

# The Genesis of VQ-1, Detachment “Bravo”

## DaNang, Republic of Vietnam

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In July 1964 I was on an EC-121M flight crew that was temporarily staging out of Don Muang International Airport, Bangkok, Thailand. The plane commander was LCDR Norm Bull. During this rather enjoyable deployment, our crew was tasked to fly a mission that terminated at DaNang, RVN. As this place was way off the beaten path, I think the crew was excited about going, I know I was. On the arrival in DaNang, we were met by Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) personnel in civilian clothes who took the enlisted crewman to a “French Villa” in the heart of DaNang, City. This writer can’t recall where the crew officers and NSG folks went, but, at least, they all showed up for the flight the next day. We were to fly a mission and then land back at Bangkok. But, right after takeoff, the aircraft suffered an engine failure prompting a return to DaNang. An engine was flown in and changed and the plane returned to Bangkok.

A short time later there were two incidents involving the US Navy in the Gulf of Tonkin that gave reason for President Lyndon B. Johnson and Congress to begin a build up of US forces in and around Vietnam. As with most things happening in the Western Pacific, VQ-1 had an early involvement, In this case it was mainly VQ-1 A-3 Skywarriors flying support missions from the Philippines and from the decks of aircraft carriers in the region. The skipper of VQ-1 at this time was CDR A. T. Holt.



Fast-forward a year. Rumors began to swirl about an upcoming EC-121M deployment. Scuttlebutt had it that a trip to Australia was in the offing and adding credence to this rumor, the crew thought to be going was one that seemed to get most of the best trips. Well, when the briefing notice finally came out on the flight schedule, the crew briefing for the mission was a lot different than that rumored! I was pretty certain then that Australia was not in our future as I was junior first flight engineer (2<sup>nd</sup> class petty officer) and quite a way down the pecking order. At the briefing we were told to pack clothes for warm weather. It wasn't until we were on the airplane taxiing out that we were told our destination was DaNang, RVN. The plane commander was LCDR Bob Hullander and the aircraft was 135749 (PR-21). The skipper at this time was CDR Dressen with CDR Mel Klein being the executive officer.

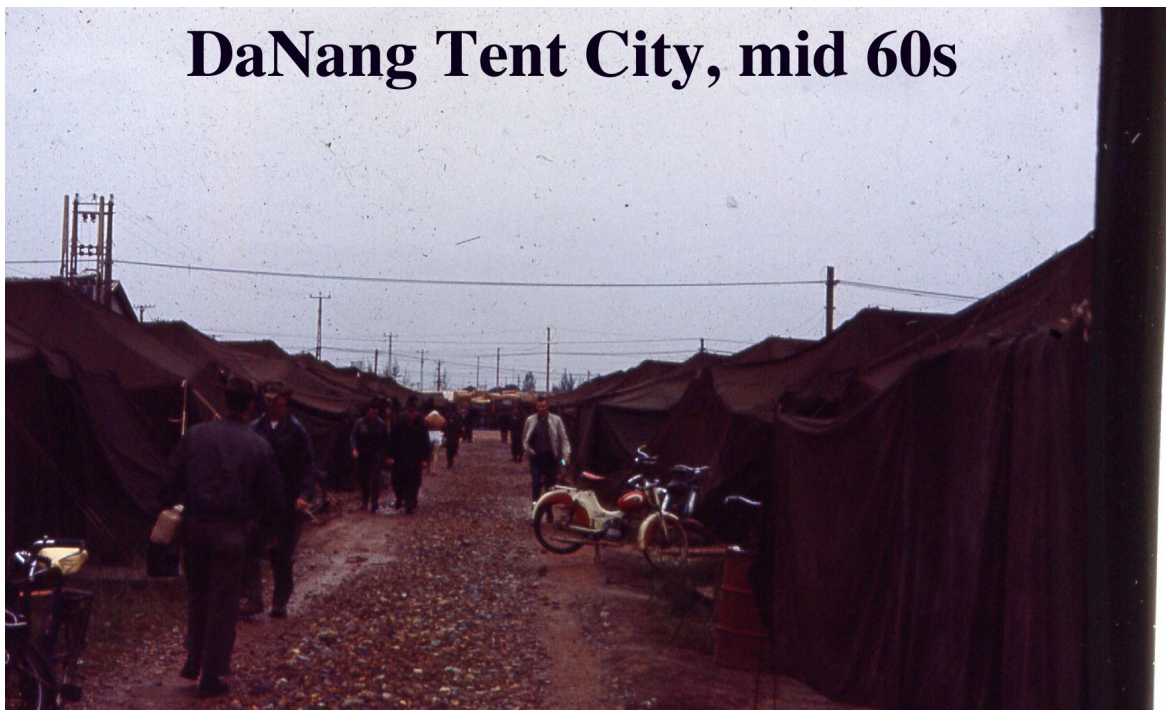
It was a nice, warm day when we left Atsugi. We would soon learn the true meaning of warm! After a stop at Cubi Point, RP, we landed at DaNang on September 3, 1965 and the big difference I first noticed from the previous year was the vastly increased level of activity. At this time, there was only one runway and the taxi way was on the eastern side of the north/south runway. There was a fairly large ramp at the north end and this is where we ended up. Because of the high volume of traffic coming on and off the ramp, we had to get the airplane moved back into a spot where we wouldn't obstruct traffic. As we had no tow bar for the Willy, we had to use propeller reverse pitch to back the aircraft into a spot that was perpendicular to the runway with the tail section hanging out over an unimproved area between the ramp and taxiway. Actually, it was a slightly improved area as there were numerous fuel bladders and one bladder we found later to be Agent Orange that was used as a defoliant. Our ramp mates were usually a couple of C-123 Defoliant Sprayers, C-47 "Puff" gunships, one or two SA-16 SEA/AIR Rescue (SAR) birds, and crash protection helos that had twin main rotors that trashed wildly together, amazingly staying in synchronization with each other. I also remember a couple of olive drab F-100 Super Sabre jets along side of us some of the time.



