

MACV Tower Account

Frank Doezema and the Attack on the MACV Compound, 31 January 1968

By Bob Robertson

This is an eyewitness account used with permission from our friend Bob Robertson from the night of January 31st, 1968 the first night of The Battle of Hue....

Michael and I were assigned to Marine Security Detachment MACV Advisory Team #3 in Hue RVN. Though we had seen both Frank and Bobby Hull around the Compound on numerous occasions we had never been formally introduced nor spoken at length with either one until we were brought together to go through what would prove to be a life changing ordeal for everyone involved. We had no way of knowing at the time but we were only going to know Frank for six hours of his life, but I can not think of any other type of situation one could go through where it would be possible to learn more quickly the make up of a mans character or what's in his heart than what the four of us would go through in the six hours to come. As a result I think there are probably things the four of us know about each other that many lifelong friends wouldn't know.

Michael's assigned post for that night 30-31 Jan. was post #2 which was the observation tower in the northeast corner of the compound. My duties were to insure that each man on watch was alert and familiar with all weapons on his post. Every man in the compound was assigned a post or specific assembly point to go to in case the compound came under attack. As Michael and I soon learned Frank and Bobby Hull had been assigned to the tower. When I began my rounds to check posts shortly past midnight on the 31st I stopped at the main gate, delivered coffee, checked on the men, and went on to post #2. I had just given Michael a cup of coffee and he only had time to burn his lips when the first rocket hit in the street between the main gate and the tower. Michael dropped his cup and was up the ladder, I dropped the coffee pot and was right behind him, we were in the tower before all the shrapnel from the first round had hit the ground, and more rounds started hitting all over the compound. I looked at my watch and the time was 15 minutes after midnight. That was the last time I would look at my watch until long after we had come down out of that tower. Everything that happened in the next six hours seemed to be happening for the most part while time was standing still, and the time was not a priority so all estimates of time are approximations.

Within the next ten minutes Frank came running through the exploding rocket and mortar rounds and climbed into the tower, followed shortly by Bobby Hull. The introductions were short, an exchange of names, as the next few minutes were busily spent preparing all weapons and carefully watching for the ground assault that was sure to come. The skies were completely overcast and the night was pitch black, so the only light we had initially was from the exploding rounds. We had a land line telephone so we started with the ability to contact other posts on the compound. We all soon learned that Michael had excellent night vision and recovery as he was the first to see the enemy troops moving toward us and the fire fight began. We could hear the rounds coming through the tower and see the tracers as they passed. Though I think military training is very important I don't think that any amount of training could have fully prepared us for what was coming. Though I had been exposed to rocket and mortar fire hitting very closely on numerous occasions before I hadn't heard anything like what we were going to hear.

Somewhere around 2:30 I heard the loudest noise I had ever heard in my life, and the four of us were knocked to the floor unconscious from the blast of the B40 rocket that had hit and blown off much of the roof of the tower. Being the first to regain consciousness the first thing I had to do was clear my head, figure out where I was and assess the situation we were in, and it was back to the wall immediately to return the incoming fire. It's hard to relate what goes through your head at a time like this, there are numerous things that you need to be concentrating on but you can only have one thought at a time. The most pressing matter was the enemy that were trying to get into our compound. I knew without help this would be very difficult, so while firing with one hand I reached out with the other grabbing at flak jackets and shaking. As I recall Frank was the first to get back up followed by Bobby and Michael, and they were right back up to the wall firing. I don't know how long we were unconscious but it could not have been more than a few seconds, as the enemy coming at us had not advanced more than a few yards in the time we were out. I know that anyone who witnessed the blast from the round hitting the tower would probably have thought that there was no way anyone could survive a hit like that, but they could not have known about all the forces at work here.

