

**Gunfire on a Beach in Vietnam -
The Day I Decided What to Do With The Rest of My Life
Tom Dunne**

I suppose every day we live influences the rest of our days, but some experiences have more impact than others. This is the story of a most influential day for me – March 12, 1963 – the day I decided, at age 23, what I wanted to do with the rest of my life.

The events leading up to March 12th had begun several months before. In late 1962, planners at the U.S. Navy's Pacific Fleet headquarters in Pearl Harbor had determined that the Navy needed to update its intelligence on the locations of suitable beaches for potential future amphibious landings in South Vietnam. If the U.S. were to decide to land the Marines (which in fact we began doing in the Spring of 1965), where were the beaches that would lend themselves to that, taking into account the sea approaches, the beaches themselves and exits from the beaches into the hinterland? Three special operations units were given orders to work as a team in carrying out reconnaissance missions: The USS *Weiss*, Underwater Demolition Team (UDT) 11 and the 3rd Marine Reconnaissance Battalion.

Weiss was a high-speed transport – a destroyer escort that had been modified to carry and deliver UDTs, Marine Recon teams and other special operations units.



The USS Weiss, APD-135

UDTs: The primary mission of the Navy's Underwater Demolition Teams (predecessors of today's SEAL Teams) was to reconnoiter landing beaches and the waters just offshore, locating and demolishing any natural or enemy-planted obstacles that would interfere with landing craft.



Members of UDT-11



**Myself, on a reconnaissance
exercise with Royal Thai
Frogmen**

Marine Reconnaissance Teams: The primary mission of Marine Reconnaissance Teams is to conduct ground and amphibious reconnaissance, and to observe and report on enemy activity and other military intelligence.



A Marine Reconnaissance team landing on a beach

In the early 1960s the UDTs generally were responsible for reconnoitering beaches from the 3 ½ fathom (21 foot) curve offshore up to the high water mark, while the Marine Recon teams were responsible for the area extending from the high water mark into the hinterland.

In January of 1963 a meeting of senior U.S. military and diplomatic officials was held in Saigon to work out details of the mission. Intelligence reports indicated that the coastal areas were relatively quiet, although landing parties might encounter small arms or sniper fire from Viet Cong guerillas. The conferees recommended that armed landing craft be positioned off the beaches and that all hands carry small arms ashore for self-defense.

On February 18 *Weiss* got underway from the U.S. naval base in Subic Bay, Philippines en route to Vietnam. She carried four officers (including myself) and thirty men from UDT-11, as well as a detachment of about thirty men from the Third Marine Reconnaissance Battalion commanded by First Lieutenant Michael Donaldson.

Between February 21 and March 7 we reconnoitered five beaches along the coast of Vietnam – we “frogmen” surveying the beach and its approaches, and the Marines heading inland. At some point it became apparent to Lieutenant Donaldson that he was in need of a translator for those situations in which he wanted to communicate with the local civil defense forces – they did not speak English and the Marines did not speak Vietnamese. But a solution soon became apparent: since some of the locals spoke French (an inheritance from their recently-ended days as a colony of France) and I had studied French during my college years I offered to accompany the Marines and serve as translator. Problem solved.

On March 12 we commenced what would turn out to be our final mission. *Weiss* took station five miles southeast of the coastal village of Vinh Chau, Soc Trang Province. This area is near the mouth of the Mekong river, which has been carrying sediment into the South China Sea for millennia. That is a lot of sediment! The Mekong begins in Tibet, well over two thousand miles to the north and each year it carries thousands of tons of silt out to sea. As a result, the seafloor gradient is very gradual in the delta region, and the waters very shallow. This required the *Weiss* to come no closer than five miles to the shore. This shallow gradient would have a significant effect on our mission, as would the great tidal range of over ten feet. When the tide goes out in this area it really goes out, and strands small boats (and their occupants – in this

case us) for hours, before slowly returning.

