

Some recollections of DaNang

To understand the initial Navy Supply Corps involvement in the "I" Corps (the five Northern Provinces of VietNam) Tactical Zone, one needs to go back to the events which occurred in the 1968 Lebanon Crisis.

An oversimplified version is that the USMC was sent in to assist the Lebanese government and they were to secure the airport. The USMC WW II experiences were not of a garrison variety but rather to take control by an amphibious landing, secure the island and move on to the next island. In Beirut they quickly landed and secured the airport but over the following months it became apparent that they did not have a sustainable system for getting logistical support from the waterfront to the troops.

Subsequent discussions between the CNO and the Commandant's staffs devised a scheme whereby the Navy would take the lead role in providing logistics over the shore in any future USMC sustained deployment. That scheme provided for the establishment of two deployable Nucleus Port Crews, one each on the East and West coast. These NPC's were staffed on a TAD basis from their home Naval District and met once a month. Actual cargo movement would be handled by a Cargo Handling Battalion, with the NPC taking care of Port Management duties, operations, communications, contracting, disbursing and planning functions.

On March 8, 1965 the 9th Marine Expeditionary Brigade (MEB) landed at DaNang, Vietnam, with a mission limited solely to the defense of the airbase at DaNang which quickly expanded beyond the advisory stage and became the 3rd Marine Amphibious Force (III MAF) on June 4, 1965 commanded by MAJGEN Lewis W. Walt. In the meantime in April 1965 CINCPAC had tasked CINCPACFLT with the logistics support of US forces in "I" Corps, and in turn the job was passed to Commander, 7th Fleet. TG 76.4 was established under the command of Captain Ken Huff, USNR with PHIBPAC assets such as APAs, LSTs, LSDs, Beachmasters and Assault craft. CNO assigned the Cargo Handling Battalions from Yorktown, VA (commanded by CDR John Hatfield, SC USN) and from Subic Bay. PI (commanded by LCDR Hugo Luoto, SC, USN) to augment TG 76.4. in the actual discharge of ships cargo.

In mid June, 1965 the CNO ordered the Nucleus Port Crew (NPC) #2 from the 3rd Naval District in Brooklyn, NY on Temporary Duty (TAD) to proceed to DaNang to report to CTG 76.4. Curiously we were told that we were going to Tourane, which was the earlier French name for DaNang. We were also told that the orders were Top Secret and that the only persons we could tell were our respective skippers, and that did not include family members. NPC#2 was headed up by a line officer, CDR Doheny, three LT line officers (ops, personnel and comm) and five Supply Corps officers -Lt Earl Judd, LT Norm Randall, LT Deiner, LT Phillips and one other whose name I cannot

recall. We had a DK, several SKs, an RM, a YN, a BM and a couple of non-rated men.

Four days after receipt of the orders we were bused from the Brooklyn Navy Yard to NAS Lakehurst, NJ where we boarded a VR-21 C-118 Liftmaster flight number 48A18 at 1425 on 6/20/65. We stopped for fuel and crew changes at NAS Alameda, NAS Barbers Point, NAF Wake Island, NAS Agana, Guam, and NAS Cubi Point where we stayed overnight in their BOQ/BEQ. I picked up seven side arms and ammo at the Naval Supply Depot, Subic, and we re-boarded good old BUNO 131604 for the last leg of the trip to DaNang where we arrived at 2215 on 6/24/65 after spending 47 hours and 47 minutes aloft in that bird. After a short bus trip to the waterfront and a long boat ride, NPC#2 reported to CTG 76.4 aboard USS NAVARRO (APA-215). An interesting issue came up during the flight to Barbers Point. Two of the Storekeepers were USNR (TAR). They noted that in their reenlistment contracts they had waived reenlistment bonuses for a guarantee that they would never be assigned outside CONUS, and clearly we were headed out of CONUS. After correspondence with their congressmen, they were returned to the States in July.