In those days, the flight crew was also the maintenance crew so there were different ratings, such as mechanics and electricians, who served as ECM operators in the back end plus the crew cook was usually an electrician. The technician type operators took care of the backend electronics. As you might imagine, this made for some very long days! The NSG folks that flew with us from DaNang were out of COMSTA San Miguel, Republic of the Philippines.

Right away, it became clear that we were “Orphans” at DaNang. Power units for the aircraft were hard to come by due to the high tempo activity and the MD3 Air Force DC units were just good enough for basic power. When the back end needed ground power, we had to fire a couple of engines to use the AC alternators on engines, one and four which certainly wasn't good for the Curtis Wright R-3350 reciprocating engines. We did find some Air Force avionics repair shops where our technicians were able to fix some of the black boxes, mainly the infamous ARC-27 UHF radio that had a Mean Time Between Failure of just about long enough to carry it out to the aircraft. Also the sheer size of the EC-121 caused considerable heartburn to the Air Force line folks and their congested parking area. This was a continuing problem until the aircraft moved to the west side of the runway to a ramp put in by the Seabees later on in 1966.

The living accommodations in DaNang were rather Spartan. We were put up in tents that were probably four or five hundred yards from the runway ramp where our aircraft was. The tents, I believe, were 20 men, with a wooden floor. I'm pretty sure we had two tents for the crew and I remember a lot of space in the tent. There was a ditch that ran alongside of where the tents were and over this ditch there was a shower set up that most of us only used as last resort! We all believed that the water used for the shower was pumped out of the ditch. As an analogy, if anyone can remember the river between Cubi Point and Olongapo City in the Philippines, that body of water would be pristine compared to the DaNang ditch! For calls of nature, there was the honey bucket on board the aircraft when flying, on the ground large pipes (4-5 inch) were sunk into the ground here and there and acted as urinals and in a very few places there were 55 gal barrels cut in half which stank to high heaven. The NCO club had the only flush toilet available to us so when we were in the club there was always a queue of folks wanting to use that fine facility.



