



## 220th Aviation Company

(Surveillance Airplane Light)

(Reconnaissance Airplane)

(Utility Airplane)



"Catkillers" and Family, and all Friends and brothers in Arms, in memory of those who have served.

## The 231st Signal Detachment



### The Beginning — A 'Reader's Digest' Version: by Jim Sheets

Transcribed and edited by Dennis Currie, Assistant Editor

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SPECIALIST JAMES D. SHEETS

In May of 1963, I Graduated from High School. Vietnam was still background news for the day. By June of 1963 I had entered the US Army completing my basic training at Ft. Leonard Wood, Missouri, after which I was sent to Communications Center Crypto Maintenance at Fort Gordon, Georgia.

Prior to my tour in Vietnam, I was to experience several assignments in a relatively quick order, beginning with a tour in Peshawar, West Pakistan where I cross-trained in RF Receiver Maintenance from December 1963 through November 1964. In December of 1964 I transferred to the 68th Signal Detachment, at Fort Lewis, Washington, where I worked at a civilian avionics repair shop located at the airfield at Fort Lewis. Also while stationed there I won soldier of the month for February 1965. Finally, In March of 1965 I was reassigned to the 231st Signal Detachment where I cross-trained doing avionics depot level maintenance.

I deployed in late June as part of the advanced party to Phu Bai, South Vietnam. By July I received an MOS change and promotion, which included several rotations to various stations throughout South Vietnam, especially in I-Corps. From August 1966 to June 1967 I had moved from Phu Bai, to Nha Trang, on to An Khe and finally returning to Nha Trang working in avionics repair along the way.

Phu Bai and my tour with the 231st Signal Detachment was to create many memories that have been indelibly etched in my mind. Life at Phu Bai was actually a series of events all rolled into a seemingly timeless experience. Looking back over that time, over forty-five years ago, specific events come to mind that stand out in my tour. It was these experiences that punctuated my work-day and in some way relieved the drudgery of life in the shop. Let me explain:

## Our Command Organization:

- 2nd Lt Robert P Cavino, Commanding (Bronx NY, NY)
- SP5 George Roberts, TACAN Maintenance (Philadelphia Pa.)
- SP4 Stephen E. Nogle, Communications Maintenance Depot (Lewiston Idaho)
- SP4 James D. Sheets, Electronics Maintenance. Crypto (temp supply specialist) (Rural Iowa)
- SP4 Howard Crawford, Communications Maintenance Flight Line (Panama)
- PFC Bruce Wombel, Electronics Maintenance Depot (Delhart Texas). PFC Wombel got sick and was evacuated and hospitalized in country. He was about three months into his tour and was reassigned in country
- PFC James F. "Butch" Lovell (Eastern Pennsylvania)
- PFC Daniel L. Zimmerly, Electronics Maintenance Depot (Ridgefield, Washington). See photos.
- PFC Donald Scrima, Electronics Maintenance Flight Line (Scranton Pennsylvania)
- Staff Sergeant Carl Davis, arrived after about a month after we were deployed and operational at Phu Bai. After about six months into our tour he got amebic dysentery and was evacuated out of country.
- Staff Sergeant Carter (Colombia Ga.) arrived to take Sgt. Davis' slot.
- PFC John Trinnell arrived to take PFC Wombel's slot. (London England) John was a dependent from the United Kingdom, where his mother married a US Air Force Sergeant. He arrived in the US and was drafted into the Army at eighteen. Since he would receive US citizenship upon discharge he was happy with the arrangement.

These men were the original ten-man 231st Signal Detachment.

- PFC Peterson arrived to fill the slot for supply. (Florida)

There were several replacement technicians that arrived two or three weeks before I rotated about 5 August 1966. I do not remember their names. All of the original SP4s and PFCs received a promotion before rotation. Three men, Nogle, Sheets, and Crawford, received US Army Commendation medals for their work with the 231st Signal Detachment. PFC Zimmerly received a medal for his participation in an operation at Chu Lai.

