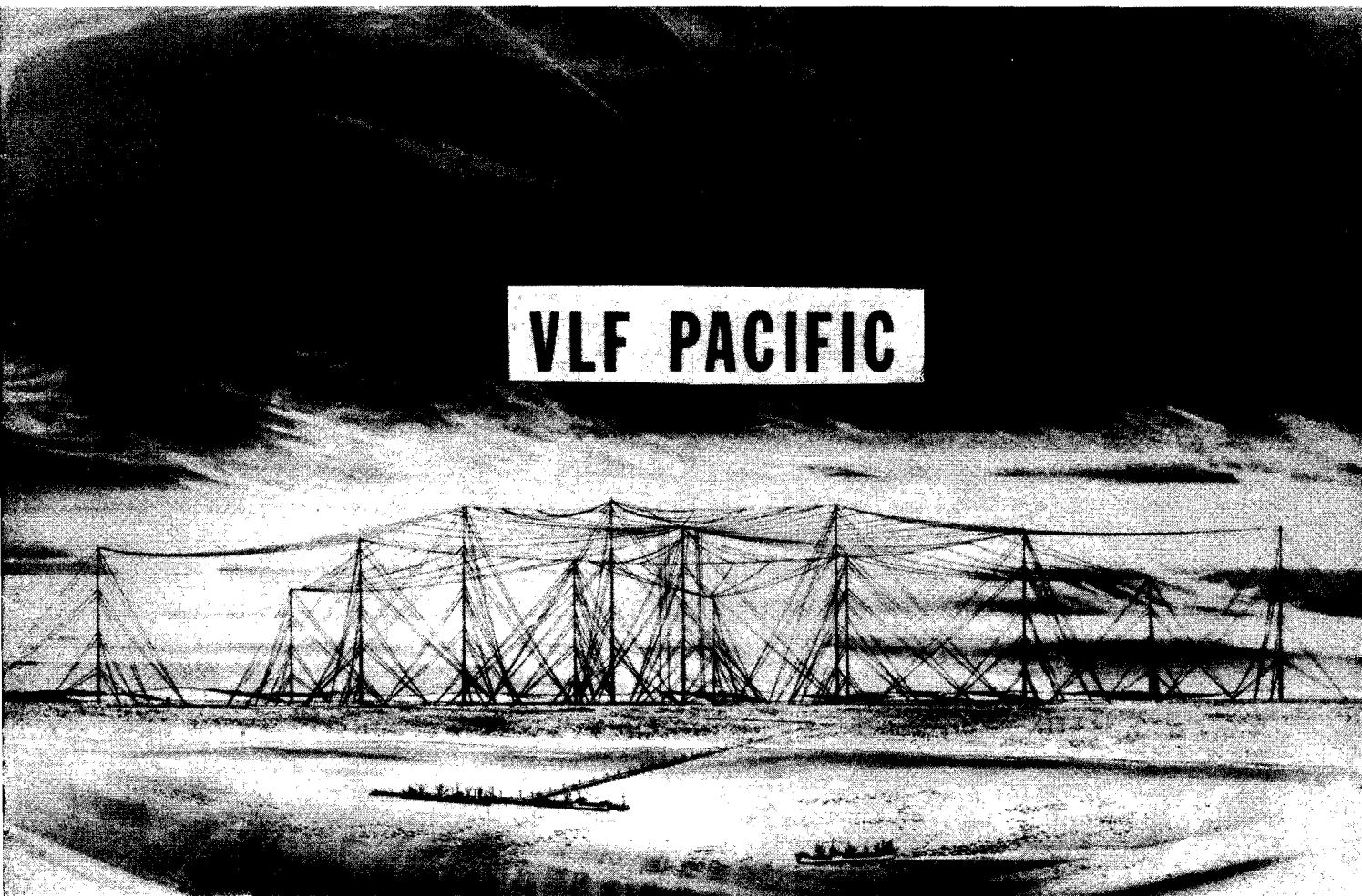


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# NAVY CIVIL ENGINEER

**VLF PACIFIC**



L36

NOVEMBER —  
DECEMBER  
1965



**BUREAU OF YARDS AND DOCKS**

# The Battle of Dong Xoai

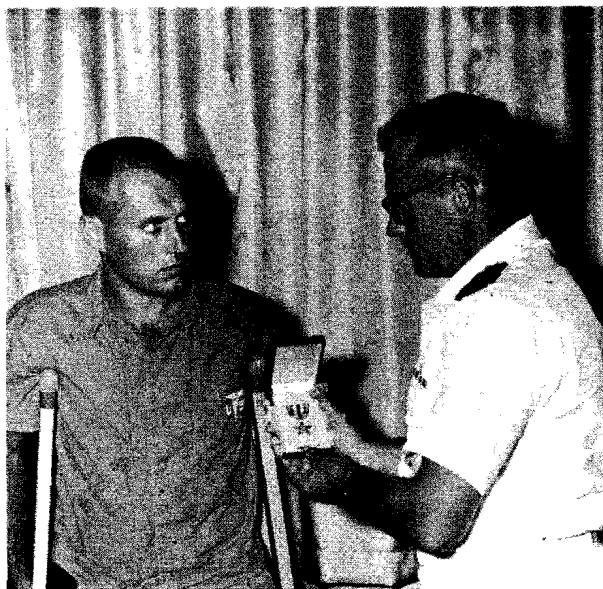
By LTJG Frank A. Peterlin, CEC, USNR

Shortly before midnight on the night of June 9, 1965, Seabee Team 1104, of which I was the Officer-in-Charge, was abruptly awakened in the Special Forces camp at Dong Xoai, Republic of Vietnam, by the sounds of incoming mortar and 57 mm recoilless rifle rounds as a Viet Cong Force, later estimated to be 1,500 to 2,000 strong, commenced one of the fiercest battles thus far in the Vietnam war.

In addition to myself and eight other Seabees, the Dong Xoai camp was occupied by eleven men of U. S. Army Special Forces "A" team 342, and a Vietnamese defense force of approximately 400 men.

Immediately after the start of the intense Viet Cong barrage the American and Vietnamese forces ran to assigned alert positions on the earth berm surrounding the camp. Some of the first mortar rounds hit buildings housing the camp's communication equipment and medical aid station, and buildings in which the Americans were sleeping, and several of the Seabees and Special Forces men were killed or wounded in the first moments of the attack.

The 20 Americans at Dong Xoai were divided between two areas of the L-shaped camp. Five Special Forces men, four Seabees, and I took up defensive positions in the north end of the camp. Four Seabees and four Special Forces men took up positions in the west end of the camp.



CDR William W. Barron, CEC, USN, presents the Silver Star to LTJG Frank A. Peterlin, CEC, USNR, Officer in Charge of Seabee Team 1104, for his gallant action during the attack at Dong Xoai.

The intense Viet Cong attacks on the camp, utilizing mortars, rocket launchers, recoilless rifles, machine guns, and small arms fire continued for three hours. About 0100 flare aircraft arrived over the camp and began dropping flares periodically, about 45 minutes later armed helicopters arrived and began bombing and strafing the areas north and west of the camp.

At about 0245, supported by an intense mortar barrage, recoilless rifles, machine guns, and small arms fire, and utilizing hand grenades and flame throwers, the Viet Cong launched an assault on the west berm of the north area of the camp.

As the Viet Cong overran this area of the camp, Seabees Marvin G. Shields, CMA3, and Lawrence W. Eyman, UTP2, and a Special Forces sergeant succeeded in carrying a badly wounded Special Forces Captain to the west end of the camp where they joined the remainder of the Americans.