I can't remember a mess hall although I know there was one somewhere that the Air Force used. What I most remember eating is whatever they gave us for inflight rations,

which was potluck, C-Rations we cumshawed or SOS (creamed beef on toast) at the NCO club. We all suspected the C-Rations were left over from World War Two. When breaking open a new box, it was always a mad scramble to get the choice entrée, the most popular being Beans and Franks or, fondly called, Beanie Wienies! The other end of the scale was the scrambled eggs and ham or lima beans and ham.

As far as uniform of the day, it was a mixed bag. Orange or tan flight suits and dungarees (chambray shirts, denim pants, blue cap) with some people big dealing olive green fatigues as the det went on. Again, I can't remember how we got our uniforms cleaned but I suspect we all brought enough clothes to last a month. I can't ever remember seeing the officers in anything but a flight suit.

There wasn't much in the way of entertainment for the times we were off. I guess we did what generations of sailors before us did, tell sea stories and drink beer! We hadn't been there too long when arrangements were made to have the EA-3B crews that dropped in for fuel to bring us San Miguel from the Philippines. The A3s were flying double shuttles from Cubi; flying a mission then landing on the ship, fly another mission from the ship and then land in DaNang to fuel up for the trip back to the PI. It was a very long day for those lads but we appreciated the beer they brought in. We could leave the base and there were a couple of times I, and others, made our way into the big city of DaNang. There was no formal transportation so getting there was a hassle, plus the flight schedule was pretty daunting without much time off.



Pictured at left are some coins that were used in the Air Force NCO club. Twenty-five cents would buy you a beer, but, there were often happy hours when it would be as cheap as a nickle. The center piece is what was called a, "John Wayne." A number of these useful devices were included with a box of C rations and were used to open the cans.

The Vietnamese coins depicted were far more worthless than they look! I don't know what they were made from but they weren't much heavier than a piece of paper of the same size.

Operations for us started about a day and a half after we arrived, flying our first mission on 5 September 1965. From then on we flew every day except the 15<sup>th</sup> when I think we were down for a RADAR wave-guide and then, after two flights on the 20<sup>th</sup>, we went down for an engine change. After a five-day wait for a new engine, we started flying again on the 26<sup>th</sup>. When we left DaNang on the 5<sup>th</sup> of October we had flown 32 missions in the Gulf for a total of 165.4 mission hours. This does not include the flights from Atsugi or the flights returning to home base.



You will notice there are 40 strike/flight patches in the photo above. Some of the flights we flew counted double for air medal points so those of us that flew everyday earned two air medals. The Purple Heart ribbon painted on the side denotes the instances of being hit by ground fire, which was in the take off or landing mode. Fortunately, no serious damage was done and was easily fixed by 100 mile an hour tape. I remember changes were made to our approaches for landing but not much could be done to our takeoffs when the aircraft was heavy and the outside air temperature was up in the stratosphere!

There was one instance during the detachment where we could have taken some very heavy-duty artillery. We were in the Gulf and our RADAR was down and we were above the overcast, probably about 10,000 feet, flying in the area off Vinh, North Vietnam. My recollection is that we were relying on radio fixes off a Navy warship and the ship may have been out of position. Whatever the reason, there is no doubt we penetrated close to 20 miles into North Vietnam. Larry Brosh, the AES (Airborne Electronics Supervisor), relates that we flew directly over a Fire Can (RADAR controlled Anti-Aircraft Gun) and for whatever the reason, the NVN gunners didn't fire. Alan

Cranston (Big Look Operator) recalls looking out a hatch, seeing a break in the clouds and seeing lush, green countryside when there only should have been water! Perhaps they thought this might be some Yankee ploy, flying an aluminum cloud, at 170 knots, over what proved to be one of the most heavily defended places in the world. We exited, perhaps a little faster than we entered. I remember there was some finger pointing afterwards, but I think the only thing that came of it was that you didn't be up in the Gulf when it was overcast without RADAR!

We were all happy to leave DaNang when another crew from Atsugi relieved us. There may have been some visionaries, but I don't think too many of us thought that from this humble beginning, there would be such a commitment that would last until 1973. My position in the crew was as a flight engineer but I know that the professionalism of those in the backend established VQ-1 as a premier provider of electronic intelligence and the brave pilots who carried out the strikes in North Vietnam quickly learned the value of Big Look. Evidently, our bosses in Seventh Fleet thought so too!