

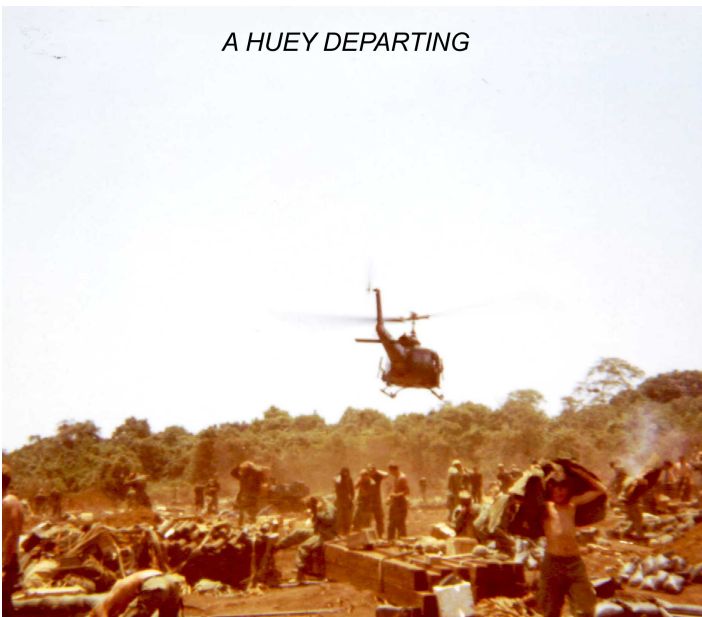
6 - BUILDING FSB RACQUEL

Located in the Central Highlands in a valley below FSB Welch
They were named after Raquel Welch



Racquel Welch in Vietnam with Bob Hope's USO Show around 1967

FSB Raquel was located in a valley overlooked by another hill to the southwest. On that hill, another unit was building FB Welch. I didn't know the location of our new site and really didn't care. I had hoped to be able to get some rest after carrying a hundred-pound pack in ninety-degree plus heat for two weeks, without a change of uniform.



A HUEY DEPARTING

As grunts, we were only issued one uniform every two weeks if the resupply was on time. A uniform consisted of one shirt, one pair of pants, and one pair of socks. Wearing underwear was forbidden, although tee shirts were allowed. During that period you never removed your uniform, even while sleeping. Every morning I would usually take off my boots and switch socks from one foot to the other to prevent blisters. After a couple of days in the field, we really began to smell. Wearing underwear promoted the growth of fungus (skin disease) in a very delicate area. There was only one

mushroom I wanted in my pants. The only time we came close to washing was when crossing a river. Water was usually in short supply, so brushing one's teeth did not happen in the field.



We used our toothbrushes to keep our weapons clean. Official army rifle cleaning kits were scarce so we had to depend on innovative cleaning devices. The only thing in abundance was army rifle lubricant, which left a carbon residue after firing, I was told, and caused the M-16 to jam. We used WD-40, which we had our parents ship over from the states. One church group would also send us Care packages with WD-40 as well as other goodies. The only organization that did not recognize the need for a good lubricant was the army! I'm sure they'll get it right for the next war.

The firebase had been cleared out to form a 150-yard diameter circle. The artillery, composed of 105-mm howitzers, was set up

between a field of stumps, and bunkers were under construction. Upon our arrival, fresh uniforms were distributed to us, but no showers or water to wash with was available. At least my uniform smelled great.



We were assigned a portion of the firebase perimeter with no bunkers and were told to begin digging in. Digging in meant building bunkers. Once we found shovels, entrenching tools, and empty sandbags, we began digging. The soil wasn't too hard and had few rocks, but the temperature and humidity were over ninety. A clear sky and a burning sun magnified the heat. In a matter of hours, our fresh uniforms were dirtier than the uniforms we had just turned in! It was miserable and backbreaking work. The first day resulted in a large hole in the ground lined with filled sandbags and a pile of extra-filled sandbags that would be used for the roof the next day.

