



# Bien Hoa, Airbase, RVN

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During the [Vietnam Wars](#) (1955–75), the base was used by the [Republic of Vietnam Air Force](#) (VNAF). The United States used it as a major base from 1961 through 1973, stationing [Army](#), [Air Force](#) (USAF), [Navy](#), and [Marine](#) units there.

Bien Hoa is located on quiet, flat grounds in a rural area 25 kilometres (16 mi) northeast of [Saigon](#). The [French Air Force](#) established an [air base](#), the *Base aérienne tactique 192*, which was very active during the [First Indochina War](#). On 1 June 1955, Bien Hoa Air Base became the VNAF's logistics support base when the French evacuated their main depot at [Hanoi](#). At that time the VNAF was in its final days as an auxiliary air arm under total French control.

Not long after it was established as a VNAF base the facility took on a tactical role as well as that of a depot. It was here that the VNAF's 1st Fighter Squadron (later renumbered the 514th FS) was formed on 1 June 1956. From this point Bien Hoa became the base of newly formed and continually growing air units. The VNAF 2311th Air Group, later to become an Air Wing, and the 311th Air Division were also stationed there. and the base supported the greatest number of air combat units than any other have throughout South Vietnam.

With the influx of USAF tactical air units in the early 1960s, Bien Hoa became a joint operating base for both VNAF and USAF organizations. The USAF forces stationed there were under the command of the [Pacific Air Forces](#) (PACAF). Bien Hoa was the location for [TACAN](#) station Channel 73 and was referenced by that identifier in voice communications during air missions. Its [military mail address](#) was APO San Francisco, 96227.

The [3d Tactical Fighter Wing](#) was the host unit at Bien Hoa. It was transferred from [England Air Force Base Louisiana](#) on 8 November 1965 taking over the mission of the provisional 6251st TFW. Operating the F-100D/F Super Sabre, the fighter squadrons of the 3d TFW were:

[416th Tactical Fighter Squadron](#), 8 November 1965 – 15 April 1967 (Blue colors)  
[531st Tactical Fighter Squadron](#), 7 December 1965 – 31 July 1970 (CP, Red Tail Stripe)  
[510th Tactical Fighter Squadron](#), 8 November 1965 – 15 November 1969 (CE, Purple Tail Stripe)  
[308th Tactical Fighter Squadron](#), 2 December 1965 – 14 November 1966 (Green Colors)  
[90th Tactical Fighter Squadron](#), 8 February 1966 – 31 October 1970 (CB, Blue Tail Stripe).

Upon arrival at Bien Hoa, the 3d TFW took over the assets of the 6251st TFW. The 429th TFS returned to Cannon AFB, New Mexico upon activation of the 3d TFW; the 416th TFS was reassigned to [Phu Cat AB](#) on 15 April 1967 to the [37th Tactical Fighter Wing](#).

The 307th TFS returned to Homestead, passing its aircraft and equipment to the 308th Tactical Fighter Squadron, which operated F-100s (Green Tail Stripe) from 2 December 1965 to 14 November 1966 when it was moved PCS to the 31st TFW at [Tuy Hoa AB](#).

The [90th Tactical Fighter Squadron](#) was deployed from the [834th Air Division](#), England AFB, Louisiana on 8 February 1966 and became the sixth F-100 squadron. It remained until withdrawn on 31 October 1970.

Missions of the 3d TFW included close air support, counterinsurgency, forward air control, interdiction, and radar-controlled bombing. Supported numerous ground operations with strike missions against enemy fortifications, supply areas, lines of communication and personnel, in addition to suppressing fire in landing areas.

During this time, the 3d TFW also participated in combat evaluation of the [Cessna A-37](#) aircraft for counter-insurgency operations and the [F-5 Freedom Fighter](#) as a light tactical fighter.

In addition to the F-100 squadrons, the 3d absorbed the assets of the [1st and 602nd Air Commando Squadrons](#) flying the A-1E Skyraider. The unit was activated at Bien Hoa on 8 July 1963. The 1st ACS was transferred to [Pleiku Air Base](#) on 5 January 1966.

The unit was replaced by the 604th Air Commando Squadron flying the A-37A Dragonfly (Tail Code CK). The 604th deployed from England AFB, Louisiana between 17 July and 14 August 1967. The squadron was tasked to test the A-37 in combat over three months under a program named "Combat Dragon". Testing began on August 15 and ended on September 6. This phase of the project was used to familiarize the pilots with the operational areas of Vietnam and Laos. The data collection and evaluation system was also refined using forms and methods already in use in Southeast Asia. The 604th ACS began combat operations on 19 August, flying 12 combat sorties a day in support of ground troops and against enemy supplies being shipped into South Vietnam. The daily sortie reached 60 by the end of September.

