

Bien Hoa AB

Night Rider

3rd Security Police Squadron

1966-1967

Death on an Air Base

by **G. Ernest Govea**

3rd Combat Security Police Squadron, Bien Hoa, 1966-1967

One cold, drizzly night in February of 1992, I was in Washington DC, on business. I had not been there since 1968, when I had visited the Capital while stationed at Langley AFB, in Virginia. Although late at night, and I was tired, I set out to find the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall. I had a map of the city, which told me it was just a few blocks away from my hotel. By the time I arrived the rain looked heavy in the bright lights, but I didn't care. I had stood in rains worse than that many a night.

I raised the collar of my black trench coat, tucking it around me more tightly. I would not be denied my time at The Wall I wanted to visit, needed to visit, for years ... and now I planned to take my time.

Rain pelted the plastic covered stand which held worn copies of the many books-of-names of the dead, I began the search for my names. A neighbor who was killed in action as a nineteen year old Marine. When his father told my mom of how he was killed, it caused havoc in our family because I was soon going in the Air Force. But the first name I wanted to find was that of a young Army soldier whom I had never known and whom I had never seen alive. I found his name in the book, and the panel location, then set out to find it on The Wall. I had set out to find him once, years before.

As I walked The Wall looking at the seemingly countless names, unpleasant emotions began to stir within me---emotions I thought long since buried, and knowing fully what they represented. All those dead young men. Memories began welling up, and I felt a lump form in my throat.

I passed three young men who were laughing and joking, inappropriately, like clowns at a funeral---they didn't know anyone here. Then I found his name on The Wall. As I stood there staring at his cold etched name, watching rivulets of water ripple over letters, my mind went back to that evening at Bien Hoa AB.



Another rare rocket attack that occurred at dusk, just before the dark night. Almost always, the rockets came arcing around the twilight of black sky in the east and ribbons of fading colors in the west. This attack was not a major one, as only a dozen or so rockets exploded across the base. Charlie objected to being bombed and machine gunned from the sky, and therefore the Bien Hoa AB was always a preferred target, especially if he only had a few rockets to throw at us Airmen.

I was working law enforcement then, and since I always worked late nights, I had been off duty in my hut when the attack came. We ran to a bunker and took cover until the base siren stopped. After emerging from our bunker, we went to our lockers, got our M16's, ammo, flak vests, and helmets, and reported for duty. The damage assessment was still underway but as yet, there were no reports of casualties.

I was assigned to vehicle patrol with **Staff Sergeant Chalk**, a career NCO. I liked Chalk. He was a real professional, always cool, level headed, and soft spoken. In his late twenties, his hair was white blond, his eyes pale blue, and he was of slender build. We climbed into our jeep and drove off to the east side of the base.

We were assigned to talk to an NCO who had reported an Army flatbed truck broken down in front of his hut. It had a flat tire and was loaded with hundreds of artillery rounds. The prospect of it being hit by a rocket made him, understandably, a little nervous. We pulled up to the truck and the Air Force Staff Sergeant who had called it in, came out of a hut about seventy feet away. He came over and pointed out the obvious flat tire. Chalk climbed into the cab looking for some paperwork that would identify a unit we could contact.

I hoped Chalk would decide not to stick around if more rockets started coming in again. But as he searched the cab, I began to consider our situation. If we came under rockets again, we would have to be hundreds of yards away from the Army flatbed to be safe from rounds exploding or cooking off. But on the other hand, driving around in an open jeep during a rocket attack is hardly an enviable situation.

I had been in Vietnam for over eight months and shared the NCO's concern. My twentieth birthday was coming up in a couple of months, and a month and a half after that I would complete my tour in Vietnam and DEROS back home. I didn't want anything interfering with that. Nevertheless, we were disciplined, and the Air Force doesn't often ask an Airman his opinion. I would do whatever I had to do.

As Sergeant Chalk jumped down from the truck's cab, we saw a blue Air Force ambulance going down a road about a hundred yards from us, red lights rotating in the night. Sergeant Chalk went over to our jeep and called in, asking if there had been any reports of casualties from the attack of an hour earlier. There still had been none reported to law enforcement. Chalk informed the Desk Sergeant of the ambulance that we were going to follow and check it out. We told the Staff Sergeant that had reported the abandoned truck that we would be back, and took off in pursuit of the ambulance.

I had no regrets about getting away from that artillery truck, and for the sake of those in that area, I hoped a rocket would not find it if another attack occurred.

Our jeep gained on the speeding ambulance as it raced out to Perimeter Road on the east side, and headed north. A moonless night, it was black-dark, and we were far away from the main part of the base. Distant parachute flares did not light our area. Nothing out here but elephant grass on both sides of the road, and the perimeter fence line off to our right. If we continued much further along the road, we would arrive at the gate of the Army's **101st Airborne Division** base at the northeast corner of Bien Hoa AB.