### Rats:

When we first arrived at Phu Bai, and moved into our tents, we had a lot of rats. They appeared to come out of the drainage ditch at the northwest corner of our tent area. The tent being used for a mess hall supplies was invaded by them and the problem had to be dealt with. The first tent to get a "frame" with screen wire around it was the mess hall supplies tent. Next morning, the screen wire had been chewed through and more boxes chewed open. Some heavier screen wire patches were put over the holes of the original wire to halt the invasion, while someone went into Hue and purchased live capture rat traps. They were baited and set and the following morning the traps were full. The same thing for several more days, more traps were purchased and more rats were trapped and killed. This went on until their population was reduced. We knew the rat capture and killing was working because the rats we captured were getting smaller.

Rats continued to be the bane of our existence, as I nicked my chin while shaving one morning with my blue blade razor. I had a small scab on my chin for the day. The next morning my shaving scab was gone and the chin nick was slightly sore and pink. I checked in the mirror and saw the skin was pink on either side of the nick. I pressured the nick a bit and got it to bleed, my thought was that the nick had dirt in it and needed to bleed to clean it out. For the second day I had a small scab on my chin. That night I awoke from a slight disturbance and there on my chest was a rat. I swatted at it and it made its get away. I quickly got up, tucked in my mosquito net before going back to bed and routinely tucked in the mosquito net after that. That rat had licked the scab on my chin and as I told and retold this story about Phu Bai rats, the response was always the same—yuck. However, there were two men that lived in my tent who were medically evacuated with intestinal problems for no apparent reason and other men became sick while most of us did not. I have wondered for a lifetime about what part, if any, those rats played in making men sick.

### Corn Fritters:

The first couple of weeks or so we ate in the 3rd Radio Research Unit mess hall; however, after a week or so they ran low on food. So it became worse after a couple of days and what they had for all of us to eat was corn fritters with homemade sugar syrup. We were busy filling sand bags and having guard duty about every third day and we had to eat to sustain ourselves. We ate, corn fritters for breakfast, dinner, and supper for three or four consecutive days. Thank goodness, Sergeant Pablo Sandoval got our mess up and running and we were quickly eating powdered scrambled eggs, powdered milk, homemade bread used for French toast with sugar syrup and pancakes with more sugar syrup. That was some fine chow after those corn fritters. Lots of the little stuff, day to day, that you are able to deal with, is relative to what you have been eating. I tried a helping of corn fritters perhaps forty years later, and one bite was more than enough, confirming that they were not for me.

## **First Guard Duty:**

Sgt Ski took about five of us to the west of our compound where he placed the first man near the drainage ditch. We then walked at an outbound angle toward the airstrip and dropped off a man about every twenty yards. I was next to the last to have a post assigned, which was located in a slight swale, just enough to hide in when laying prone. This was I guess about ten PM. I stared into darkness for hours, occasionally smoking a cigarette when about two AM a squad of men walked out of the scrub brush perhaps fifty yards in front of my position, but coming at an angle so as to split the distance between me the next guard and me. Swish--pop, a hand held flare was fired two hundred or more feet into the air, everything is in black and white and only motion can be seen. When the flare went out, I locked a round into the chamber of my rifle, put extra ammo out, removed the safety and set the auto selector to rock and roll. Once again, swish—pop, and another flare was deployed. These guys are speaking in a foreign language and instinctively I drew a bead on one of them near the middle of their line. Whew, they had finally set off a flare of their own, so as to be seen, revealing that they were South Vietnamese coming in from a patrol. They were going to use part of the airstrip to walk on near the end of their patrol. In what can only be described as utter relief, I laid down my rifle and tried to get over the rush of adrenalin. I don't think they knew that we were there. Wow, I almost made a huge, mistake. It would have been less exciting if we had known of the patrol coming in before it arrived, however, no harm, no foul except for my white knuckles.