Captain Huff operated both from the NAVARRO and an office in a compound along the Perfume River in downtown DaNang called the "White Elephant" while CDR Hatfield and LCDR Luogo spent most of their time afloat in the harbor directing the commercial ship cargo offloads. After the first few days of riding a gig in to work at the White Elephant and returning to the ship overnight, CDR Doheny decided that we should find a place ashore to live to cut down the commuting time. On Wednesday 30 June some of us moved into a tent located with the Marines on the southwest side of the airstrip. It had pallets for flooring and we slept on canvas cots, there was no air conditioning and it was sweltering. One day later in the early morning hours of 1 July 1965 I was asleep in the tent next to the revetment surrounding the fuel bladders used by the Marines for their Phantoms or helicopters when the mortar explosions started. The tent was just across the runway from the Air Force Alert Interceptor F-102s. One of the fuel bladders next to our tent was hit and ruptured but did not catch fire. The ammo bunkers were just to the north of us and they fortunately were not hit. There was a lot of small arms fire, not the usual off in the distance stuff, but up close, loud and personal. The explosions and flames of the Air Force planes lit up the night sky. When the excitement all started I grabbed my 45 and belt and ran barefoot in my skivvies about 20 feet to the crude shelter made on sandbag walls, 2 by 4s and plywood roof with sand bags on top. The flames on the other side of the runway backlit running figures and then some fire fighting equipment. We knew that we were surrounded by several tents of Marines in our camp area which lent some comfort but it still was a very intense night as it was not at all clear how many of the running figures were Viet Cong sappers or good guys. The sight in the morning was chilling indeed. As I recall at least two of the 102s and one or more of the C-130 flare aircraft were big smoking

piles of rubble. By nightfall we were back aboard NAVARRO! It was nearly a month before we leased a villa within four blocks of the White Elephant which handily housed eight officers. That eliminated the 40 minute boat trip to and from NAVARRO.

The port of DaNang had a large natural protected harbor but no deep water piers. As a result large commercial freighters had to be off loaded at anchor in the harbor onto lighterage which in turn had to be offloaded at the limited fishing docks along portions of the Perfume River. Cargo then had to be loaded into trucks for delivery to the airbase. Longshoreman work in the holds of these freighters was unbelievably hot and difficult work, and the cargo handlers worked day and night in twelve hour shifts. Due to the lack of shoreside cargo offload facilities, the ships loading out of NSC Oakland and other ports were stowed as "break bulk" which at best was full intact pallets, and at worst was broken pallet loads. On the harbor side of Monkey Mountain just inside the harbor entrance was the classified realm of the swift boats. Just south of that encampment was a narrow beach area where LSTs could beach and offload cargo through their bow ramps. Rough terrain fork lifts were absolutely invaluable in those conditions. Fortunately for us, many of the fork lift parts were also used in some of the SeaBee equipment.

One of the main problems about the location of the ramps and the eventual DeLong pier was the fact that all the cargo needed to get to the airport side of the river. The VC took out the center spans of the bridge over the Perfume River. It took a few weeks but the SeaBees put in a temporary repair which was still holding up under the loads of the trucks and their cargo nearly a year later when I left.

In early July, Captain Huff showed us the top secret planning documents laying out the planned force structure and size which would need logistics support in all of I Corps. The numbers were staggering and it quickly became apparent that even with the additional numbers of seamen being ordered in on a TAD basis, the TG 76.4 organization was not going to be capable of keeping up with the task at hand. The APA and the APLs bunking capacity was running out so he tasked CDR Doheny and me to scout the area for a suitable site to berth and feed our men ashore. By happenstance on the south side of Monkey Mountain we found an unused camp that formerly had been used by the Republic of VietNam Army. In short order we obtained permission to lease the camp and started planning for barracks and a mess hall. I don't know where the name originated but it was called Camp Tien Sha and was simply a series of concrete foundations and slabs with metal trusses and roofs supported by metal poles. Many had side walls but no functioning plumbing nor electrical power. Clearly the SeaBees were going to have plenty of work to do. During the rainy fall we used many of these buildings (which the SeaBees were not working on) to temporarily store some of the cargo being offloaded.