The morning of the twelfth dawned hot and humid. Since we were due to depart the ship at dawn I was up at five a.m. I grabbed some breakfast, headed down to the armory to draw an M1 carbine and mustered on deck with the recon team. Shortly after sunrise *Weiss* lowered an LCPR (Landing Craft, Personnel, Ramp) into the water with our two rubber boats aboard. We all then climbed the net down the side of the ship and into the landing craft. I had asked Engineman Alva Ray Hale, a member of our UDT detachment, to accompany us as well. The outboard motors for our rubber boats tended to be temperamental, and Alva Ray was our insurance against being marooned at sea during the mission.



Troops climbing down from their mother ship into a landing craft



Special operations troops departing their mother ship in an LCPR, with their rubber boats stacked on the stern

We headed west, and about midway to the beach the water shallowed out. This was the end of the line for our LCPR. We hoisted our rubber boats over the side, attached our outboard motors, checked them out, and then we all climbed in, five of us in each boat. Alva Ray in our boat and his Marine counterpart in the other revved up the outboards and we continued our voyage towards the beach. As we got closer it became clear that this was a typical Mekong Delta beach – perfectly flat and about 100 yards deep, from the water’s edge to the treeline of scrub and pine. Several hundred yards offshore we began to stir up mud, so we stopped – another “end of the line”. It would be all wading from here; shortly our rubber boats would be high and dry as the tide continued to recede.



A typical Mekong Delta beach

Alva Ray stayed with the boats for security and we began our trek to the beach. The mud gradually changed into a mud-sand mix as we drew closer and finally the bottom turned sandy. We reached dry land at about eight o'clock and commenced moving inland. The day was sunny. There was a light breeze and the beach was deserted and peaceful – a good day for conducting a reconnaissance.

But we had taken only a few paces toward the treeline when suddenly the tropical silence was broken by a shocking sound: bap-bap-bap-bap-bap – We were being shot at by automatic weapons fire! We all instantly hit the deck and formed a rough beach defense perimeter, with our backs to the sea and our weapons aimed at the treeline a hundred yards or so to our front, where the firing was coming from.



Navy SEALS setting up a beach defense perimeter

I suppose that every young soldier, when considering the prospect of being in combat, wonders what their reaction will be – I certainly had. “Will I be brave?” “Will I be scared?” It never occurred to me what my actual reaction would be: I was angry. I was more than angry – I was furious. It was as though someone had reached out and slapped me across the face. What? This is Tom Dunne! Who the hell are you to do this? And my reaction was as instantaneous as my flash of fury: “Can we go get them, sir?” I called out to Lieutenant Donaldson. I expected him to say: “Let’s go!” but with his response he saved my life – and all of our lives. “No; we’re going to stay right here,” he shouted. And he was right. We were totally exposed – the beach was as flat as a table top, and there was nothing to hide behind. And the shooters were hidden in among the trees. We could not see them at all. It would have been suicide to attack.

On the other hand, there was nowhere to retreat. Our two rubber boats, guarded by Alva Ray, were several hundred yards behind us – stranded in the mud, and with the tide still going out. So we stayed right where we were – and the firing stopped! It slowly dawned on us that the shooters had not been firing at us, but over our heads. We were unscathed.

Since the tide would not be high enough for us to extract for several hours we settled in, lying there on our bellies, watching that treeline and grateful for each successive minute of silence.

As the sun proceeded across the sky an interesting thing began to happen: Right in front of my nose a tiny crab emerged from the sand, and began excavating its hole. It rolled the excavated sand into little balls, which slowly turned into a little fort of sand-balls around its hole. Then I noticed another and then another little sand crab doing the same thing. The whole beach was

alive with these little creatures, working merrily away! And when I flicked my fingers, poof! They would all disappear back into their little burrows. They were blithely going about their daily routine, unconcerned by our unfolding life-and-death situation. It was humbling. Here we were on the edge of possible annihilation, but the world was going on, just as before.



