

4 - FSB CHALLENGE

Located in the Central Highlands 40 miles NW of An Khe

It was March 28, 1970, and the ride to the firebase lasted about twenty minutes over hilly jungle terrain. There were no villages or roads in sight. Challenge was located about 40 miles northwest of An Khe and miles from the nearest road. The only way to reach it was by helicopter or by foot through dense jungle and hostile forces. It was located on the tallest hill in the area and had a small river called the Dak Kron Bung that curved around its western base.

Upon landing I noticed that one of the guys standing on the side of the chopper pad looked familiar. It was Tom Wajer, a neighbor from my hometown in Dudley, Massachusetts! He lived two streets down from my home and was a year ahead of me in high school. We used to ride the school bus together. He greeted me like a long-lost friend. Boy did I feel good. Tom was a platoon leader with the third platoon. He was a 1st Lieutenant. I didn't know whether I should salute him or hug him. We shook hands as he welcomed me to Challenge.



The left picture shows Lt. Tom Wajer Tom in May of 1970. The right picture shows him with his Tunnel Rat Shorty McDowel.

He gave me a quick tour and explained what a good unit I had joined. Delta Company really had their shit together and the first platoon was one of the best. I didn't know if he was trying to make me feel better, but it worked. Months later I would realize what a good unit the 2/35th was, but that's another story.



The firebase was a two-level design. The smaller upper level served as a chopper pad. It was connected to the larger firebase by a small path located on a narrow ridge that connected the two areas. The main area contained the bunkers on the perimeter with the center containing the 105mm Howitzers and mortar tubes. This area was about the size of a football field.

The typical bunker was a hole in the ground like a cellar hole. The dirt from the hole was used to fill sandbags, which were lined around the hole and ended a couple of feet above ground level. Logs cut from the top of the hill and the surrounding area were used to cover the bunker hole and create a roof. A sheet of plastic was laid over the logs to make the roof waterproof. About three layers of sandbags were

piled on top of the sheet of plastic. The bunker was about eight-foot square and would sleep two people. A small opening faced the firebase perimeter and led to a two-man fighting position. The fighting position was a narrow trench with a couple of rows of sandbags surrounding it. The fighting position would hold 2 to 3 people. The bunker was pretty safe from attack and easily defended. Each bunker position could overlap fire zones with adjacent bunkers. The only way to destroy or breach the bunker would be through direct artillery or mortar round hit or to have the enemy overrun the position with a direct assault.

At night, since there was no electricity available in the bunker, light could only be provided by using a flashlight or burning a candle. Candles were made by tightly twisting discarded mortar paper into the shape of a candle. The mortar paper was impregnated with wax to protect either the powder charges or the explosive round. Before lighting the candle in the bunker, a poncho had to be draped over the bunker opening to prevent presenting a target for the enemy. This arrangement made the bunker very hot and smoky. As a result, nighttime letter writing, and reading were kept to a minimum.

During the day, small chores were assigned to the grunts to perform. If there was any concertina or barbed wire surrounding the perimeter, it would be checked for signs of tampering from the enemy at night. If more wire was available, then another row of wire might be added to the perimeter. The mines and trip flares would be checked and reset. Small patrols would also be sent out to scout the surrounding area for signs of enemy activity. Choppers would be busy bringing personnel and supplies which would have to be transported

to the firebase area by coolie power. Garbage would be policed and buried, piss tubes limed¹, and shit burned.

A couple of days later the 1st Squad of the 1st Platoon arrived at the firebase. I spent the next day meeting the members of my new squad and preparing for the mission. The 2nd squad had not arrived yet. They were scheduled to join us after the mission had started.

It was announced that our squad would be landing in the valley the next day. Up until now life on the firebase was pretty laid back. I wrote a lot of letters and got used to the firebase routine which was pretty boring. One day there was a firefight at the bottom of the hill on the western side. There were some light casualties that had to be medevac'd out by chopper. After the fight, the platoon climbed up the side of the hill and entered Challenge. They really looked worn out and gaunt. I didn't think it was from the steep climb. Later I would learn that this worn and gaunt look was known as the "Thousand Yard Stare".

I got to know some of the guys in the platoon that I was joining and began packing my rucksack for the mission. My Rucksack would be home for the next 14 months.

Everybody in my new squad was very nice and helpful. Everyone had advice for me. I couldn't remember a tenth of the advice.

It was a sleepless night for me. The anxiety was insane. I couldn't wait for the great adventure to start, or could I?

My Rucksack or Home Sweet Home

Packing the rucksack was an art, and everybody had their own method. While in Vietnam your rucksack was your home, even when you were on a firebase or back at a base camp. The rucksack carried all the required munitions that would support your war effort. It was your kitchen, stored your bedroom, and carried all your personal belongings. A poorly packed rucksack could cost you your life or make your life miserable. If you packed too much the weight would kill you, too little and you could go hungry, thirsty, die, or have a miserable social life.

¹ A piss tube was an opened pipe at each end with half buried in the ground at a 45 degree angle. The exposed topside of the tube was covered with a fine screen coated with lime. One would walk up to the tube and urinate into the screen.



