

Summary of telephone with Daniel Edward Elwood by Richard Killblane, 7 March 2003.

In December 1966, Dan Elwood enlisted at the age of 16 with his mother's permission as a 71N20, movement control movement specialist at Ft Eustis, VA. He went through the jungle training while there. The OPFOR wore black uniforms of the Vietcong. The training was held off post.

Dan arrived in Vietnam in August 1967 and was assigned to the 403rd Transportation Company at Cam Ranh Bay. He was initially assigned as a fork lift operator in SSG "Superman" Andrews' seven-man squad. Other members were Vernel "B" Balton, Tyde Wilinoton, Frank Jones, "Soup," and Smitty."

Andrews had his special squad and liked to volunteer for short range patrols. They patrolled the area north of the air base through the jungle and caves. They were usually out no longer than a week at time and once found a cache of weapons.

Andrews, SGM Roberts and their lieutenant told them that in time of war the 402nd and 403rd Transportation Companies were the only units that become forward support units. They were not true transportation companies. They left on an LST bound for Da Nang in December 1967.

At Da Nang, one squad was assigned to offload cargo. Dan had a driver's license and also drove 2 ½- and 5-ton trucks to Dong Ha. Sometimes he rode shotgun for other drivers.

After three days at Da Nang, they moved to Dong Ha. Andrews' squad was attached to provide security for those off loading cargo. They filled sand bags and built bunkers out of PSP. Some of the company lived in village hooches and others lived in tents. Dan's squad lived in the hooches.

After operations at Dong Ha got under way, Andrews sent Dan down in a 2 ½-ton truck driven by an Indian named Brown to a bare beach near Quang Tri. Andrew's squad was going to come down later to establish a place to live, accept and catalog the 403rd TC and 505th S&P's equipment that would arrive on an LST. The 403rd would become a part of the 159th Terminal Battalion's logistics-over-the-shore operations, known as Wunder Beach. Dan was supposed to take care of his unit's equipment in case it arrived before the main body.

When Brown dropped Dan off, there were only two Navy Seabees waiting on the beach, nothing else. They pointed over to a nearby village and warned, "Over there is an NVA R&R Center. Don't worry, if you don't mess with them, they won't mess with you." That did not help. At seventeen, Dan was young and scared. Nonetheless, they slept under ponchos, ran around in shorts and swam in the surf. The sea was beautiful clear water with giant manta rays.

Three days later a few hours before dark, a Navy vessel called the Seabees of its approach. They sighted it off shore and it fired 12 to 15 rounds to either clear or mark the perimeter of beach operation. Dan watched where the rounds landed. The Seabees said, "Hey, that is about a hundred yards this side of the grave yard." The vessel radioed that they were leaving and that the LST would arrive 11 hours later. The Seabees then seemed a little worried. It was then that Dan realized that the people in the village had not known that they were there. Now the NVA did.

Andrews' squad arrived in a truck at Dan's location about three hours before the LST. Someone had evidently notified the company of the scheduled arrival of the LST. The LST arrived around 9:00 or 10:30 in the morning. The LST ran as far up the beach as it could and grounded figuring that after it discharged its cargo, it would lighten the load so it could pull off. It was 30 to 50 yards from the waters edge. The first LST/LSU brought support troops to make sure the beach was secured; the equipment came on the second. Some BARCs offloaded and Andrew's squad offloaded equipment to build a pier and dredge a loading zone. The LST remained for about three days.

The next day the rest of the 403rd TC arrived. Everyone was busy getting the camp set up. The 14th Army Engineers marked out the location for bunkers with stakes with tape on the ends. Dan worked on the detail to filled sandbags and put them on the trucks. After five truck loads, Dan was put on a detail to build bunkers. It took about two weeks to build the walls and put up the roofs to the bunkers. Others dredged out the sand for the pier. At the same time the 2nd of the 18th Armored Cavalry had arrived. It set up barbed wire and put out claymore mines. The sand dunes marked the end of the beach operations and the perimeter defense was beyond.

They had not covered the roofs with three layers of sand bags when his squad was sent on patrol with the Cav to check out a report of enemy activity where the Navy rounds had landed. They did not reach the area, because someone called in close air support, which dropped white phosphorous on the grave yard. Dan remembered, "We were running toward the beach and they [VC] were running the other way." The next morning at about 10:15, a Cav chopper flew circles around the camp with a VC body hanging by a rope. The men yelled and waved. At the time and under the circumstances of combat they thought it was funny. After a few circles, the people in the helicopter cut the body loose and it fell to the ground.