In October, some of the planes were shipped to Pleiku AB for further evaluation of the A-37A, where pilots began flying armed and visual reconnaissance missions and night interdiction flights in "Tiger Hound". Tiger Hound was an area roughly 90 miles long in Laos bordering on South Vietnam territory used by the North Vietnamese to infiltrate troops and supplies. It was also the code name of a special Air Force, Navy, Marine and Army task force that began interdicting southeastern Laos.

When the testing period drew to a close, the A-37A Dragonflies had logged more than 4,000 sorties without a single combat loss. The pilots were pleased with the planes' maneuverability, it accelerated and decelerated rapidly and its combat delivery system was highly accurate. The maintainers also heaped their praise on the aircraft, as easy to fix with turnaround times often averaging just over 90 minutes between missions. One plane went down as a result of an unfortunate maneuver after the aircraft returned to its home base. The squadron was then attached to the [14th Air Commando Wing](#) at [Nha Trang AB](#). The unit however, continued to fly out of Bien Hoa. In late 1968/early 1969 the squadron was renamed the [604th Special Operations Squadron](#) (604th SOS) and was assigned to the 3rd Tactical Fighter Wing (TFW).

On 15 November 1969 the A-37s of 604th was joined by the [8th Attack Squadron](#) (Tail Code: CF), and started flying the A-37B three days later on 18 November. A third A-37B squadron, the [90th Attack Squadron](#) was assigned on 12 December but had already started flying A-37Bs in November along with the 8th. Both units were combat certified on 12 December 1969.

In March 1970, under U.S. President [Richard Nixon's](#) "[Vietnamization](#) Program", preparations were made for the transfer of the A-37 aircraft to the VNAF. At the same time, the decision was made to close out the 604th SOS while retaining the 8th Attack Squadron designation because of the significance of its being one of the squadrons with the longest record of continuous service dating back to World War I. The 604th SOS absorbed the personnel from the 8th and 90th Attack Squadrons which were closing out, and then it was redesignated as the [8th Special Operations Squadron](#).

**F-5 Skoshi Tiger Program:** The Skoshi Tiger program was a combat evaluation of the Northrop F-5 "Freedom Fighter" in South Vietnam. Although all F-5A production was intended for Military Assistance Programs, the Air Force actually requested at least 200 F-5s for use in Vietnam. This sudden request on the part of the USAF was a result of heavier than expected attrition in Southeast Asia and because the F-5 promised to be available with a relatively short lead time.

In October 1965, the USAF "borrowed" 12 combat-ready F-5As and turned them over to the 4503rd Tactical Fighter Squadron at [Williams Air Force Base Arizona](#) for operational service trials. The aircraft left Williams AFB on 20 October 1965 for Bien Hoa.

At Bien Hoa, the F-5s were attached to the 3d TFW as the 4503rd Tactical Fighter Squadron on 21 November 1965.

The F-5 missions were exclusively over the South, and they never crossed the North Vietnamese border because their arrival coincided with a lull in the offensive against the North. The aircraft never encountered enemy MiGs, and so never got a chance to demonstrate their air-to-air capabilities.

Although the Freedom Fighter was judged to be a technical success in Vietnam, the Skoshi Tiger program was essentially a political project, designed to appease those few Air Force officers who believed in the aircraft.<sup>[[citation needed](#)]</sup> The Freedom Fighter was destined to have a relatively brief operational career with the USAF, and the DoD turned down a second request for F-5s, deciding instead to look at other types such as the [A-7 Corsair II](#).

On 8 March 1966 the F-5s of the 4503rd TFS were redesignated the 10th Fighter (Commando) Squadron. On 17 April 1967 the F-5s were turned over to the VNAF. 1968 Tet Offensive at Bien Hoa Air Base

The beginning of the 1968 [Tet Offensive](#) was signaled by the air base receiving small arms and mortar fire. The main gate was near the active runway of the [145th Aviation Battalion](#), a U.S. Army helicopter unit. The battalion's pilots lived off-base at the Honour-Smith Compound, a villa on Cong Ly Street in the city of Bien Hoa, some 2 kilometers away. Some were on base or made it there before the fire got too heavy and some of the gunships took off to patrol the base perimeters. Later intelligence reported that there were three main Viet Cong units that were to attack the base; the most critical attack was to force the main gate, overwhelm the helicopter active area and prevent gunships from taking off. Other attacks were to proceed across open ground to the main Air Force bunkers and to bring mounted 50 cal machine guns to sweep the base runway.