The most disconcerting thing for me at the time was the fact that we were totally deaf. Although we knew our weapons were firing and we could see the muzzle flashes, it was as though we had been placed in a sound proof booth, and all sound had been removed. It was about 15 to 20 minutes before I began to hear what sounded like very distant gunfire, and the hearing slowly began to return. When I had already gotten an acknowledgment from Frank and Bobby that they were okay and tried to question Michael he began to yell that he couldn't hear and it was evident that he was not in a good state. As I thought about our overall situation the thought came to me that even though we had all four been knocked out and round 1 was over, the fight was not. I began to laugh. Then Frank started to laugh, then Bobby. As Michael started to regain his hearing, the first thing he heard was the three of us laughing and he began to laugh too. (I didn't know until Michael told me 38 1/2 years later that the laughter was the only thing that kept him from flipping out on us and from that point he was able to stay focused.) We found out the land line was no longer working, and we began to hear someone from the bunker in back of the quarters behind the tower yelling for us to get out of there. A quick vote and it was unanimously decided that if they really wanted us out, let them come up and get us.

As I became more aware of the blood running down my back from the shrapnel in my head and arms I knew the others all had shrapnel wounds as well, but not one of them said a word other than they were okay. It was about this time that we began to get illumination from flares launched from the main gate thanks to the efforts of Joe Vasquez, from Marine Security, who lost part of his hand and was evacuated before we had a chance to thank him. I think it was while the first or second flare was burning that the big white goose came waddling and quacking up the road right through the exploding mortar rounds. With a quick glance back to see it, we had another quick laugh and kept firing.

At approximately 3:30 the second B40 hit the back side of the opening in the floor. It knocked us into the front sandbag wall and we dropped to the floor. The recovery time from that round probably took a little longer as more of that blast was contained by the sandbag walls all around. The head clearing didn't take as long that time as we were more familiar with what had just happened to us. Just as before I was firing with one hand to answer the incoming fire and stop the advance of enemy troops, and with the

other I was reaching for flak jackets to help revive the men. All three men were soon back up on the wall. As we could not yet hear, the questions about their condition were asked in silence and the answers were three nods that they were okay. If we had any new shrapnel wounds from that round it wasn't much, I think it was mostly cuts from the force of the blast.

I knew all three of these men were hurt, but they were not going to give up as long as they could get back up and fight. I also knew that if I had known in advance what we were going to have to go through, and had been given an opportunity to hand pick three men to go through it with that I would not have made one change.

Hearing started to return for me between 20 and 25 minutes after that round hit, and for the others soon after. There had been four more knockouts and round two was over, but the fight still was not. We had another good round of laughter and maintained our focus. We could now hear the demands from the bunker that we get down out of the tower. After another quick vote and again a unanimous decision, we were not ready to give up the vantage point we had, so if they wanted us out let them come up and get us.

When I saw Michael move to the left side of the tower with his rifle to his shoulder ready to start shooting toward the police station across the street, I grabbed his arm and questioned whether we really needed to get into a fire fight with the cops, but before he even responded we began to receive fire from the top of that building. It was evident that they had already overrun the police station. We now had to cover to the front and to the left. I would not doubt Michael's eyesight again.

I had by now come to realize that it was a great honor to be in the position I was in with these three men. Though it is impossible to know the thoughts in another mans head, I had no doubt that no matter what was racing through their minds, they did not allow anything to distract them from focusing on the reality of our situation, and doing whatever necessary to keep the forces coming at us from getting into the wire. It was not possible to count the number of times that all three men stood up exposing themselves to rounds coming through in order to get a better angle to fire from or launch a grenade. Thoughts had crossed my mind of many places I would rather have been, and even thoughts of just lying down and waiting for this to pass. But the reality was that that would only have made matters worse. If we didn't stop that attack right there the whole compound was in trouble.

