

MEMORIAL DAY 2017

REMEMBERING A SOLDIER WHO DIED ON FSB TOMAHAWK SOUTH VIETNAM 1970

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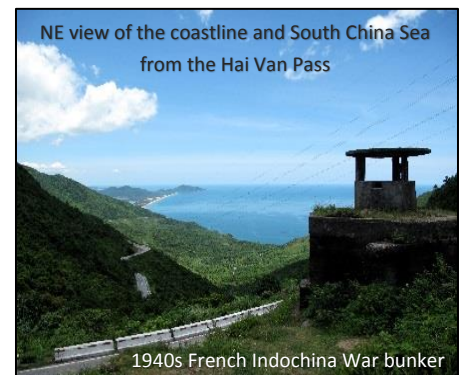
Fire Support Base (FSB) Tomahawk, Hill 132, in the Phu Loc District near the southeast border of Thau Thien Province, was operated by the 101st Airborne Division. Located beside *Highway 1*, the main north-south



highway in South Vietnam, Tomahawk was 2/3rd of a mile north of the *Hai Van Pass*. Looking east was a view of the South China Sea and to the west was a vast expanse of jungle covered terrain extending 35 miles to the Annamite Mountains and the fearsome A Shau Valley. The Hai Van Pass had major strategic importance as it formed a natural barrier to any land army attempting to move between the northern and central regions of South Vietnam. *Hai Van* means "Sea Cloud", referring to mist that rises from the Sea and drifts into the Pass reducing visibility.

Tomahawk's elevation was 400ft but it was surrounded by much higher hills to the west, making it vulnerable to attack and difficult to defend from the west side. Also vulnerable to attack was Highway 1 where it twisted and turned through the east end of the Hai Van Pass. Highway 1 was a crucial supply route for the American war effort and FSB Tomahawk was deliberately positioned to protect it.

After 7 months as a field medic with Alpha Company 2/501st I was reassigned. Since March, Alpha lost 23 KIA, 1 MIA and countless wounded. Those who survived were bonded together by brutal combat and memories of our fallen brothers. My new assignment was to help run the Medical Aid Stations on several fire support bases operated by 101st Airborne Division. One of those firebases was FSB Tomahawk. *In addition to providing basic and emergency medical services on Tomahawk, I provided MEDCAP services (Medical Civil Action Program) offering medical treatment to local Vietnamese as part of a pacification effort.* All US Firebases were prime targets for attacks by the NVA. Tomahawk was hit frequently, including a devastating assault on June 19th, 1969, killing 14 and wounding 50 Americans.



One black, rainy night, Tomahawk was slammed by a deadly NVA mortar attack from the western hills. *There is nothing more terrifying than incoming mortar rounds bombarding your position, you hope and pray one doesn't land on you.* The Americans retaliated with massive fire power from artillery and the perimeter fighting positions to fend off a ground assault. Then came the screams: "MEDIC! MEDIC!" The damage was horrific. *The haunting image of a soldier's body ripped apart, the blood, the rain, and the smell of explosives, is a recurring flashback for me.* Amidst the deafening chaos of the mortar attack, another medic applied field dressings to the gaping wounds while I started an IV in his right arm. *We took turns giving him mouth to mouth ... I remember gagging and fighting the urge to puke, my back aching.* The attack was over and the soldier lie dead. We placed him in a body bag. *Rest in peace brother.*

EPILOGUE: *I remember many details about this tragic event but regrettably, I cannot recall the soldier's name. Extreme sensory overload is common during combat. To survive the brutality and intensity you learn to suppress it, trust your training, ignore the pain and move forward. Suppressed traumatic war experiences along with survivor's guilt will hold you prisoner until you face those memories head on.*

RAISING AWARENESS OF THE VIETNAM EXPERIENCE

"Soon there'll be blood and many will die, mothers and fathers back home they will cry"

From the song "Sky Pilot" by Eric Burdon, 1968