Since most non-flying, non-police Air Force personnel were not issued arms, the bunkers were full of unarmed airmen guarded by only a very few security police and [RED HORSE](#) engineers armed with [M-16s](#). However the unit that was to attack the main gate never appeared and helicopters got airborne and attacked many Viet Cong in the open fields approaching the base areas.

As soon as some order was restored, the rest of the pilots were lifted from Honour-Smith Compound to the airbase by helicopter. A temporary heli-pad was made on Honour-Smith by pulling the posts out of an old French tennis court.

There was intermittent fire from the village onto the base for several days but on the third day, a squadron of tanks from the [11th Armored Cavalry Regiment](#) arrived to provide substantial physical security. Elements of the 275th NVA Regiment would attack the base again around Tet 1969 and much of the fighting would take place around the village of Thai Hiep on 26 February 1969. <sup>[5]</sup>

In 1971, the 3rd TFW was preparing to inactivate and the wing began phasing down for inactivation as part of the American drawdown of forces. On 15 March 1971 the 3d TFW inactivated at Bien Hoa and was simultaneously activated at [Kunsan AB](#), South Korea, taking over the defensive mission there.

With the last F-100 squadron being reassigned on 31 October 1970, the 3d TFW transferred its remaining resources to the [315th Tactical Airlift Wing](#) at Phan Rang AB on July 31, 1971. Still flying its A-37s, the 8th Special Operations Squadron was attached to the 315th TAW, but physically remained at Bien Hoa AB. Then the 8th SOS was attached to the 377th Air Base Group (later [377th Air Base Wing](#)) at Tan Son Nhut AB on 15 January 1972

In early 1972, the 8th SOS A-37B's were instrumental in helping blunt the NVA's armored thrust toward Saigon in the April 1972 [Easter Offensive](#). 1st Lt. [Michael Blassie](#), whose remains were interred in the [Tomb of the Unknowns](#) at [Arlington Cemetery](#) until identification in 1998, was shot down 11 May 1972 while flying with the 8th SOS.

The last combat sorties were flown on 30 September 1972, and the unit was officially relocated to Clark AB, Philippines on 1 October 1972. It transferred its aircraft and other assets to the VNAF.

Det 1. 377th Air Base Wing: An operating location of the [377th Air Base Wing](#) was established at Bien Hoa Air Base on 14 April 1972 to provide turnaround service for [F-4s](#) of other organizations. It was replaced on 20 June 1972 by Detachment I of the wing headquarters, which continued the [F-4](#) turn-around service and added A-7D turnaround service on 30 October 1972. A small detachment of personnel from the [354th Tactical Fighter Wing](#) deployed at [Korat Royal Thai Air Force Base Thailand](#) were assigned for A-7D servicing.

The detachment continued operations through 11 February 1973 when the United States presence ended at Bien Hoa Air Base.

North Vietnam had suffered about 50,000 casualties during the 1968 [Tet Offensive](#) and was similarly mauled in its spring 1972 offensive against the South. The People's Army of Vietnam needed time to recuperate.

In March 1975 Hanoi made its next seriously aggressive move. In the preceding two years, North Vietnam's army patiently moved into the South enormous quantities of Soviet artillery, surface-to-air missiles, and armored vehicles, along with 100,000 fresh troops.

On 10 March the North Vietnamese Army began a [new offensive in South Vietnam](#). Northern forces [isolated the provincial capitol of Buôn Ma Thuột](#) by cutting off or blocking the main highways to it. It was at Ban Me Thuot that the first phenomenon which would increasingly undermine the South's morale occurred. Many of its army officers used helicopters to pick up their families and flee to the south with them. South Vietnamese civilians then began to flee the countryside, crowding the main roads and the pathways in a mass exodus for the coast, where they ultimately jammed seaports seeking transport to the south. The refugees included not only those civilians who had helped the South's army or the Americans, but also a great mass who expected bad treatment from the communists.

By early April the end of South Vietnam was at hand. North Vietnam's forces had severed the roads around [Saigon](#) and had begun shelling Bien Hoa. On 9 April the ARVN [engaged the PAVN at Xuan Loc](#), located on [Highway 1](#) only 37 miles northeast of Saigon. Xuan Loc fell on 23 April, and there was now little to prevent or slow the Communist advance on Saigon. The loss of Xuan Loc made Bien Hoa Air base indefensible, although the VNAF continued to fly from the base until PAVN artillery fire forced the evacuation of Bien Hoa on 25 April.



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