Seabee William C. Hoover, SWF2, Special Forces Staff Sergeant D. C. Dedman and I were cut off from the remainder of the defenders and began a withdrawal to the east side of the camp as the Viet Cong came over the west berm. Both Hoover and Dedman had previously been wounded and at this time I was knocked down by an explosion and wounded in the right foot by a bullet. As we attempted to crawl through concertina wire on the east side of the camp I was separated from Hoover and Dedman. Both were later found dead.

Despite heavy fire I was able to continue my own escape, finally taking a position in an abandoned foxhole several hundred feet from the camp. Throughout the day and night of June 10, I remained in this position while Viet Cong on all sides returned fire on U. S. and Vietnamese aircraft which were bombing and strafing the area. At about 0730 on June 11, when the Viet Cong had finally withdrawn from the area, I emerged from the foxhole and was assisted to a rescue helicopter by a Vietnamese soldier.

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Early in June 1965 LTJG Peterlin and eight members of the team arrived at a new camp site at Dong Xoai, a district capital approximately sixty miles north of Saigon. Two members of the team were on leave and two were still at Ben Soi with the team's equipment, which had not yet been moved to Dong Xoai, when the attack described by LTJG Peterlin in the accompanying account began on June 9th.

As a result of their heroic conduct in the Dong Xoai battle the Commander in Chief, U. S. Pacific Fleet, has awarded LTJG Peterlin and Chief Petty Officer



Smoke rises from the shattered Special Forces Camp at Dong Xoai where Seabee Team 1104, U.S. Army Special Forces men, and Vietnamese Government Troops battled against overwhelming Viet Cong forces.

Even more remarkable than my own escape was that of Chief Petty Officer (EOC) Johnny R. McCully. Wounded by shrapnel and a .50 caliber bullet through his right shoulder, Chief McCully had been firing a machine gun and a recoilless rifle at the Viet Cong until the north area of the camp was overrun. Accompanied by two Vietnamese soldiers Chief McCully withdrew through Dong Xoai village. Using escape and evasion tactics he successfully avoided the over-running Viet Cong by hiding in a sawmill and nearby woods until the morning of June 11th, when the Viet Cong withdrew and he joined me at the rescue helicopter.

