



U.S. PLANE DOWNED BY DA NANG REBELS

Stars & Stripes

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1LT Donald L. "Don" Johnson

Pilot, original Catkiller, 1965-66

PREFACE:

Historian Stanley Karnow said of Air Vice-Marshal Nguyễn Cao Kỳ [who became premier of South Vietnam on 19 June 1965] and General Nguyễn Chánh Thi: "Both flamboyant characters who wore gaudy uniforms and sported sinister moustaches, the two young officers had been friends, and their rivalry seemed to typify the personal struggles for power that chronically afflicted South Vietnam. But their dispute mirrored more than individual ambition." Both were known for the colorful red berets they wore. There were reports that Thi was showing insubordination towards Kỳ. The U.S. military commander in Vietnam, General William Westmoreland, said that Thi once refused to report to Kỳ in Saigon when requested. On one occasion, Kỳ came to I Corps to remonstrate with him in early March, Thi addressed his staff and asked mockingly, "Should we pay attention to this funny little man from Saigon or should we ignore him?" Thi made this comment rather loudly, within earshot of Kỳ, and the Vietnamese politician Bùi Diễm thought that the prime minister viewed Thi's comment as a direct challenge to his authority.



General Thi's Home in Da Nang: "We walked by this place enroute from our early hooch at 9 Gia Long to the MACV club for evening meal." Comment and photo, Norm MacPhee

Buddhists and other antijunta civilian activists joined together with I Corps units supportive of Thi to form the Struggle Movement, leading to civil unrest and a halt in I Corps military operations. On 3 April, Ky held a press conference during which he claimed that Da Nang was under communist control and vowed to stage a military operation to regain the territory, thus implying the Buddhists were communist agents. He vowed to kill the mayor of Da Nang, saying, "Either Da Nang's mayor is shot or the government will fall." The following evening, Ky deployed three battalions of marines to Da Nang. The marines stayed at Da Nang Air Base and made no moves against the rebels. Soon, two battalions of Vietnamese Rangers, as well as some riot police and paratroopers, joined them. Ky took personal command and found that Buddhist civilians and pro-Thi factions in I Corps blocked all roads leading into the city. After a standoff, Ky realized that he could not score a decisive victory and had lost face. He arranged a meeting and media event with Thi loyalist officers, and various Struggle Movement supporters.



Depiction of hits on 220th Wounded Birds – The red “Broken Hearts” (Cherries) were VC enemy hits – the yellow and red South Vietnamese flag “Broken Heart” (Cherries) denoted the hits from the Rebels.



Buddhist Temple Where Rebels Were Hiding (Photo Courtesy of Norm MacPhee)

At this point in time, all pilots were living at Marble Mountain airfield. I believe the enlisted men lived at the Da Nang Hotel in town, until more hooch’s were finished at Marble. There was a temporary floating bridge that replaced a bridge blown by the VC between Marble and Da Nang. This is the bridge they are speaking of here. The enlisted men, except for one or two, were “trapped” in town during this time, so all the work was done by the ones at Marble. The missions (all at night) were, in our minds, foolish but ordered from above to “keep an eye” on the temple

where the rebels were holed up. How one “keeps an eye” on anything in the dark puzzled me. Don got too close and they let loose on him.

Our enlisted men in Da Nang were simply the best. We never had any problems that I knew of. We flew two missions a day, 6 days a week, about 3 to 3.5 hours each, plus brief and de-brief, so were exhausted at the end of the day. I regret not spending more time with the crew chiefs as they kept us alive for sure.

Gene Wilson recalled, “Don Johnson's shoot-down by rebel forces occurred just before I arrived in the 220th—but we all got to see General/Premier Ky and his A-1E, along with GEN Westmoreland in Phu Bai after the dust from the attempted coup had settled.” A *side story* might be interesting for this account was that Roger Bradley was recommended for a Bronze Star for being the only crew chief at Marble Mountain crewing the platoon's 8 aircraft for 5 days during this 'rebellion uprising' because all other crew chiefs were 'holed up /restricted' to their quarters and 'bunkers' in Da Nang. Roger was also recognized as Crew Chief of the Month the following month:

Roger Bradley



Stars & Stripes Article

U.S. Plane Downed By Da Nang Rebels

By The Associated Press

Anti-government Vietnamese soldiers shot down a U.S. spotter plane over Da Nang late Wednesday, but the pilot managed a crash landing on a nearby beach. The plane carrying a U.S. Army pilot and a Marine Corps observer, was hit seven times as it flew twice over Da Nang. The plane crashed on a beach two miles east of town and the two Americans were rescued uninjured by a helicopter.

U.S. Marines, meanwhile, quietly took over a Da Nang River bridge that was in dispute between rebel and government troops. The Marine commander, Lt. Gen. Lewis W. Walt, talked Vietnamese Marines into helping the Americans take over the west end and others negotiated a withdrawal of rebel troops holding the east end.

Earlier, Premier Nguyen Cao Ky's opponents ordered 500 more antigovernment infantrymen into Da Nang and 200 men from a detachment of Rangers already based there, switched to the rebel side. The move boosted the rebel ranks to more than 1,100 men. Ky sent in 2,500 Marines and paratroopers Sunday.

A side note on this article: Roger Putnam says the media got it wrong—they did not land on the beach, but rather on the road that runs north of the end of the bridge on the east side of Da Nang. Marble Mountain is on the south road—leave it to a newspaper reporter.

Sources: Pacific Stars and Stripes, Vol. 22, No. 139 Friday, May 20, 1966
Wikipedia Article: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nguyễn_Cao_Kỳ

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