

## Tit for Tat

While operating out of Dong Tam during TET '68, I spent most of my down time in the 9<sup>th</sup> Div TOC monitoring the relief operation of Ben Tre City being conducted by a US infantry battalion task force. During this time, it was confirmed that many of the mortar rounds received within the Dong Tam installation were being fired from across the Mekong River within Kien Hoa Province. This resulted in searching for sites while I was airborne; however, no specific targets were detected during the week following TET.

This VC capability was indicative of the lack of combat operations in the northwest portion of the province. The province's RF/PF forces were not capable of ground operations in this area. There was only one 7<sup>th</sup> ARVN Div infantry battalion within Kien Hoa, and it was stationed in the Ba Tri District on the coast. The two ARVN artillery pieces at the Truc Giang AF were 155's and were always short of ammo; and as a result, were seldom given clearance to fire.

As an artilleryman, I was convinced that the US artillery at Dong Tam should be put to good use to engage targets detected during VRs in the Ham Long and Truc Giang districts. If a VC force was detected and clearance to fire was obtained, I could request a fire mission from Dong Tam Arty. The Dong Tam TOC was responsive to these requests since action was being taken against the VC's continuing ability to deliver mortar fire into Dong Tam from across the Mekong River.

Water traffic in this section of Kien Hoa was always a matter of intelligence interest. Large motorized sampans were to operate in and along the main river and be subject to surveillance and search by the patrol boats that operated in the vicinity of Dong Tam.

There was a large parallel canal that ran inside of the Kien Hoa side of the river that was off-limits to all large sampans. In late February, while conducting a VR in this area, three large sampans were travelling west bound on the canal. Two were low in the water with the cargo covered and the other had cargo and personnel onboard. I reported this sighting to the Kien Hoa TOC and was requested to attempt to halt the sampans. I dropped red smoke grenades on each side of the canal, but the boats increased their speed and continued. I went down for a lower pass and it appeared that two boats were loaded with 55 gal drums. With this report, the TOC gave permission to fire upon the boats. I made a machine gun run and two boats burst into flames and were beached bow-first into the side of the canal. The third sampan was also beached. I was satisfied that the boats would be destroyed because some of the drums had exploded. I reported the results to the TOC before departing the area for a landing at the airfield that was only a few minutes away.

As I shut down the aircraft and stepped out onto the ramp, a mortar round exploded on the runway. I decided to walk out to the runway to check the detonation point. As I reached the point, I heard another round leave the tube. The second round landed about thirty meters up the runway. I got up and ran to this second point to verify that it was the same as the first. The firing of a third round was heard, and it hit the runway closer to the parking ramp area. All three rounds had the same type tail fin stuck in the ground, which

were canted in a direct line to where the boats were still burning. The VC had offered a respectable response to the Bird Dog's attack.

The mortar rounds were reported to the TOC as I took off for another "look see" of the area. I did not find the mortar site, but did contact Dong Tam Arty and received a two-gun (three-volley) fire for effect mission in the vicinity of the burning boats. No other ordnance exchanges occurred.

This "tit for tat" episode was an example of the give and take in the Kien Hoa AO. The airfield's parking ramp had also been mortared on 25 Dec '67 resulting in one of the Swamp Fox aircraft being damaged.

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199<sup>th</sup> RAC, 1968