc".

Nights in Viet Nam were under the stars. Illumination flares frequently were seen slowly parachuting across the distant sky, shedding light on something some observer might have thought suspicious. Occasionally we could see tracers sprayed into the distant sky. We never knew if they were ours or theirs, a part of a battle, or just someone shooting at the sky for the hell of it. We tended to assume the latter.

It was hot in the bunkers but we would gladly trade fresh air for the security they provided when we had the opportunity for sleep. By midnight we had turned radios off and were trying to ignore the heat and get some sleep. Then it started. Machine guns opened up to the east of the compound. No big deal...someone shooting at shadows.... then, the unmistakable sharp sound of incoming mortars.... still nothing to get concerned about.... two weeks prior, during Tet, I had slept through most of 213 mortar rounds dropping in on our base camp at Dong Tam, there had been some property damage but the bunkers hadn't been penetrated.

The machine gun fire and rifle fire escalated. One man ran past the bunker, grabbed an M-60 30 caliber machine gun, saying, "I see 'em!" and headed toward the perimeter. Flares filled the sky, creating daytime visibility with surreal multiple shadows that flowed with the nighttime breeze. Someone ran up to our bunker, "Where's Doc? I need him." I grabbed my aid kit and went with him.

About 50 yards away from the bunker, two of the infantrymen, manning a machine gun on one of the APC's, had flesh wounds, gunshots or shrapnel in their upper arms. Nothing serious. I bandaged them and asked if they were able to stay. We didn't want a gap in the perimeter. They said they could and I headed back to the bunker. I knew the situation was getting intense

but really hadn't a clue. When I got to the bunker, I was directed to the commanders tent where more wounded waited. Corporal Johnston was the most seriously injured. I cut open his pant leg and a five-pound glob of jellied blood rolled out. All I could do was to apply a tourniquet above the wound and set him aside until he could be evacuated. More and more wounded soldiers were brought to me. I used all the bandages that I had pretty quickly, and was beginning to tear fatigues to improvise when one of the infantry medics was brought to me. He had a fairly minor wound, but was more than willing to give me his bandages and medical supplies and get out of the way,----*thanks coach, but I'll sit the rest of this game out.* He seemed to feel that he had done his part.... *at the time, it made good sense to me, too.*

"We need Doc at gun number two!"

By now the situation was extreme, fires, gunshots, explosions all around. Our ammunition dump was on fire and some of the artillery shells were glowing from the heat. We knew that if they blew, it would be over for all of us. I remember distinctly thinking as I ran past the burning explosives...*If I get killed, it would be no big deal...but I'd sure hate to get burned.* That thought still haunts me. Faced with real and imminent danger, given the choice between death and a life of pain....

When I got to gun number two, Pfc Farrell was laying at the entrance of a bunker holding his chest. I opened his shirt to find a hole about the size of a man's fist in the middle of his chest. No blood, but I think I saw his heart beating.

"Am I gonna be all right, Doc?"

I bandaged the wound. "Yeah, you're okay". And with my assurance he got up and walked to the command bunker to await evacuation. *I was amazed...*

Gun group number one got hit the hardest. Their bunker was penetrated by a rocket propelled grenade (RPG) and we had to dig all seven squad members out. Six were seriously injured, but Pfc. Parker was killed. When we put him on the litter, his arm dangled over the side and I placed it on top of him. It was cold, but I didn't want to allow myself to believe he was dead. Parker was probably my best friend in the unit. We had come over on the same

flight and had consistently been getting assigned to the same units since arriving in-country. Just this evening we had sat together waiting to get a haircut, joking about life in the *real world*. We related. Same middle class background, *same hopes and dreams...*

Seemingly, from nowhere, F-100 fighter jets lit up the night with cluster bombs. There would be one flash, followed almost instantly by hundreds of smaller flashes. I'd never even heard of cluster bombs, but tonight I thought they were a good thing. The fighters made four or five passes in the open fields around our compound. Then, all was quiet. It was over much more suddenly than it had begun.

After a few minutes, helicopters began landing to pickup the wounded. When the first one landed, I noticed none of the artillery officers (there were three or four still with us) seemed interested. They looked dazed. It may have taken a minute or two, but I started directing the loading. Corporal Romines had lost two fingers in the middle of his right hand, but he was there to assist. Corporal Johnston, with the badly injured leg, was still holding-on, and was probably the most seriously injured. We got him on a flight and continued loading for what seemed like hours. When everyone else was gone, I told Romines to get on and get that hand taken care of. I was impressed by everything he did. We had always called Romines "Old Man". He was 34 years old while most of us were in our late teens and early twenties. We had been drafted but he had joined the Army so that his daughter with leukemia could get medical treatment. *I admired, but did not yet understand a father's love for his child.*

By now the sun was beginning to shed light on a new day. I sat down on top of a bunker and just sat. Infantry squads patrolled the rice paddy around the compound. Occasionally I would hear a single gunshot. I believed they were *dispatching* wounded Vietcong. I didn't care. I was numb. I knew I should feel something for theirs and for ours. I was numb. Bulldozers dug a massive trench and they piled 98 dead VC bodies in it and covered them with no more regard than we gave our trash. .

We gently lined up Parker and 19 dead comrades in black body bags. They were sent home.

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Outside the command post more than 40 captured weapons, AK47's, machine guns, rocket propelled grenades, and land mines, were spread out on display. Among the display was a VC medic's aid bag. I looked in it and found several bandages, a couple of small bottles of perfume and some Vietnamese coins. *I felt a kinship to the man who had carried this bag. I kept a coin.*

We had 11 of our 25 armored personnel carriers destroyed, twenty dead and 68 wounded. A military news report called the casualty rate "moderate".

Vietcong had actually penetrated our perimeter and had momentarily gained control of two of the artillery pieces, turning them, attempting to drag them off by hand. About 10 feet from my bunker, I found a grenade with its pin pulled lying on its handle. It had been carefully and intentionally placed there. One clumsy step could have dislodged it and set it off. *They had been closer than I realized.*

The next few days at Jaeger were uneventful and I was returned to the base camp in Dong Tam.

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I wrote this to put a vague burden that I've been carrying around for 34 years into a perspective. Reading it in print helps me do that. On the larger scale, the attack on FSB Jaeger was not a terribly significant event in the Vietnam conflict. It certainly didn't turn the tide of the war. It did, however; have an impact on the 20 soldiers, and families of those, who lost their lives that night. It permanently affected the lives of those who bare its scars. Those of us, who were fortunate enough to come through it unscathed, still carry their memory and although we didn't give our lives, they were offered. What has always bothered me most, I suppose, is that the event has never been given a footnote in history and as obscure as this writing may be, it now exists. The perspective is mine and mine alone, but it's all I had.

Randall K. Logan