



## DONG HA, SOUTH VIETNAM, 1967

A PERSONAL STORY BY LLOYD OAKE

*Edited and arranged by Dennis Currie*



Born in Edmonton, Alberta Canada in 1941, my path to citizenship was to be a memorable journey to say the least. My father was a division superintendant with the Canadian National Railroad (CNR), and we were transferred frequently throughout Canada. We eventually made our way back to Edmonton, where I graduated in 1959 from Ross Sheppard High School. After graduation I went to work for FW Woolworth Co. and transferred around Western Canada. However, I was eventually to return to Edmonton to become a medical insurance salesman. By 1963, I was ready for a change and decided that I wanted to serve in the U.S. Military. I applied for and received my green card. Before I knew it, I was on a bus headed for Santa Monica, California, where I enlisted in the United States Army. 1964 brought with it basic training at Fort Polk, Louisiana, followed by aircraft maintenance school at Fort Rucker, Alabama. I was then ordered to Fort Hood, Texas, to crew Huey's, where I made the decision to attend Warrant Officer Flight School at Fort Walters, Texas. Finally, I went to Fort Stewart, Georgia, for Fixed Wing Flight School—where I washed out of the program. At this juncture, with my maintenance qualifications in hand, I was off to Vietnam and the 220<sup>th</sup> Aviation Company.

The fourth platoon was ordered to Dong Ha in March of 1967. The enlisted men were volunteers; however, I'm not sure if the officers were volunteers as well. I was tired of Phu Bai, where each day was the same and ended with us drinking in the EM Club. I looked forward to a new adventure. I

believe (after some thought) we had a platoon leader, four pilots, four crew chiefs, and four Birddogs. The enlisted men had a great deal of difficulty finding accommodations but ended up housed with the Marine cooks—our good luck—as their hooch had air conditioning, which could run day and night but continuously blew fuses—at least we were cool. Here I am at the airfield at the beginning of my tour there. I did not have the opportunity to acquire my Aussie look at this point.



We decided to chart our own course and differentiate ourselves from the other platoons. We thought we were special and we were – we wore Australian type hats with the 220<sup>th</sup> patch on the turned up side, handle bar mustaches if one desired and participated in no formations or inspections. We had self-discipline and needed no external motivation to perform. We flew everyday weather permitting, usually multiple missions. EM's were permitted to fly on numerous occasions, as these flights were identified as test flights, however, pilots were always on the lookout for action and always found it. We went to Phu Bai and Marble Mountain for R&R and any airplane maintenance we were not equipped to do in Dong Ha. Our dress and appearance definitely got attention.

We saw an increase in action, with incoming escalating from mortars to 120mm rockets and 151mm artillery fire. When the 120mm rockets and the 151mm rounds started landing the shrapnel field was massive. We were hit day and night, and we lost a Marine who was looking out of a vent and suffered other wounded as well. We decided to build our bunker underground at the airfield beside our maintenance shack. As you can see from the photos, we were inundated with onlookers and the so-called sidewalk superintendants. However, the Sea Bees dug the hole and we placed concrete blocks and runway PSP for the flooring material. The remainder of the construction was standard bunker craft.

Now, one would be tempted to ask why underground, with the possibility of the monsoon flooding our only place of protection. I can say unequivocally that no one drowned in our bunker at the Dong Ha airfield. Our solution for monsoon flooding was to share our bunker with the Marine Fire Rescue Unit who used their pumps to drain the water when things became overly moist. You can see the captured rounds in the attached photo.



Our days at the airfield were often filled with other surprises, such as the time when a Marine CH-34 came in with a landing gear missing. The following photos show how we saved the day by placing a stack of skids for the bottom of the chopper to rest on as he came in for a landing. Everyone was relieved when the idea worked and allowed the CH-34 to fly again another day.



The Air Force built a club for officers and EM with our help. However upon completion their CO rescinded a previous invitation to share the facility. A few weeks later the club received a direct hit from either a 151mm or 120mm rocket, and it burned to the ground. Fortunately, there were no casualties; however, we were very happy, and I took pictures, which I treasure to this day. The loss of the club didn't mean we didn't celebrate. Often we would have barbeques for all to celebrate, who needed a club for that!



July 4, 1967, the unit ordered an evacuation, as conditions grew dire at the airfield. Four Birddogs, each departing with pilots and a crew chiefs, flew to Phu Bai. I remained at the airfield with another pilot to guard the tools and personal items. We continued to weather the incoming until the 6<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> when Phu Bai evacuated us. Major Woods flew a Beaver in after dark and kept the engine running on the runway and we dove in. I believe he received the DFC for the flight, but I'm not sure. It was a gutsy rescue. By July 10<sup>th</sup> we were happy to return to Dong Ha and get back to work. We remained in Dong Ha until August 17<sup>th</sup>, 1967, when the platoon was ordered back to Phu Bai.