## **Hand Grenades:**

The 220th Aviation Company had a new "Top" when they arrived at Phu Bai [probably 1SGT Felix Alston]. He was an E-8 with service from WWII and Korea. His routine included a formation every morning that lasted just a couple of minutes. The morning formation was held on the dirt road that ran past the orderly room tent and just beyond the walkway to the orderly room. Next to the walk way was a burn barrel which the orderly room clerk used to burn the paper trash from the previous day. Also, at 7:30 AM the laundry girls were let onto the base and they arrived at our area about the time our morning formation was dismissed. About a week or two into this morning formation routine and as everyone was dismissed, the laundry girls had just passed, and someone hollered, "hand grenade." We split! Someone was taking trash to the burn barrel and saw several hand grenades at the bottom of the barrel. Captain [William] Schmale, thinking quickly, grabbed the drinking water bottle in the orderly room tent and dumped it into the burn barrel. The contents of the burn barrel were then spilled onto the ground. There were four or five American made hand grenades, each wrapped with an inch or so wide piece of US Army green tape, which was singed but still intact. Each piece of green tape held the handle of each grenade in place. The pins to the grenades had not been pulled so it was concluded that the heat of the fire was expected to set off the grenades. No one, to my knowledge was ever found to have dumped these grenades and morning formation was suspended indefinitely, especially since we all had our excitement for the day.

## **Weed Killer:**

From time to time, and mostly from boredom, I, along with other guys, would go for a walk around the general area. We were looking to see what the guys in other units were doing. Near our area was a place where a marine had a jeep with a pressure boom sprayer on the back end. The marine was refilling it, so we stopped to watch and talk about nothing in particular. He had just started to mix the herbicide, which

consisted of a box with a heavy plastic bag inside the box with a powder inside the bag. As the water level rose in the barrel he put in more of the herbicide powder with his hands then mixed it with a stick. When the water level was high enough to reach, he began mixing the herbicide into the water with his hand. One of us asked about touching the herbicide and he explained that the bad part of his job was to not adequately mix the powder and water, then having one of the spray nozzles plug up. He then had to remove the nozzle and blow it out with his mouth. We both walked on convinced that what he was doing, by coming into direct contact with the herbicide, was not the correct procedure. No one, except the bio-medical engineers, chemists and common sense knew of the long-term lethality of the herbicide.

### **Christmas Eve 1965:**

I drew guard duty at our hanger that Christmas Eve and about 10:00 PM it began a gentle rain. I went inside and listened to the rain pitter-patter on the metal roof and down the flight apron came a platoon of marines. They came into our area and most of the men lay down on the floor to sleep. The OIC and two or three sergeants stood in the office area smoking and talking quietly. Someone told me that they had a C-130 coming up from Da Nang and it was taking all of them to Okinawa for Christmas Dinner. They had been on a thirty-day patrol with no action. About an hour after the marines arrived a C-130 arrived, taxied to our hanger and the plane turned about a half turn and lowered the ramp, on go the interior lights and within a minute the marines were loaded and belted in. Up goes the ramp after turning off the interior lights, at which point the pilot taxied to the strip. After stopping for a few seconds before applying maximum power to the four turbo-props the C-130 barreled down the runway, lifted off, and they were on their way to Christmas dinner in Okinawa, 1965. Their flight time was about nine hours with plenty of time to catch up on missed sleep. I did not hear a single word about clearing their weapons—these guys knew how to handle the safety details.

### **Helicopter Crash:**

Several months into our tour there was a terrible CH-34 chopper crash from the Marine Evil Eye unit from the opposite end of the airfield. It carried pilot, copilot, crew chief and passengers. It crashed on the south edge of the apron and about a hundred yards from our van area. It lifted off and the tail dropped, coming down with the main rotor cutting through the tail section, resulting in a fire. All except one passenger got out; however, some crew and passengers were injured. The skin of this chopper was made of a magnesium alloy, which burns at a very high temperature. The heat from the burning chopper was so hot that unprotected people could get only about fifteen feet from it. The fire engine from the 220th arrived almost immediately after the crash but could do little to help. Only the engine, tail rotor drive shaft and springs from the seats remained after the fire. It was the hottest fire I have ever been near.