Four grunts were assigned to each bunker and each bunker had to post a guard. That meant that each one of us would have to pull a two and half hours shift on guard duty. Considering the amount of work during the day, there was not much time for sleep. My shift was in the middle of the night and I had all I could do to remain awake. A series of claymore mines and trip flares were set up in front of the bunkers at the edge of the jungle. Again, the night was pitch black so all you could do was listen for the enemy. The NVA was noted for disarming the trip flares and turning the claymore mines around to blast the grunts firing them. They would also send in sappers with satchel charges to blow up targets within the perimeter of the firebase. It was tough staring into the pitch-black night, listening for any potential threatening sound, and trying to stay awake while your body cried for sleep.

The next day found us cutting trees with machetes so that we could make a log roof for our bunker. Some engineers came along with a chainsaw and helped us cut the trees. What a God send! By lunch, we began laying the logs over the bunker.



Lunch consisted of opening a package of C-Rations and heating some water to make instant coffee. During lunch, a helicopter arrived with the mail. Our RTO was in charge of retrieving and sorting the mail. I last received mail on FSB Challenge over two weeks ago. I not only had mail but my first package from home. The package included a Kodak Instamatic camera, brownies, and other miscellaneous items. Pressed into the brownies were nip bottles of rum and whisky! The brownies were hard as a rock, but tasted great! The nips speak for themselves and helped soften the brownies. I shared with my squad and became instantaneously popular. I think the FNG label disappeared after

that package. I received the most packages of anybody in the squad, during my tour, and shared them liberally. My fellow grunts appreciated me, and I'd like to think covered my ass on missions. If I ended up in a body bag, the packages would end abruptly.

After mail call, we went back to our bunker to finish the roof and found a lifer captain inspecting our bunker construction. Evidently, he was the firebase bunker building inspector. He was there to tell us that our bunker did not meet army specifications! Beauracatic bullshit in the middle of nowhere! I lost my temper and made a scene that even impressed the LT. I asked to see the official army print or specification that he was referring to. He replied that he was the specification and that his judgment was supreme. I asked him what specific training made him the expert. Was he an engineer or an architect? He indignantly replied that he was

not only an ROTC graduate but possessed a four-year college degree in literature.



I was really wound up now, thanks to the rum and brownies. I informed him that he was conversing with an experienced BS in mechanical engineering who had been involved with the Apollo project. I was in the army, taking his bullshit because once we had landed the first man on the moon I had lost by deferment, hence my new profession, killing NVA, while designing bunkers in between missions. I would gladly scratch out my calculations for the design in the dirt and justify them to his superior, the grand poobah of bunkers. Otherwise, get out of our way! To my surprise he left, never to return. The last of my FNG label was gone. My bunker mates figured if I could fight half as good as I could talk, I'd earn myself the Congressional Medal of Honor.

We finished our bunker before dark and retired for the night. Again, it was very hard to stay awake. One of our men from the next bunker was caught asleep on guard duty, by the officer of the guard, the recently humiliated Captain Bunker Inspector. His ranting and raving woke up the entire firebase. He was threatening an instant court martial and a firing squad in the morning. Our company commander, also a captain, had to come over and calm the situation down. He promised proper punishment and began chewing out the soldier all over again. Captain Bunker finally went away. I shudder to think what my fate would be if I was the one caught sleeping. Whenever I felt sleepy on guard I would always think about Captain Bunker. As it turned out, Captain Bunker was a REMF (rear echelon mother f---er). This was a soldier who had never been in the field and would never be in the field because his military occupation (MOS) was non-combat. Their specialty was using their rank to try to harass and intimidate combat troops in between combat missions.

From the NY Times: On April 17, 1970, Apollo 13 splashed down safely in the Pacific after their failed mission.

At the White House, Johnny Cash was entertaining the President.

Nearby, in Cambodia, Cambodian government troops were reported to have slaughtered 100 Vietnamese Citizens

Hallelujah, the next morning our squad was chosen to go on a short-range patrol (SRP) near the firebase. I couldn't wait to get back into the jungle! Everybody else felt that way also. Our squad leader had other plans in mind also. Originally, I was frightened to go on my first mission, and now I couldn't wait to get out of the relatively secure firebase. This was a dramatic change in my psyche.