The rucksack was a large khaki nylon sack that was mounted on a light aluminum frame with two shoulder straps. The straps had quick-release tabs that could be released with a tug that would allow the rucksack to fall off the grunt's back in the case of an emergency. The straps went over your shoulders allowing the frame to distribute the weight in the sack over your back. There was a nylon web that went across the frame at the bottom that rested on and cushioned the kidney area of your back. The sack was about the size of a large grocery bag with a drawstring to close it, and a tie-down flap to protect it against the weather. On the outside of the sack, there were three smaller pouches attached, each with its' own tie-down flap. A typical rifleman had to carry the following mandatory munitions load:

- Three (3) bandoliers of rifle ammunition. Each bandolier contained seven (7) magazines, each containing 20 rounds. A bandolier was made out of light cloth and had seven pockets and a tie string. Most grunts tied two diagonally across their chest bandit style and another around their waist. I carried another two bandoliers in the outside pockets of the rucksack in reserve. Each bandolier weighed about 3 pounds.
- One one hundred round belt of M-60 ammunition. Again, this was usually carried diagonally across the chest bandit style. During a firefight, the M-60 ammunition was passed on to the squad machinegun. A belt weighed 7 pounds.
- Two hand grenades that were usually carried in an outside ruck pocket. In the dense jungle, there was little use for these items unless you ran across a bunker complex.

Carrying them on the outside of a ruck posed a hazard in that a vine could release the pin and trigger the grenade. Each weighed one pound.

- For signaling aircraft each grunt carried two colored smoke grenades weighing one pound each.
- For night security each man carried one trip flare. At night trip flares were taped to the lower trunk of a tree or shrub. A wire was attached to the pin of the flare and another tree. If an enemy hit the wire at night the flare would ignite and illuminate the area. A flare weighed one pound.
- Each man either carried a LAW antitank weapon that was good for use against bunkers or a claymore mine for night security or ambushes. The LAW was a single shot rocket-propelled grenade capable of penetrating 12 inches of armor plate. The claymore was a book-sized mine that was curved. The unit was filled with small ball bearings propelled with a plastic explosive (C-4). When triggered hundreds of ball bearings would explode in the enemy's direction. The unit was triggered by an electric trigger and blasting cap. Sometimes, depending on the mission, a grunt would be assigned to carry an entrenching tool (small shovel) rather than the other two items. Each unit weighed about two pounds.
- Each man carried two two-pound bars of plastic explosives (C-4) for blowing LZs or enemy bunker complexes. It was also good for cooking food. A little piece could be lighted and would burn like Sterno. If you tried to stamp it out it would explode. If you ingested a little, it would create convulsions and hallucinations. The army frowned against its use as a cooking utensil, but we all used it. The total weight was 4 pounds.
- Last but not least was the M-16 rifle that fired high-powered 22 caliber rounds. It weighed only 5 pounds. The total weight of the required munitions load, including the rifle, was 32 pounds. I carried 38 pounds.

The non-munitions requirements were:

- Each man had to carry a minimum of 7 quarts of water. I usually carried 9 quarts. One flexible blivet would hold four quarts, but was difficult to get and was prone to leak. The rest was carried in plastic one-quart canteens. The total weight of the 9 quarts was about 20 pounds.
- One combat dressing that consisted of a Kotex pad with two gauze strips sewn to each end for tying the dressing to a wound. The dressing was packaged in a plastic bag that could be used to seal a "sucking chest wound". When a bullet penetrated the chest air would leak out of the cavity making it difficult or impossible to breathe. The plastic would be placed over the hole and the dressing would hold it in place. Sometimes the exit hole would be larger than the plastic package and a rubber poncho would have to be used.
- Everybody was required to carry 4 days of food consisting of a case of C-Rations containing 12 boxes of assorted meals in sealed cans. Each box would contain one can filled with the main course such as "Ham & Lima Beans". Another can would contain crackers and spreadable cheese, and dessert of a round wafer of a "Nestle's Crunch

Bar". The box would contain a plastic sealed package containing a plastic spoon, knife, and fork. Last but not least each box contained a small package of toilet tissue to allow you to clean up properly after the final deposit of the meal. Sometimes "LERP" rations were available. These were freeze-dried foods that were activated by adding a half cup of boiling water. They were good only if water supplies were in good supply. The meals made you very thirsty afterward. It wasn't a good meal during the dry season if you were in the mountains. The total weight of the case of C-Rations would be about 20 pounds.

- Each man was required to carry an ammo belt with a canteen holder and an ammo pouch to carry the battle dressing. Total weight was about one pound. The total weight of the minimum requirement was 73 pounds. I carried 79 pounds.

The non-required load was:

- Each man carried a bed roll which included a rubber poncho, hammock, and a poncho liner. The poncho included a hood and was normally used to put on the ground to separate the grunt from the damp ground, while the light comforter poncho liner was used as a bed cover. In the case of rain, the grunt could roll up in both to try to stay dry. The hammock could be used if the enemy activity was not too intense. The poncho could be also used as a small pup tent on the ground or over the hammock. The total weight was about two pounds.
- Personal effects were usually carried in an M-60 ammo box that was made out of steel and had a hinged sealed cover that was secured by a lever clip that made the container waterproof. Inside the container envelopes, stationary, camera, film, magazines, and books could be stored safely. Total weight averaged about 5 pounds.

The total weight of the average rifleman was about 82 pounds including the 2-pound rucksack. I carried 88 pounds. Depending on the job of the grunt and his size the rucksack varied. The rifleman probably had the lightest pack.