Two days later, the Cav surround the village and opened fire and ended up firing into their own men. A number of them were wounded. One night the 2-12th Cav came in to relieve the 2-18th Cav. As they approached, they contacted the compound headquarters to alert them that they were half a mile from the beach. The headquarters did not have the radio frequency of the unit on perimeter and failed to inform them that the Cav was approaching. As the 2-12th came walking in, the perimeter opened fire on them. The 2-12th returned fire to let the perimeter know that they were friendly by the red colored tracers, since the enemy fired green tracers. However, the enemy sometimes fired captured weaponry and ammunition. Again unnecessary casualties were taken.

Since his squad was the last ones to finish their sandbag details, all the others were assigned cargo handling jobs. Andrews' squad was left over and the company did not have a transportation mission for them. By then everything began to fall into routine. He conducted convoy guard, mine sweeping, range patrol and beer detail.

“When we built our hooch, I was in Dong Ha. I was assigned to a bunker when I returned to the beach. Never the less, there was a extra round of sandbags on the inside around the bunker so that we had a chest high shelf. It also served as a rifle rest. As far as my foot locker. I had jungle fatigues that I had altered in Dong Ha to fit better, extra socks and an extra pair of boots. My shaving gear and tooth paste and things like that I kept in a small diddy-bag as I was always on the go. We had fold up cots. I kept nothing of value in my box because of thieves.”

“I was in what was called the ‘odd squad.’ We didn't have a job or a mission because we were the last to be assigned. We burned the outhouse cans, pulled a lot of guard duty, did mine sweeps, short range patrols, convoy driving, convoy guard, and body bag detail. This is a bad thing to remember but we used to roll up the sides of the mess tents and put the body bags outside so that the people would leave and we could get some good chow. Don't get me wrong, the base camp had good chow, it's just that we weren't there to get it very often.”

Everyone knew who to go to for trades. Some time near his birthday, 20 May, Dan borrowed a 503rd S&P vehicle and drove down to Da Nang. Where he picked up six pallets of their beer (for his company). They did not ask any questions and just assumed that he was from the 503rd. He then drove over to Hue to trade four pallets of beer for four pallets of steaks with people from Vinnel Corporation. He then gave two pallets of steaks to the Koreans and Vinnel people for armed escort back to Da Nang. From Da Nang, got on the highway and drove back to Wunder Beach. His company partied for two days.

The 2nd of the 5th Mechanized Infantry arrived sometime after that. They were new to the area and during their first night they bombed the 3rd Marine Division at Dong Ha. Dan had taken a 2 ½-ton truck into Dong Ha that day. During their second or third night, a 2-12th helicopter flew into their fire zone and they shot it out of the sky.

On one occasion Dan was wounded by an incoming mortar round. A piece of shrapnel hit him in he left knee and another cut him in the back. Friends took him to an Armored Personnel Carrier, where they sewed up his wounds and sent him back to duty. At that time the 3/5 Cav was at Wunder Beach.

The beach operation was due to end with the coming of the monsoon season. Dan was also short. He and other opened fire on anything that set off a flare on the perimeter. He did not take any chances. In the final days of Wunder Beach, the rains came. Everything was under water. It was waist deep almost to the perimeter or dunes. Trucks drove with water up over their tires. The rains ruined all their perishable foods and helicopters could

not fly in. They had to live off of C-Rations the rest of the time. The company asked Dan to extend but he was in a hurry to get home.

“As far as the racial problems went, one never knew what to expect. Everyone was billeted together in bunkers except the blacks. They liked to stay to themselves. I had a couple of good friends who were black, so they kept my young senile butt covered. Their names were Vernel Balton and Tyrone Odom.”

Dan, Vernel, and Ty walked into a copse of trees and saw three black dudes had just shot a Korean MP. Vernel told the others to run, “I’ll hold them. I’m black and they won’t mess with me.” He later came back to the barracks and told his friends, “Dudes, we don’t want to be in the barracks tonight.” They left and went to the airport. That was the night of the Black Panther uprising at Da Nang in 1968. Dan felt “B’ saved my butt.”