

Greetings from Charlie

24 April 1972

At 1 a.m. I was sound asleep in my barracks at DaNang Air Base. A sudden thunder clap in the night changed that to instant reaction. My roommates and I rolled out of our beds screaming "rocket attack" for the unlikely occurrence that someone had slept through the sounds of incoming 122mm rockets.

A Russian made 122mm rocket weighs 102 pounds, its warhead 42 pounds, 14 pounds of TNT and 28 pounds of shrapnel. Boasting a range of six miles, with a booster 11 miles, the rockets are launched from the rice paddies and hills surrounding DaNang. The Airmen assigned here have dubbed DaNang "Rocket City" because our base was the recipient of more nocturnal visits from these Communist rockets than any other air base in Vietnam. On April 24th DaNang was hit twice, once in the early morning and again that night.

Thirteen rockets had hit DaNang this time. One struck near our modular aircrew barracks. A flash of light, a tremendous boom, and shaking walls launched me from my bed. It was a hell of a way to wake up and I quickly got into my flack vest and helmet. I was already on the ground floor, so I remained on the floor waiting to see if we were going to get more incoming rounds.

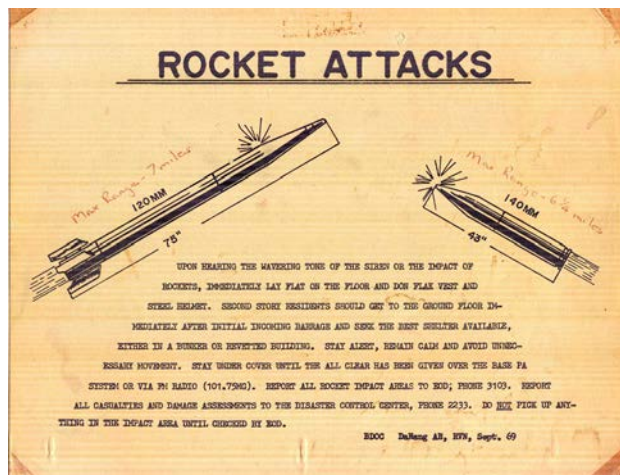
By the time I hit the floor, the base siren was already wailing. The siren speakers also sent out a voice warning. *"This is the 366th command post DaNang is under attack. Take cover."*

Every night, we positioned our flack vest and helmet on the floor under or next to our bed. We also made sure that a medical kit was also nearby. Most of us also had some type of small arms that we kept with us in case infiltrators got on base with the intention of killing us. I kept a .45 pistol and half a dozen magazines of ammo under my bed. Most men on DaNang were not armed by order of the base commander. His policy was that only the security police would be armed. He was afraid that untrained personnel would cause more friendly casualties than enemy. Fortunately for us, our job allowed us easy access to almost any type pistol or rifle. We had quite a collection of weapons given to us by survivors we picked up on rescue missions. They just told their supervisors that their weapons were lost in combat and that was all anyone wanted to hear.

When we went a few minutes without hearing additional explosions, everyone got up and checked out our area to make sure that no one was wounded or killed by the rockets. Tonight we were lucky and there were no injuries in the Jolly Green enlisted aircrew barracks. After we were sure no one was hurt, we went outside to see if anyone near our barracks needed help.

By 2 a.m. we PJs were all back asleep because we needed to get up early in the morning for PT or Jolly Alert duties. I had already been at DaNang over a year by now so I was as used to these attacks as one could become. That was also the reason for my having a room on the ground floor of the barracks. The new guys did not know any better when they arrived and were glad to take a room on the second floor. After their first rocket attack, they suddenly became acutely aware that the higher off the ground you were, the more vulnerable you were to shrapnel. The shrapnel exploded upwards in a 45° angled pattern. If you were on the ground you were relatively safe. If you were standing or above 6 feet from the ground, you were in the area the shrapnel and debris flew around in.

The 122mm rocket is a simple weapon. It is usually transported by two men. One man carried the motor, while another the fuse and warhead. It was fired electrically. The ideal launching device is a rocket launcher, but crossed sticks or a mound of sand would work. The rocket was aimed with an optical sighting device, also Russian manufactured.



The flight line was always a primary target of the rockets. If the enemy was lucky, they could hit and destroy an aircraft. If they missed the aircraft, then the rockets had a fair chance of landing on the runway or nearby barracks or support facilities. Charlie thought that would slow down aircraft operations. But the base had a "Fast Fix Team" that quickly repaired taxiways and runways.