

Recollections of a Da Nang K-9 Handler, 1965-66

K-9 posts in combat zones are perilous for K-9 Teams in all military services. U. S. Air Force K-9 posts at Da Nang Air Base in 1965-66 included several runway posts, bomb storage area, napalm storage area, the Vietnamese Morgue along the Marine perimeter, an isolated and remote munitions bunker and other strategic locations. Every post had its own perils, even the seemingly secure runway posts.

One of the first things K-9 Handlers learn about runway posts is to avoid walking along the runway. Silhouetted against the flight line lights and runway lights, the K-9 Team's location can easily be revealed to an intruder, in addition to the Team becoming an excellent target. The farther from the runway the K-9 Team is positioned, the better its concealment. Someone breaking the runway lights could be observed several thousand feet away by a K-9 Team and would be perceived as a security threat. At Da Nang in 1965, that person might have been Security Police Commander, Lt. Col. Phillips, on an exercise to penetrate your K-9 post, or it might have been a VC on the same mission. Either way, if you had missed him, you would wish you hadn't. K-9's senses are at their best when the K-9 Team is isolated and concealed by darkness. Concealment was a critical issue for K-9 Teams at Da Nang, but when the night was suddenly lit up with flares due to a threat, the only option for concealment might have been lying flat on the ground or in the mud during the monsoon season.

Jet afterburner noise was another good reason to stay away from the runway if Handlers were to have any hearing left. In 1965, Air Base policies forbid K-9 Handlers from wearing earplugs. As one could imagine, jet afterburner noise was also a big problem for the K-9's hearing.

Runway posts are hazardous because aircraft tend to crash a lot in combat zones, for various reasons. In 1965-66 Da Nang was one of the busiest airports in the world with combat missions taking off almost continuously around the clock. Aircraft landed every day with in-flight emergencies caused by bullets, flack damage, hung bombs, mechanical problems or injured crew. The tower would advise K-9 Teams by radio of incoming aircraft emergencies so they could move as far back from the runway as possible for their own safety. Aircraft would also unexpectedly crash on takeoff creating dangerous situations for nearby K-9 Teams. The most tragic and frightening aircraft crash I have ever seen happened on Jan 16, 1966 when a B-57 Canberra tactical bomber crashed on takeoff with a full

load of wing and bombay ordinance and 20 mm cannon rounds. Tragically, both the pilot and co-pilot were killed by the explosion of a 500-pound bomb during that crash. That crash is documented by my good friend and fellow K-9 Handler Don Poss. Don, who is currently Webmaster of the Vietnam Security Police Association (VSPA.com), witnessed the crash that night as I did. In Don's article, "B57 Canberra Mayday...Mayday...", found in the Website <http://www.war-stories.com/dab-poss-b57-01-1966.htm>, he reveals details of the crash and his communications with the pilots family members many years later.

At Da Nang, even traveling to and from post could be dangerous at times. One night during the monsoon season, we were in the back of the K-9 truck on our way to post. We were following a flatbed truck loaded with bombs that was traveling around the end of the flight line. The road was muddy, full of deep ruts and barely drivable. Our driver could hardly see the ordinance truck ahead of us in the heavy monsoon rains. All of a sudden, the truck hit a big bump. As I looked out the back of the truck, I saw that we had just run over a 250 lb bomb that had rolled off the flat bed truck ahead of us.

Sometimes K-9 Teams create their own perils. On the runway posts, K-9 Teams were dropped off in two groups, one group on each end of the runway. After getting radio clearance from the tower, they would cross the runway and then fan out to their assigned posts. The sacred rule, for safety reasons, was never to cross the runway without clearance from the tower. As K-9 staffing increased along with the VC threats, we began working overlapping shifts. The early K-9 shift worked 6pm-2am and the late shift worked 10pm-6 am. That gave the Air Base overlapping K-9 coverage during the dreaded hours of 10pm-2am. K-9 Handlers, being the notoriously independent people they are, didn't always follow the sacred rule about crossing the runway. K-9 Handlers who got off at 2am were in a hurry to get back to their Huts and get a couple of hours of sleep before they had to get up at daylight to work at rebuilding the kennels. So, being in a hurry to get off post, they would sometimes cross the runway without waiting for clearance from the tower. There is no thrill like being half way across a runway at the 1,000-foot marker and hearing the twin afterburners of an F-4 Phantom kick in and seeing the jet headed directly for you. It's amazing how fast a K-9 Handler can run with an M16 in one hand, a K-9 leash in the other, and a web belt loaded with a 38 Special, lots of bullets, a flare, canteen, knife, radio and rain gear. A similar scene would sometimes occur at the other end of the runway. Incoming aircraft at Da Nang would usually land at night without lights to avoid ground fire on their approach

to the Air Base. With no lights as points of reference, and with little noise on their glide path coming in, judging a planes distance away at night was almost impossible. The second biggest thrill in an unauthorized runway crossing is looking up to see an F4 Phantom, F8 Crusader or maybe a C130 about to come down over you. If our old SP Commander, Lt. Col. Phillips, is still out there, I never broke that rule, Sir!

Finally, I guess the worst of all perils is the wrath of an angry K-9 Handler. As my good friends Gary Knutson, Herb Norfolk, Byron Martin, Don Poss and Paul Giulaini may recall, I probably hold the Da Nang Air Base record for getting the K-9 truck stuck in the mud during the monsoon season while taking K-9 Teams to and from post. I think I would rather face a Cong with an AK47 than face an angry K-9 Handler getting off post late. My belated and heart felt apologies to my fellow K-9 Handles for those long delays in the miserable monsoon rains, in the middle of the night, while we waited to get our K-9 truck towed out of the mud. On second thought, since I'm now out of shooting range from you guys; guess what, I just did it for fun!

Don Jones