It was instantly clear when the third round hit that it was different. Though I would not have thought it possible, the blast was louder and the flash was almost blinding. Before I lost consciousness I felt my body being thrown back from the front wall and slammed to the floor. When I regained consciousness the first image I had on my way back up to the wall was Frank and I knew that I could not try to even move him without hurting him more than he already was. I would have to have help for that. I knew the laughter in that tower was over. (When Michael and I spoke on the phone in Sept. one of the first things he asked me was if I remembered us all laughing together in the tower, and I laughed immediately. How could I have possibly forgotten that? But for 38 1/2 years those thoughts had not once entered my mind. I will not forget again. One of my most treasured memories will always be that no matter how dark the situation Frank, Michael, Bobby, and I were in seemed at the time, we still managed to share a few good laughs.) I couldn't get the .30 Cal. Machine Gun to fire so I picked up an M-16 and began firing, while reaching out for Michael and Bobby with my other hand. When they were

both back up and we were fairly confident we had stopped any advance toward us, we all three dropped back and stretched Frank out and made him as comfortable as possible under the circumstances. We used the field dressings we had to try to stop the bleeding, and got right back to the wall as the incoming rounds had begun to increase. Though we could not yet hear we had already begun to yell for a medic.

I don't know how long it had been since the third round hit, but I had started to regain my hearing when Frank regained consciousness. From the corner of my vision I saw him pushing himself up off the floor to try to get back up on the wall to help us. As severely wounded as he was he was not willing to give up. We turned back to lay him back down on the floor and I told him that we could handle whatever we had left to do. He said "It's pretty bad isn't it?" I told him we would get some help as soon as we could and he was going to be all right. He fell back into unconsciousness again and we concentrated on stopping the attack. We had no way of knowing how long they would keep coming.

When I heard Frank again he had asked if we could raise his legs up off the rough oak floor. Thankfully I do not remember who gave up their flak jacket, but we picked up his legs and stretched the flak jacket out under the lower half of his body. By now we knew that if another B40 hit, whatever physical protection we had would not stop it anyway. But we owed Frank whatever protection and comfort we could give him. Frank would not speak directly to the three of us again.

I don't know how much time passed, but when I heard Frank speaking again he was praying, not for himself but for help and protection for the three men up there with him. It took me many years to realize it, but he was not praying to some God way up in Heaven, but to the living God who was right there holding his hand, waiting to take him Home.

John 10:27 My sheep hear my voice, and I know them and they follow me:

John 10:28 And I give unto them eternal life, and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand.

John 10:29 My Father, which gave them me, is greater than all; and no man is able to pluck them out of My Father's Hand.

John 10:30 I and my Father are one.

Frank's prayers were being answered and the attack had started to slow. Bobby Hull dropped down out of the tower and went back into the compound to get a medic. He came back shortly with two medics that had brought up a basket that we carefully strapped Frank into, and we lowered him over the back wall of the tower to the ground. As we were now getting some covering fire we picked up the weapons and what ammo we had left and got down out of there.

Though it was eventually rebuilt and again used as a guard post after I left Hue in late Apr. '68, Michael nor I would ever go back up into that tower again. Nor did we even discuss what had happened up there until after the events that led us to get in touch with each other in Sept. '06. For all these years the accounts of what happened were based on misinformation. My sincere hope is that this letter helps to bring out the truth. For 15 years I suppose that I was angry with God that a good man like Frank had died and three hell raisers like Michael, Bobby, and I had walked away with minor wounds. After being saved and becoming a Christian in '83, I began to understand that Frank was

ready to go and we were not. God had some work to do on the three of us.

Psalm 124:7 Our soul is escaped as a bird out of the snare of the fowlers; the snare is broken and we are escaped.

Over the years I have heard many prayers, some very eloquent and some by people a lot smarter and who know a lot more about God and his ways than I do, but none have had any more impact on my life than the simple prayers of a brave young man who knew he was dying as he lay on the floor of an observation tower half way around the world from his family and friends. Frank Doezema Jr. was never alone in that tower. He would not have been alone if Michael, Bobby, and I had not even been there. Although Frank was the only one aware of it at the time, there weren't just four of us up there, there were five!

John 15:13 Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.

I look forward to the day when I will once again meet Frank.

Respectfully,

Bob

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