

The Battle of Bunker Hill 10

A veteran Security Police sergeant took over when the officer in charge at the point of attack was killed defending Bien Hoa.

BY JOHN L. FRISBEE

FOR most of 1967, North Vietnam held its—and the Viet Cong's—military operations in the South at a low level in order to accumulate supplies for the massive Tet offensive that was to begin the night of January 30–31, 1968. The goal of the offensive was as much political as military: to shatter the confidence of South Vietnam's citizens in their government and to fuel the fires of antiwar sentiment that burned with increasing intensity in the United States.

A hundred cities and more than twenty air bases were attacked simultaneously by some 84,000 enemy troops in violation of a thirty-six-hour truce for celebration of the Vietnamese New Year. Saigon, the capital of South Vietnam, was a prime target. To capture it, enemy forces had to neutralize the two great air bases—Bien Hoa and Tan Son Nhut—near the city. Two infantry battalions and a reinforced infantry company were assigned the task of penetrating Bien Hoa's defenses and destroying US and VNAF aircraft and facilities. Their carefully planned surprise attack was to follow a heavy barrage of rocket and mortar fire. But surprise was not to be. Gen. William Momyer, Commander of Seventh Air Force, doubted that North Vietnam would honor the truce. All his units were on alert, with outposts reinforced, when the attack on Bien Hoa came.

At 0300 hours on January 31, rockets and mortar shells began to fall on the flight line. SSgt. William

Piazza, a member of the 3d Security Police Squadron serving his second volunteer tour in Vietnam, was leader of a resupply team on the north side of the base. As the barrage lifted, the command center radioed a team (Def 6) responsible for the east end of the base, where the infantry attack was concentrated, to reinforce Bunker Hill 10, a large concrete bunker at the east end of the runway. About thirty men commanded by a captain were under attack there and would soon run short of ammunition. The team was stopped by sniper fire before it could reach the bunker.

Sergeant Piazza immediately ordered his men to fall back to a safe position. He then picked up the leader of Def 6 and drove his truck, loaded with ammunition, through a curtain of enemy fire to the bunker. A few minutes after he arrived, the enemy again attacked the bunker from three sides with rockets, automatic weapons, and small arms. Piazza climbed out of the bunker and returned fire with a 40-mm grenade launcher until very close support fire from a helicopter gunship forced him back inside. There he discovered that the captain in command had been killed. Piazza assumed command of the defending force as "all hell broke loose, and Control could not get anyone on the radio."

As the night wore on, a C-47 Spooky gunship that had lighted the area, enabling Piazza to direct fire from the bunker, apparently ran out of flares. Sergeant Piazza again left the shelter of the bunker to light the area with hand flares. He continued to direct the defense until Army reinforcements arrived after daylight. Then, after the wounded had been evacuated from the bunker, Piazza and four other men remained until evening without food, water, or reinforcements, spotting targets for the Army troops and providing supporting fire. When the east end of the base had been cleared, 139 en-

emy lay dead and twenty-five had been captured.

Although several aircraft were destroyed or damaged by rockets, enemy infantry and sappers never penetrated the base beyond Bunker Hill 10. The citation for the Silver Star presented to Sergeant Piazza by General Momyer summed it up: "An untold number of lives and literally hundreds of millions of dollars of aircraft and other materiel had been saved" through the gallant defense of the base, led at Bunker Hill 10 by Sergeant Piazza.

The Tet offensive was soundly defeated at Bien Hoa and throughout South Vietnam. Of the 84,000 enemy troops thrown into that failed gamble, some 45,000 are believed to have been killed and another 24,000 wounded. It was not, as some journalists of that day reported, a military defeat for the US and South Vietnam. The negative political repercussion of those reports in this country is another story.

SSgt. William Piazza, one of the heroes of Tet, volunteered for a third tour of duty in Vietnam. Today he is a master sergeant stationed at Robins AFB, Ga. ■



Seventh Air Force Commander Gen. William Momyer pins on the Silver Star awarded to SSgt. William Piazza.