

Bien Hoa AB . . .

Bravo One Three

by G. Ernest Govea

3rd Security Police Squadron - 1968

I arrived at Bien Hoa, Air Base on November 5, 1968. Almost seven weeks earlier, on September the 13th, a Friday, I turned nineteen while going through AZR at Lackland. Some two months after being in country, I was still pretty green. It was around this time that I had an experience I remember vividly to this day.

As with most security policemen, I worked nights my entire year in Vietnam. At Guardmount, on this particular night, I was assigned to Bravo-One-Three. One of the most boring posts on the base. This post was not on the perimeter where you might have the opportunity to crank off a few rounds. From here you could not see helicopters pouring fire down on VC below. You could not see B-52 raids off in the distance, although you could see the explosions reflecting red off the clouds above. No, this post was deep inside the base. It was a tiny bunker situated between a large parking apron to the south and a taxiway to the north that ran east and west, parallel with the runway.

After **Guardmount**, posting troops was a major but well rehearsed event, consisting of *hurry up and wait*, and mount the trucks and jeeps. After twenty minutes or so, I was posted at Bravo One Three, which had a ravine separating the parking apron and the taxiway. My bunker was on the parking apron side.

The Relief truck continued on down the apron, pausing now and then as troops were dropped off to guard a variety of aircraft parked on the apron--mostly C-130's. On the south side of the parking apron was the terminal, if one can call a big tin roof supported by concrete and steel columns, a terminal. Approximately 50 feet to the west of me was a ramp by which aircraft accessed the taxiway from the parking apron. Maybe another hundred feet or so, west of the ramp was another security police post. It was probably Bravo-One-Two, but I don't remember exactly. Our job was to waste any sappers who might have made it this far into the base.



If you arrived in country at Bien Hoa or departed from there, this was that parking apron where the civilian freedom birds parked, and from which you boarded or deplaned.

The night was slowly crawling by and I was exhausted. It was a little cooler than during the day, but still hot enough to make you sweat. The big difference is that it was much, much quieter. That day I had gotten my usual one or two hours of sleep in the heat, humidity and noise of jet aircraft. My thoughts kept turning to my bunk and I longed to plunge into it. My eye lids felt like lead. I had been on duty for five hours and had seven more to go. I wondered if I could make it through the night. The parking apron was dark. The whole area was dark, very dark, not much light anywhere.

Just after midnight I was sitting on my bunker wondering if my watch was working properly. According to my illumines dial, only ten minutes had gone by since the last time I had looked at it. It seemed like it had been an hour and ten minutes. Suddenly my radio came alive. "Bravo-One-Four, Defense Control, be advised someone just went past me on a motorcycle." Bravo-One-Four was an entry control point at the south east corner of the parking apron.

I turned my head toward Bravo-One-Four, and saw a headlight coming toward me through the darkness. The implication was clear, the guy on the bike had gone past our security policeman without identifying himself. If Defense Control responded, I have no recollection of it. I jumped up and grabbed my M16. *Was he VC?* All Vietnamese rode motorcycles. A Honda 90 was the family car.

My heart began to beat faster at the prospect of confrontation. It was so dark, I knew he couldn't see me. As the headlight

near me heading toward the ramp, I shouted "HALT!" as loud as I could. Upon doing so, I realized that the man on the bike could not have possibly heard me. His bike was so loud, I could hardly hear myself; how could he have heard me? As he traversed the ramp, I pulled and released the charging handle on my M16 jacking a round into the chamber.

Again I shouted "HALT!" and fired a round into the air. At this point the security policeman at Bravo-One-Four came over the radio again. "Bravo-One-Four, Defense Control, be advised I just saw a tracer round go up from Bravo-One-Three." My first round was a tracer. At this point everyone who could hear the radio transmissions knew I was challenging the individual on the bike. The biker had not heard me. After turning onto the taxiway, he straightened out his bike and began to accelerate. I shouted "halt=" one last time but not as loud as before. What was the point? He couldn't hear me anyway. Now it was merely an empty ritual.

I leveled my M16 at him and flipped the selector to full auto. I mentally asked myself, "Do I really want to shoot this guy?" I answered myself, "No, I don't want to shoot him." My next thought was the realization that other men in a cool situation had decided that under these conditions, a challenge unheeded, the security policeman would shoot to kill. No one had ever told me what to do if I challenged someone and they didn't hear me! Well, I now had to shoot, I was a security policeman, that was my duty, that's what I was here for. All this went through my mind in a couple of seconds.

I fixed my sights on his torso. He was going away from me now, but it was still going to be an easy shot. My heart was beating fast. I was about to kill a man, he didn't have a chance. He was about to be killed. This healthy, living human being was about to become dead! I began to apply pressure to my trigger. My heart was racing. Other security policemen who had heard Bravo-One-Four, were waiting to see if Bravo-One-Three would shoot to kill in accordance with established procedures. It occurred to me that the biker would probably see a tracer round come out of his body before he fell, slid and died.

I was increasing the pressure on the trigger, I was going to try for a three to five round burst. Just then, from the dim blue lights of the runway beyond him, I realized for the first time that he was a big guy, and that his bike was no Honda 90. He was an American!!! I raised my rifle muzzle and set the selector back to *safe*. I picked up my radio and blurted out, "Bravo-One-Three, Defense Control!!!!" There was no reply. In my excitement my words were unintelligible. Ashamed of my excitement, I took a deep breath. I had almost killed a guy, an American! In a more calm voice I said, "Bravo-One-Three, Defense Control, be advised I challenged the individual, he kept on going."

Defense Control replied, "Ten-four Bravo-One-Three, what direction is he going in?"

"Be advised," I said, "he's going east." Defense Control called a SAT team and instructed them to cut him off and tell him to get off the taxiway. I heard later he was a civilian construction worker. Very likely an employee of Brown and Root. I understand they did a lot of work in Vietnam and that Lady Bird Johnson owned a lot of their stock.

I never heard exactly what happened with the SAT team, but I can picture in my mind what may have happened. I picture a security police jeep parked on the taxiway, headlights shinning toward the biker. I picture the SAT team leader and the grenadier standing on the left side of the jeep, with M16's at the ready. They did not know he was an American. I picture the machine gunner and the Vietnamese troop of the right side of the jeep, weapons at the ready. I picture the biker slowing to a stop, ... confused. I picture a young buck sergeant approaching the biker and asking him to shut off his very loud bike. I picture the young buck sergeant asking him, "Didn't you hear that security policeman challenge you back there?" I picture the biker asking, "What security policeman?" I picture the buck sergeant saying, "You were challenged back there, he fired a shot over your head, ... you came close to dying tonight." I picture the color draining from the biker's face and a knot forming in his stomach. I picture the security policeman ordering him to get off the taxiway, and to never get on it again.

Several months later, I was working law enforcement. One night I was manning a gate that separated the Air Base from a small green beret camp at the southeast corner. A civilian construction worker came walking down the road that ran nearby and stopped to chat. In our conversation he mentioned that he stayed away from the west side of the base. "I nearly got shot over there one night," he said in a very serious tone. This guy was big, about 6'4" and husky. He had short unkept brown hair and a thin brown mustache. He appeared to be in his early thirties, an old guy. Could this have been the man I had decided to kill? I didn't know. I stared hard at him, "That might have been me," I said softly in my own disbelief. But my comment didn't register with him. He took a long drag from his cigarette and stared straight ahead intently. He seemed to be reliving those moments again in his mind, and it was not pleasant. To him the whole west side of the base was off limits after dark. He didn't go over there. He'd almost been shot and killed over there one night.

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