The little sand crabs at work

(YouTube video, “Micro World of Sand Crabs in Hua Hin Thailand”)

The sand crabs were the most exciting thing going for a while until one of the Marines called out: “Does anybody have any chow?” I did, since just before leaving the ship I had retrieved a pack of “Charms” candy from a box of rations and had tucked it into the breast pocket of my uniform. So I dug it out and with a hook-shot tossed it over to my hungry comrade. And instantly came that unwelcome sound again: “bap-bap-bap-bap-bap”. It didn’t take any great analysis for us to conclude that the folks in the treeline were ok with us as long as we didn’t make any funny moves – and to conclude that we would do well to comply.



The cause of enemy fire

So the sun continued its journey and the sand crabs continued their work – and in time the tide slowly began to come back in. After a while, our rubber boats began to bob in the water, and it became clear that it was now possible for us to make our departure. But how to do that, without alarming the shooters? For the second time that day I was about to experience the wisdom – and the courage – of Lieutenant Donaldson. “Gentlemen” he said, “here is what we are going to do: We are going to leave our weapons on the deck (Marine and Navy jargon for whatever you are standing on, or in this case lying on) and we are going to slowly stand up and turn our backs to these people. Then we are going to bend down, pick up our weapons, and walk back into the sea. Are you ready?” “Aye aye sir.” And with that, the Lieutenant did what all good leaders do: He stood up first. We followed. And our adversaries did not fire a single shot.

We made it out to the rubber boats, greeted Alva Ray, and turned the boats around. We walked them out into deeper water, climbed aboard, cranked up the outboards and headed back out to sea. The crew of the LCPR greeted us with the usual heckling that is the Navy way of welcome – we had been wasting the day sunbathing on the beach, etc. It was a happy journey back to

the *Weiss*, where we arrived at about four p.m. After cleaning up and enjoying dinner and ice cream we de-briefed the senior officers and turned in for a good night's sleep.

But I couldn't sleep. I kept turning over the events of the day in my mind, troubled by something that I could not quite put my finger on. And then it slowly dawned on me. Those people who in my moment of pure fury I had wanted to kill, were, as it turned out, not trying to kill us at all! They just wanted us to back off their beach and go away! In fact, if they had wanted to they could have killed us all in a heartbeat – they were invisible to us and we were totally exposed to them. We had been right in the palm of their hand and all they would have had to do was to close that hand and we would have been gone. In a way I could say that they saved our lives – and these were the people I had wanted to kill! The absurdity of the situation was overwhelming. Who were the good guys here? Who were the bad guys? I didn't know where to take my line of thinking, but I did come to one conclusion: The whole situation was stupid. There had to be better ways of dealing with differences than shooting at each other. And with that I fell asleep.

The Navy had had enough too. That night in Washington the Deputy Chief of Naval Operations for fleet operations read the report of the day's events from *Weiss*, and sent a message to the commander in chief of the Pacific Fleet in Pearl Harbor. In Washington, he observed, "little incidents sometimes assume big proportions" and he wondered whether *Weiss's* "potentially inflammable" activities were worth the effort. So from Pearl Harbor the next morning came a message: Terminate the reconnaissance missions. So we steamed north to the Saigon River and proceeded upriver to the capital city for a few days of R&R. Then it was back to Subic Bay.

But for me the journey had just begun. From that day on I knew that what I wanted to do was to: (1) Study why we humans use force and even violence to solve our problems, (2) To discover better ways than force and violence to solve problems, and (3) to teach and coach people in implementing those "better ways". As I will explain, It would take several years of false starts before I discovered how to do all that, but a corner had been turned: I had discovered my calling and I was on my way. I began planning what I would do once my commitment to the Navy would be up in two years. It seemed to me that what I was interested in would involve both politics and ethics, and so I should consider a course of study at a religious university in Washington, D.C. that had a good political science department. I applied for and was accepted in a master's degree program at Georgetown University's School of Government, and two years later, upon completion of my service, left San Diego and headed east.