In 1968, I had left the Army and obtained my United States Citizenship. I then joined the Los Angelis County Sheriff Department as a patrolman and by 1972 was promoted to Detective and served as a helicopter observer and undercover officer until my retirement in 1998. My wife Irene and I have two daughters who are married and a wonderful grandson, Nico. We spend our retirement babysitting our grandson and travelling, as often as we are able, while residing at our home in Redondo Beach, California.

There are undoubtedly errors in this submission, as forty-five years dulls my memory. I stand corrected if someone has a better recollection of events. However, in closing, Dong Ha was one hell of a ride.



**Editor's Note:** SP5 Lloyd Oake was awarded the Purple Heart for wounds sustained from enemy fire on 3 July 1967.

**Source:** <http://www.catkillers.org/history-wounded.htm>

**Comments:**

“I was pleasantly surprised when I read Lloyd Oakes’ story on Dong Ha and his recollection of the event involving their evacuation on one of the nights they experienced artillery bombardment. I never really knew the names of those who climbed aboard the Otter, but was happy to lend them a hand.

When we first got the word of their predicament, our company commander, Major Courtney E. Smith (April—August 1967), gave the word to get the plane ready for the mission on his behalf. At that time, as his XO and also the unit standardization officer, I reminded him that he was no longer current in the aircraft and volunteered to do the job. He acquiesced, and that was that. To my later surprise, I was presented the DFC during my subsequent tour of duty back at West Point. I wish to thank Lloyd for remembering the incident. George.

George Woods, Major, Executive Officer (1966) and Commanding Officer (1967), Catkiller 5/6, who was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for his action that day. “

“I want to let you know that it wasn’t a solitary action on my part. Captains Ken Trent and Lloyd Morgan voluntarily provided their assistance. Ken flew copilot and Lloyd stayed in the rear of the Otter. This was particularly helpful in that he was able to assist the Catkiller guys to quickly get aboard without my having to shut down the Otter. I believe the other might have received awards.”

George”

[Lower, left-right: MAJ Woods; Otter, Spud 700, on loan and used during the evacuation.]





# THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

TO ALL WHO SHALL SEE THESE PRESENTS, GREETING:

THIS IS TO CERTIFY THAT  
THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA  
AUTHORIZED BY ACT OF CONGRESS, JULY 2, 1926, HAS  
AWARDED

## THE DISTINGUISHED FLYING CROSS

TO

MAJOR GEORGE J. WOODS JR. 073937 INFANTRY UNITED STATES ARMY

FOR HEROISM  
WHILE PARTICIPATING IN AERIAL FLIGHT

IN THE REPUBLIC OF VIETNAM ON 6 JULY 1967

GIVEN UNDER MY HAND IN THE CITY OF WASHINGTON  
THIS TWENTY-FIFTH DAY OF SEPTEMBER 1967

*W. C. Westmoreland*  
W. C. WESTMORELAND



*Stanley R. Reser*  
SECRETARY OF THE ARMY

West Point



LTC Robert W. Black congratulates Maj. George J. Woods Jr., 2nd Aviation Det., after presenting him with The Distinguished Flying Cross and the Bronze Star.

U. S. Army photograph, 30 Jan. 1968  
Photo by Pfc. Mayhew

## COMMENTS:

"Just read Georges reply. One of my TI's and I went along to recover a birddog that needed to go to Phu Bai for some minor problems. When we landed, it was dark with scattered explosions all over. When we opened the door, the platoon was already trying to get aboard. I asked were the aircraft we wanted to evacuate was, the platoon leader said, "I don't know if it will start. You don't know were the bunkers are, and I recommend we all get on the aircraft and get out of here," which we did! We were overloaded and were barely able to get off the ground. It took us a long time to get any altitude on the way back. When we took off, we were all praying that there were no craters in the runway—as we had no runway lights.

I ought to write up my experience after we were mortared and inspecting the damage and were re-mortared. Also, when we found my remote radio at the hanger [at Phu Bai] had been tapped into."

Lloyd Morgan, CPT, Maintenance Officer, 1967

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"I enjoyed the story. Bobby Jermyn and Dennis O'Conner and I were all classmates at flight school. I later transferred up from Marble Mountain and swapped places with Dennis. I was only there for a few weeks because after I went up, the decision was made that Dong Ha was such a bad place that they were going to rotate people thru there. I got a short tour and got to rotate out with the old guys. I remember sleeping in the hooch with a fatigue jacket with the sleeves rolled down and tennis shoes so that we could run to the bunker at night if we got rocketed. The entrance to the bunker was narrow and the sleeves were to keep from getting scratched on the side walls by small gravel in the dirt.

CPT David M. Latimer, Jr., 1967-68