### **Last Day at Phu Bai:**

Last days are typically an anxious period of time that one hopes result in nothing happening. I was to be transferred to Nha Trang to a different support assignment, so a couple of new guys (newbies) and myself walked out to our vans so I could make one last check for anything I may have forgotten. It was after supper and nearing sundown we were talking about nothing special, and all the while standing next to the door window, I said, "Look at this." On the apron and not far from us were three marine privates that

appeared to be drunk to the point of staggering while they walked. One used his M-14 like a ball bat and swung it and hit the man next to him. The man that was hit went down much like a bowling pin. The three of us ran out with the intent to stop whatever was going on. The man that was not involved said he would get the gunny and took off running, while the one that swung his rifle insisted the injured man could get up. I told him to stand in front of me and as he did I instructed the two newbies to get a stretcher from the other side of the apron, and off they ran. Next, I knelt down beside the victim, who was on his back, gurgling when he tried to breath. I then turned him onto his side and he continued to gurgle. As I opened his mouth, out came some blood, including spit and such, but he continued to gurgle. I then placed my finger into his mouth and depressed the back of his tongue and out came more vomit, and blood—lots of vomit. His gurgling stopped and he could subsequently breathe without gurgling. The two newbies returned with a stretcher, and we put the injured man on the stretcher and on his side. I held his head on its side while the newbies carried him to the Navy medics next to our camp. He remained unconscious the entire time. As I relayed what I had seen and done while the doctor was examining him, his response was that the man would need an x-ray and was suffering from a broken jaw, dental injuries and may have other problems. An orderly told the marine that had swung his rifle to sit down and wait on the Marine MPs to get there. The following morning I walked over to the medics to inquire about the injured marine and found that he was medically evacuated the previous evening about an hour after arrival. Later that day, I left out (DEROS) of Phu Bai never hearing after that what became of the incident.

## Epilogue:

By 24 June 1967, I was discharge from US Army, only to return to Vietnam as a civilian contractor in August of 1967. At Qui Nhon, I performed avionics repair until July 1969. After returning to the States I enrolled into college at Iowa State University, where I received a Bachelor's Degree in Electrical Engineering. After graduating from college in February of 1974, I married my wife in March and by April of 1975 I had landed a job with the Westinghouse Defense Center in Glen Burnie, Maryland, where I worked for ten years. During that time, our eldest son was born, while I was working on the F-16 radar program.

In April of 1985 our family returned home to Iowa where I was employed with Rockwell Collins, working primarily in the Missile Intercept Program, at Cedar Rapids, Iowa. Over the next eleven years our second son was born and I finally retired in October of 2007. I currently spend my time reading and working on my farm. In addition, my wife is retired from Hamilton University where she taught many years. She also reads a lot and enjoys working on our farm.

All of the above is as I remember those events, between June of 1965 and through August of 1966.

SP5 James D. Sheets, RA 17652496

## ADDITIONAL PHOTOS, Daniel L. Zimmerly:

SP4 Daniel L. Zimmerly, a Regular Army Signal Corps enlisted man, served in the Electronics Maintenance area and was a native of Oregon. Attempts to contact Dan were unsuccessful until mid-2015 when a newspaper article revealed his death following a helicopter crash near Mount St. Helen. Attempts to contact with his family were successful and several photographs came to us from his former widow, Margaret. She was very cooperative and freely shared the tragic story of Dan and his older brother in their fated helicopter

flight in bad weather. Both had learned to fly after Dan's service with 231<sup>st</sup> Signal Detachment, 220<sup>th</sup> Aviation Company:

## Crash victims found

RANDLE, Wash. (AP) — A wrecked helicopter and the bodies of two men in it were recovered Sunday north of Mount St. Helens after a letup in the blizzard that prevented recovery following the crash Saturday.

The cause of the crash in the rugged Strawberry Mountain area near Ryan Lake is under investigation, said a Skamania County sheriff's deputy.