The number of ships at anchor awaiting offload was growing and the force levels counting the Marines, Army, Navy and Air Force was rapidly approaching 20,000 personnel, with the planning documents proposing three to four times that number. Captain Huff recognized that the task using TAD personnel was not a sufficient long term solution and he directed CDR Doheny and me to come up with a plan to better accommodate the requirement on a more permanent basis. CDR Doheny gave me the supply functions side of the job and he took on the other aspects such as command and control, defense and security, Public Works, small craft repair and berthing. As a mid grade LT with two years experience at a Supply Center, the job was quite intimidating. Obviously the future Freight Terminal operation was going to play a major role and the existing CHBs and the augmented sailors gave me a decent basis for that aspect. Similarly the Disbursing operation and messing were scalable. Warehousing and Stock Control requirements were truly educated guesses. By mid July we presented our proposals to CAPT Huff, mine included a requirement for 81 supply officers and a little over 2,000 enlisted including SKs, DK, CSs, and large numbers of able bodied seamen. He made very few changes and then sent out a message outlining the requirements for establishing a shore activity along with the huge personnel requirements. We were somewhat stunned however at how and to whom he sent the message. It went out "Top Secret" with a priority of "Op Immediate" which was not too unusual but the addressees certainly stepped outside the normal chain of command. As I recall it went to his immediate boss at CTF 76, but it also went to COMSEVENTHFLT, COMPHIBPAC, COMSERVPAC, CINCPACFLT, CINCPAC, COMNAVSUP, COMNAVSEA, and the CNO.

Let me tell you that it certainly produced some immediate action. Within two days the Seventh Fleet Supply Officer (a senior Captain whose name I do not recall) was in the White Elephant asking me where on earth I had come up with such crazy numbers. I brought out the top secret planning document numbers and went over my educated guesses and assumptions with him and by the end of the day he allowed as how the request perhaps made sense but that I should not hold my breath waiting for any such number of personnel to show up. Simultaneously other Seventh Fleet staff officers were grilling CDR Doheny and CAPT Huff.

In later years I was told that there had been some advance planning by the OPNAV and COMSERVPAC staffs for a shore based support activity at DaNang but the CAPT Huff message really lit the fuse. Within two weeks, on the 2nd of August 1966, CDR Robert Leventhal, SC, USN, LCDR William Dickey, SC, USN and eight other Supply Corps officers reported on board as PCS transfers. CAPT Huff was designated Prospective Commanding Officer, NAVSUPACT, DaNang, and CDR Leventhal was designated Prospective Supply Officer. It took longer for the paperwork to catch up with events as the commissioning of NSA DaNang did not happen until 15 October

1965. Of note, on the 28th of July 1965 President Johnson announced an increase of 50,000 troops to be deployed to Vietnam.

At CDR Leventhal's direction we undertook the job of determining what facilities and equipments would be required. In the mid 1950s a concept for preplanning an advanced base had been designed and partially funded. It was known as the Advanced Base Functional Component (ABFC) procedure. Theoretically if there was a need for a specific functional unit such as a field hospital or a mess hall, a requiring command could call out that unit and receive all the necessary components such as facilities, equipment and supplies. In addition much of the material would have been previously acquired as Pre-positioned War Reserve Material and pre-packed, labeled and stored. The range of ABFC components which we called out was very extensive and the fact that within a year the NSA was the largest Naval Activity in the world and was proving logistic support to all US Forces in "I" Corps was a testament to some foresighted planning at OPNAV and the incredible accomplishments of the SeaBees. Over the next many months a lot of time was spent in coordination with the local SeaBees and the COMSERVPAC Staff in refining and revising many details of the numerous ABFC units ordered. We certainly did not need anti-freeze for the motor pool units. LT(JG) Larry Harris and I constituted the extent of the Planning Division of the NSA Supply Department.

One area not covered by the ABFC procedures was the determination of what and how much of ordinary consumables would be required by the supported forces. LT Harvey Nix, SC, USN and I spent many days and nights going through the GSA Catalogs line item by line item and estimated what the requirements would be. We did consult with the Marines when forecasting items like the number of rolls of concertina barbed wire, and with the SeaBees on lumber, rebar and cement needs. We also saw the incredible demand for soft drinks given the working and weather conditions.