Shortly before the assault began on the north area of the camp in which I was located, all of the Americans in the west area of the camp had withdrawn into a District Headquarters building, which was subjected to an intense Viet Cong attack at about 0300.

Even though all of the Americans in the building were wounded, they successfully held off the attacking Viet Cong throughout the night and following morning. U. S. and Vietnamese aircraft arrived over the camp at daybreak. Utilizing a PRC-10 radio, their only undamaged communication, the defenders in the District Headquarters building directed highly effective air strikes against the Viet Cong attackers around the camp.

McCully the Silver Star Medal, Dale B. Brakken, BU1, James D. Wilson, CM1, Douglas M. Mattick, BUH2, James M. Keenan, HM2, and Lawrence W. Eyman, UTP2, were all awarded the Bronze Star with the Combat "V". All seven of the surviving team members were wounded in the battle and have been awarded the Purple Heart.

The two members of the Team killed in action at Dong Xoai, Marvin G. Shields, CMA3, and William C. Hoover, SWF2, were each posthumously awarded the Republic of Vietnam's Order of Gallantry with Palm and Military Merit Medal. U. S. awards for

## Killed in Action



William C. Hoover, SWF2



Marvin G. Shields, CMA3

Shortly after noon, with ammunition running low and the Viet Cong massing for an assault, the American defenders withdrew from the Headquarters building to a nearby 105 howitzer pit for a final stand. Soon afterward, while aircraft pounded the entire surrounding area with machine gun fire, bombs, rockets, and napalm, rescue helicopters came in through the Viet Cong fire and successfully evacuated the defenders at about 1400 on June 10th.

The 13 survivors of the determined stand in the District Headquarters building reported many examples of individual valor by both Seabees and Special Forces men, whose accurate fire accounted for numerous Viet Cong casualties.

No member of Seabee Team 1104 distinguished himself more than Marvin G. Shields, who was killed in action in the Dong Xoai battle. Despite shrapnel wounds suffered during the initial mortar attack on the north area of the camp, Shields fought effectively in the defense from the west berm, taking advantage of several lulls in the fighting to distribute ammunition to the other defenders.

When the north area was finally overrun about 0245 Shields, who by this time had been wounded again by a bullet in the face, assisted another man in carrying

*(Continued on next page)*

both men are still pending at this writing.

Two members of Seabee Team 1104, who were not present during the Dong Xoai attack, had previously been decorated as a result of an encounter with the Viet Cong in March, 1965, when a terrorist grenade was thrown into a truck in which team members were riding at Saigon. Richard S. Supczak, CEW3, who was credited with saving the lives of his team mates by throwing the grenade out of the truck before it exploded, was awarded the Bronze Star Medal. Supczak and John C. Klepler, EON2, who were both wounded, also received the Purple Heart.

## Seabee Team 1104



a badly wounded Special Forces captain to the District Headquarters building.

Continuing to fight effectively in the defense of the west area of the camp, Shields volunteered to assist Special Forces Second Lieutenant Charles Q. Williams in manning a 3.5 inch rocket launcher to knock out a Viet Cong machine gun position that was threatening the District Headquarters building. Returning from this successful mission Shields was mortally wounded by machine gun fire, and died shortly after being evacuated from Dong Xoai on the afternoon of June 10th.

Seabee Teams (previously called Seabee Technical Assistance Teams) of the Pacific Naval Construction Forces have been deploying to Southeast Asia since January 1963. Carefully selected from highly qualified personnel in the Pacific Mobile Construction Battalions, each team is composed of a junior officer of the Civil Engineer Corps as Officer in Charge and twelve petty officers: three equipment operators (EO); one utilitiesman (UT); two construction mechanics (CM); two builders (BU); one steelworker (SW); one construction electrician (CE); one engineering aid (EA); and one hospital corpsman (HM).

Each of the five Pacific MCB's provides about two Seabee Teams annually. After four months of special training at the Construction Battalion Base Unit, Port Hueneme, California, each team deploys to Southeast Asia for a period of about six to eight months.

Seabee Teams in Southeast Asia have been employed in civic action projects for the United States Operations Mission (USOM) in both Thailand and Vietnam, utilizing construction projects to train Thai and Vietnamese trainees in construction skills, and in construction work for the U. S. Army Special Forces in Vietnam.

Seabee Team 1104, made up of personnel from MCB ELEVEN, entered training at Port Hueneme in October 1964 and deployed to Vietnam in February 1965 to relieve Seabee Team 1004, which had been engaged in the construction of Special Forces "A." Team camps in remote areas of Vietnam.

By June 1, 1965 Seabee Team 1104 had completed construction of a Special Forces Camp at Ben Soi, RVN, which included barracks, a dispensary, a supply building, mess halls, latrines, ammunition bunkers, a defensive berm around the camp with machine gun bunkers and fighting holes, a helicopter pad, a water tower, and various other facilities.