Just outside the perimeter was a rather large trail about 10 feet wide that was well used. We followed it very carefully for about a mile and then veered off the trail into the thick vegetation. About a hundred yards from the trail we ran into a blue line (stream) that was about ten feet wide and a foot deep. While half of the squad stood lookout, the half washed in the stream. I hadn't washed in over three weeks; I was in heaven. Our patrol took about four hours. We were very alert but made the patrol a leisurely walk in the park. We weren't in any hurry to return to the firebase and more REMFs. We returned without finding any sign of enemy activity. Getting back into the firebase without getting shot or blown up was the most frightening part of the patrol. It

could be tense being on perimeter guard in the middle of NVA country.

When we arrived back we were told that the Bangalore torpedoes were going to be blown. A Bangalore torpedo is a series of plastic pipes (8-10 feet long) that are screwed together and pushed into the jungle undergrowth. Sometimes up to ten sections can be inserted. The entire perimeter was penetrated with these torpedoes spaced about one hundred feet apart. While one half of the perimeter was blown, we retreated to the other half and took cover. They blew our side of the perimeter first. One of our guys from the second squad was asleep in a bunker next to the first detonation. What a wake-up call that was! He didn't get hurt, but couldn't hear for a couple of days.

Just before nightfall, I witnessed a rare confrontation between two grunts in our company. One participant was a grizzled veteran who had serious religious inclinations, especially when it came to telling the truth. The other participant was an FNG who had a habit of telling tall stories. Little did he know that he was getting on the veteran's nerves. In the middle of telling one of the FNG's tall tales the veteran exploded. He surprised the FNG and in one swift motion grabbed the FNG and threw him on the ground, placing his boot on his chest, while sticking the muzzle of his weapon down the FNG's throat. The weapon that was in the FNG's throat was loaded and on "rock'n'roll" (fully automatic fire). While the FNG was gagging on the muzzle, but being careful not to move, the veteran lectured him on the virtue of telling the truth. At the end of the sermon, the veteran asked the FNG if he would mend his ways or if

would he rather have his problem solved with a pull of the trigger. Needless to say, the FNG promised to walk the straight and narrow. In fact, I never heard him come close to an exaggeration again.

After about four days of details, no showers, or hot food, our vacation, or stand down as the army called it, was over. At this time, the first squad grenadier, the guy who carried the M-79 grenade launcher, wanted to pass on this weapon to an FNG and go back to being a rifleman. I was the FNG in the first squad and was assigned the M-79 for the next mission.



The M-79 was a short weapon that fired a 40mm (1-1/2") diameter grenade or buckshot round. The barrel was about 18" long and cracked open like an old single barrel shotgun. It fired one round at a time. Along with the M-79 came an ammo vest that carried the rounds in pockets in the front of the garment, just like an old hunter's shotgun vest.

When the grenade was fired, the round would rotate and arm itself after about fifty feet and explode on contact. This round was meant to be used in open areas. The buckshot round was a short-range weapon meant to spray out tiny pellets in the immediate area. There was a controversy over the most effective round to be used in the jungle. The army thought that the buckshot round was preferable in the jungle. The argument was then that a pump shotgun should be used instead since six rounds could be loaded and fired. My vest had a mixture of an equal amount of rounds. I had no idea what I was doing!

From the NY Times: April 18 – A recent Soviet census found the population to number 241.7 million people.

April 19 – Rumania threatens to withhold aid to the Soviets if they attack China.

April 21 – In New York, fugitive priest, Philip Berrigan, is held for pouring blood on draft files.

April 22 – The U.S. flies in a load of weapons to Trinidad to aid in quelling a revolt by black power groups.



We drew fresh rations which included:

one case of C-Rations, dated from the Korean War, containing 12 gourmet canned meals such as Ham & Lima Beans, Ham & Eggs Chopped, Turkey Loaf, Beefsteak, Pork Steak, etc., freshly chlorinated water to complement the meals, explosives, grenades, and ammo.

We were glad to leave. Our whole company was scheduled to leave as a group on foot. There would be no chopper insertion (CA) on this mission.