Another item of the ABFC which became an interesting story. We needed a deep water pier to help handle the volume of cargo offload. There was an ABFC component for a deep water pier called the DeLong Pier. It was transportable and once in location there were support columns which could be mechanically extended downward until they were solidly planted. The problem was that once installed in place, the remaining upper portions of the columns interfered with the cranes and booms used for offloading ships cargo. The SeaBees fixed the problem by cutting the columns flush with the pier deck with oxy-acetylene torches. That later became an issue when the Army apparently had planned on using the transportable DeLong pier at Cam Ranh Bay.

LCDR Dickey was instrumental in finding a suitable location for the warehouse and cold storage facilities on the east side of the Perfume River just south of the RVN ammo dump. Tactically that may have been a little too close for comfort.

On the riverfront street just south of the fishing docks there was a museum. At that location the seawall had deteriorated and was used by the DUKWs to exit the river and come up onto dry land. The DUKW has only canvas side walls to the 2 1/2 ton cargo platform. They transported the 500 pound bombs for the Air Force from ship-side to the airport bunkers. About once a month traversing the angle of the river exit would cause a bomb to slip off a DUKW which always was a tense moment. Capt Huff directed me to design a multiple use ramp and dockside facility just north of the Perfume River bridge. When I had finished the sketch and described to him the rationale for boom arcs and ramp dimensions to accommodate barges, LSTs and LCMs, he told me to give it to the SeaBees and ask them to build it. In short order the pilings were driven, dredge sediment was placed and the facility was put into use. No more DUKW bomb dropping. I also remember a ceremony when the 1,000,000th short ton of cargo was brought ashore at that facility.

As staffing increased and facilities started coming on-line there was a change of command at which CAPT Huff was relieved by RADM Thomas Weschler, USN in recognition of the expansive role of NSA DaNang. That happened on 5 February 1966 and CAPT Huff stayed on as Executive officer. One month later on the 1st of March 1966 RADM Weschler promoted me from the rank of Lieutenant to Lieutenant Commander which came with a nice little pay raise.

For most of the time we were able to eat our meals at a US Army mess in DaNang. That is until early spring 1966 when the Army conducted an investigation and discovered that a majority of the waitresses serving at the mess were VC sympathizers. That led to closing of the mess for 72 days during which time we subsisted on ready to eat combat rations (Meal, Combat, Individual). If I remember correctly there were only eight or nine varieties of the C Ration meals, and I will tell you that after a while we tried all sorts of combinations to get some variety. Nothing to whet the appetite like looking forward to opening a cold can of chopped ham and scrambled eggs. Fortunately there were plenty of salt and pepper packs in each meal carton, as well as the ever present cigarettes. It was a happy day when the Army mess resumed operation.

One morning I left the quarters for work earlier than usual. Shortly after I left there was a VC attack on the villa. Only two officers were still in the building when the shooting started from three sides, and the only casualty was a broken rib when one of the officers hit the floor quickly. There was some return fire from our hired ARVN guard and all was quiet thereafter. Numerous small bullet holes on the outside and large

holes on the inside left bullet fragments and brick debris on my bed. It pays not to sleep in.

Soon after the arrival of CDR Leventhal I had decided to volunteer for a PCS tour at NSA DaNang for two reasons. The obvious challenge and opportunities for a junior officer were unmatched, and it would put my tour rotation schedules back in synch with the postgraduate education cycle. In my request to the detailers I asked that my revised rotation date be provided to the PG School board. As I was waiting to board my flight out of country in July 1966 en-route to two years at Harvard Business School I met the 66th and 67th Supply Corps officers arriving for duty at NSA DaNang. Not 81, but not that far off.

Many years ago someone wrote the following:

“Looking back, the experience gained from association with this remarkable command during its initial phases is difficult to retell. Impressive indeed for its officers and men has been its rapid growth, larger and faster than anything since World War II. For those young Supply Corps officers lucky enough to be members of the Navy-Marine Team here during this period, a chance to make decisions and contributions as breathtakingly large as they have made here will probably never come again. For those officers who, night after night patiently reworked planning estimates and messages, now stand in awe when contemplating what they have helped create. As they leave, they know they have had a chance of a lifetime, for they will use the lessons learned here elsewhere and the information disseminated by them may well affect naval operations for years to come for they have helped to write ‘the book.’”