In retrospect I can see that I was not alone. During the 1960s people in many places throughout the United States and western Europe began thinking similar thoughts, and developing theories and practices that were the beginnings of today's large and still-burgeoning field called "peacebuilding and conflict resolution". And today, sixty years later, I am grateful to be able to describe what I have learned during my career, and to summarize the development of the field as I see it. (Short summary: The field is doing fine; the required cultural change - for considering cooperative approaches to resolving conflicts as our option of first choice - is still in its infancy. (You can google "Tom Dunne - Waging Peace" for an overview.) I hope that learning about this

movement will be as encouraging to the next generation of peacebuilders as being a part of it has been gratifying to me.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS [To be moved to an appendix of the book containing footnotes for each chapter]

While the events of March 12, 1963 were seared into my memory, there were many details which I did not know about at the time or had since forgotten. The following people have generously helped me discover or reconstruct those details. Without their assistance I would be able to tell the story only in its broadest outlines. I am deeply grateful to them:

- Mr. Patrick Mooney, Visitor Services Chief, National Museum of the Marine Corps. Mr. Mooney listened to my story, took an interest in helping me gather more information about the event, and introduced me to a most helpful historian at the Marine Corps Historical Reference Branch;
- Ms. Annette Amerman, Historian, Marine Corps History Division, Historical Reference Branch. In the summer of 2013 I met with Ms. Amerman, described the incident to her and subsequently sent her a summary of the information that I had at that time. She researched the Marine Corps history files and sent to me additional information on the Marine Corps unit involved, the full name of its officer in charge, and information which allowed me to contact him all these years later;
- Mr. Michael Donaldson, the Marine Corps officer in charge of our reconnaissance team, which turned out to be the first Marine ground combat unit to go into Vietnam. In December of 2013 we spoke on the telephone for the first time in fifty years and recalled the events of March 12, 1963. Michael immediately agreed to read the draft manuscript of the story and to assist in making it accurate and complete. He is now a highly successful attorney in the entertainment industry in Beverly Hills, California. Years ago he left the world of litigation to practice transactional law – a move from the world of win-lose to the world of win-win. Of his career change Michael says: “With litigation, it’s . . . being in an adversarial position for all of your working day, as opposed to being in a constructive position . . . I find that a much better way to spend my life.” He has published two books on negotiating successful agreements with others. His belief is that “Our life’s work is being happy and free – satisfied with yourself and comfortable in your surroundings, day to day – moment to moment.”
- Mr. Fred Bagnall, who was Officer in Charge of the UDT-11 Western Pacific Detachment when the incident occurred, and my commanding officer. In a telephone conversation in 1999 Fred kindly recollected the incident from his point of view and clarified many of the details of that day;
- Mr. John Boyden, a good friend and a retired Commander, U.S. Navy. John helped me track down the ship’s logs of the U.S.S. *Weiss* in the National Archives, where we were disappointed to discover that the log for the date we were looking for was missing;
- Mr. James Hastings, former Director of Access Programs, U.S. National Archives. I met Jim in 2011, after he had retired from the Archives. He took an interest in my story

and with the assistance of one of his former colleagues at the Archives, Mr. Patrick Osborn, discovered that *Weiss's* logs for February and March of 1963, along with her 1962-1963 logs, were segregated by the Navy as "classified". As Mr. Osborn explained: "This is not terribly surprising, as underwater warfare was (and is) considered a sensitive subject." Upon receiving this information, Jim arranged to have the Navy declassify the two logs in question and made copies of the relevant log entries for me. They provided great detail on just what happened that day.

RESOURCES [To be moved to the same "footnotes" appendix at the end of the book]

- *SEALS – UDT/SEAL Operations in Vietnam*, by T.L. Bosiljevac, 1990, pages 20-21 (which erroneously states that the event involved UDT-12 rather than our detachment from UDT-11.);
- Volume II of *The U.S. Navy and the Vietnam Conflict*, Naval Historical Center, pages 182-183;
- Logs of the USS *Weiss*, APD-135 for February and March, 1963

Addendum, February, 2025: I have almost finished my book-in-progress, "Waging Peace", (of which this will be the first chapter) and hope to have it out by the end of the year. Meanwhile, here is an online piece that provides some information on my thinking and career:

<https://www.beyondintractability.org/affiliate/dunne-cps-resources-cover>

Best - Tom