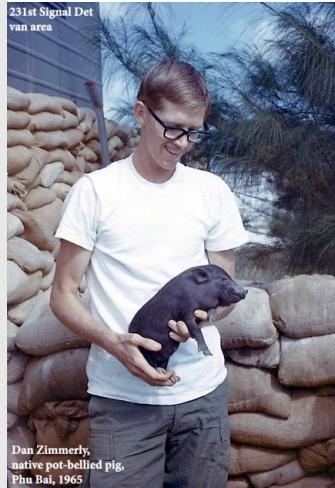
The victims were identified as David Allen McDougal, 27, Lovelock, Nev., and Jack G. Ruby, 36, Ketchum, Idaho, who were repossessing the helicopter for a Nevada firm.

Meanwhile, searchers looking for a helicopter in northwestern Oregon over the weekend found not one downed aircraft but two.

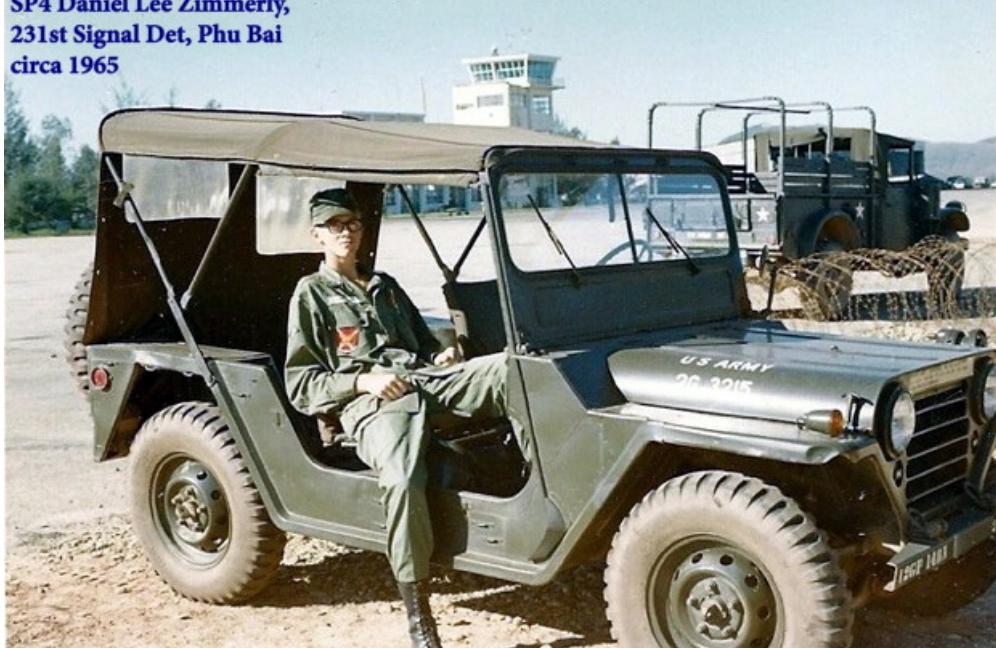
The craft — a helicopter missing since it left Ridgefield, Wash., Friday and a single-engine plane that disappeared in 1981 — were found 1½ miles apart 15 miles northwest of Portland.

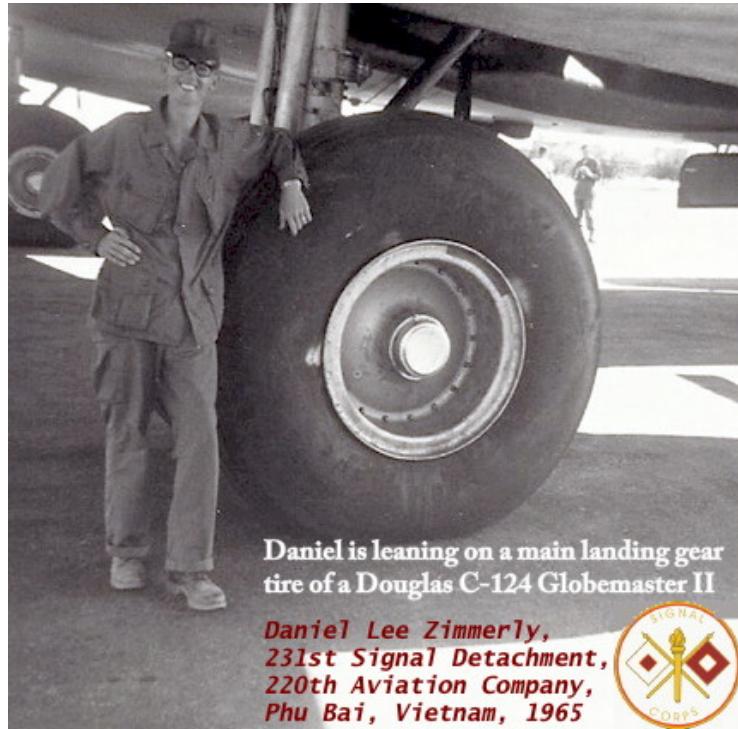
The Washington County sheriff's office identified the pilot and sole occupant of the fixed-wing craft as Don Rudebaugh, 28, who disappeared Feb. 9, 1981. The Multnomah County medical examiner's office identified the victims of the helicopter crash as Paul Zimmerly, 46, of Ridgefield, Wash., and his brother, Dan Zimmerly, 38, Vancouver, Wash.

Source: Spokane Chronicle-Dec 20, 1982



SP4 Daniel Lee Zimmerly,  
231st Signal Det, Phu Bai  
circa 1965



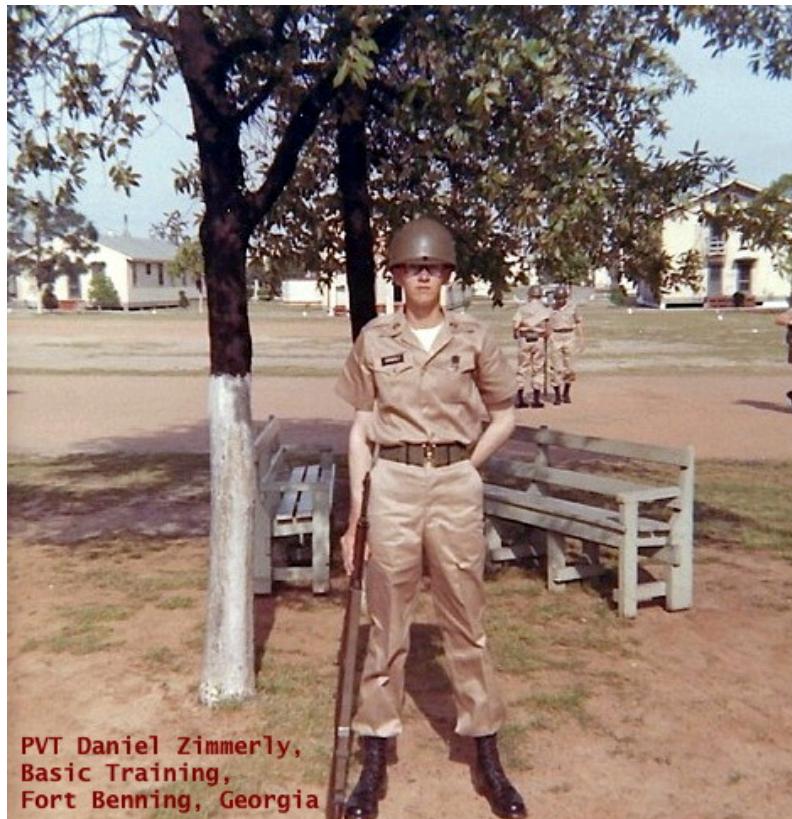


Daniel is leaning on a main landing gear tire of a Douglas C-124 Globemaster II

*Daniel Lee Zimmerly,  
231st Signal Detachment,  
220th Aviation Company,  
Phu Bai, Vietnam, 1965*



Before service in Vietnam:



*PVT Daniel Zimmerly,  
Basic Training,  
Fort Benning, Georgia*

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Donald M. Ricks, Editor, [www.catkillers.org](http://www.catkillers.org)