We were still south on the perimeter road when the ambulance stopped and pulled off to the left side of the road. We pulled off to the right side and got out. As Air Force

medics got a stretcher out of the back of the ambulance, a K-9 dog handler of the 3rd Security Police held his German Shepherd at bay. The medics scrambled down a steep embankment some twenty feet, and SSgt Chalk and I followed them.

The K-9 Sentry dog handler had discovered the body of a young soldier of the 101st Airborne Division. About thirty feet from the body, a shiny new 101st Army jeep was bogged down in mud up to the front axle. It was pretty clear what had happened. The young soldier had been driving on Perimeter Road during the rocket attack. A piece of shrapnel had hit him square in the face, and his jeep went off the road and got stuck in the mud facing west.

Gravely wounded, the soldier crawled out of his jeep, leaving a heavy trail of blood, and meandered around the front and began staggering north, back toward his base camp . . . back to his unit, and back to his buddies. About ten yards from his jeep he collapsed, sprawling face down. It looked unnatural, surreal, in the stark contrast of our jeep's headlights in the darkness. His arms were outstretched and his hands were level with his head signifying perhaps he had put his hands out to break his fall. Surrounding his head, arms and upper torso was a huge pool of thick, dark red blood and other fluids. It was obvious he had not died right away. His heart had continued to pump blood as he bled out from his head-wound, until finally, it was over.

By this time, a few other security policemen from the Security side had arrived. I do not remember who they were. The medics were preparing to roll the body over. The mood of everyone was quiet and somber. All decent men show respect for the dead; we all spoke in hushed tones.

When they rolled him over, his entire face was a horrible bloody, fleshy wound. Anyone who knew him could not have recognized him. I only know he was Caucasian and fair-haired. I tell you this because those who do not know, should know that a combat death is usually ugly and reflects the violence of war. As kids, we grew up watching war movies in which actors were usually shot in the chest. Their buddies cradled their heads tenderly and the dying man got to say a few words before feigning death. In real war, we learned that bullets and shrapnel do not discriminate in what part of the body they hit, nor do they seem to care who is wounded, nor what horror of wounds is inflicted. In an instant, a piece of hot metal deprives a man of his arm, his eyesight, his jaw and tongue, or his life. In a real war, a man can be hit square in the face. He can die alone . . . in a country of millions ... on a base of thousand ... in the dark ... without anyone even knowing he has been hit.

Medics were about to put him on a stretcher when one asked the other, "Is that your bank book?" The other medic picked up a bank book out of the pool of blood and opened it. It belonged to the dead soldier. Sergeant Chalk asked the medics for the man's ID, and got his name, rank, serial number and date of birth. He was twenty years old. The medics put him on the stretcher and carried him to the ambulance.

I saw a piece of bloody flesh, about the size of a marble, stuck to the front end of the jeep hood. I don't know how it got there. For some reason, a security police NCO from the Security side speculated there may have been two men in the jeep, and that the other man's body might be in the elephant grass. He conferred with SSgt Chalk, and as the junior ranking man, I was assigned to search the grass and water filled ditch.

I walked through the elephant grass. By now, other vehicle headlights pointed across the area, casting macabre shadows as long blades of grass sliced at me. There was no sign that anyone else had been through there. The reeds and grass seemed undisturbed. Muddy water came up over my combat boots, sucking and pulling as if my feet weighed a hundred pounds. I continued out further and groping in the grey-darkness, but finding nothing. Stagnant water was now up to my knees, but for some reason it was easier to slosh through. I searched north, then south, feeling in the darkness. Going back and forth, I continued in this manner until I felt I had adequately swept the areas where someone could possibly have been. There was no one found.

I reported back to Sergeant Chalk and informed him that I had found no other bodies and that I did not think there were any out there. I knew that at first light another team would sweep the area. Sergeant Chalk cast his eyes down at the ground and nodded solemnly. We had all been affected by the random death of that young soldier, the condition of his body, and the way he had died; alone, in the dark, in great pain, probably blind, and no doubt realizing he was too far from anyone to expect any help.

As we were preparing to clear the scene until morning, we noticed two jeeps from the 101st had come up the road and pulled off to the side. A young Army officer got out of each jeep and they scrambled down the steep embankment to where we were at. They came over to us and we saw the man in the lead was a 101st captain. He was a heavysset guy and had the air of a crack, screaming eagle, storm trooper, but his black horned rimmed glasses gave his face the scholarly look of a school teacher.

"That's my jeep," he said in a loud confident voice, "and that was my man." Sergeant Chalk and I saluted. "May I see your ID card, sir?" SSgt Chalk asked. The captain looked as though he was patiently tolerating us as he pulled his wallet out and removed his ID card. He gave it to Chalk, who clipped it to his clipboard and began writing down the pertinent information. The captain explained that they had been at the Air Force Officers' Club and had called for a man to come over and pick them up. Then the rockets started coming in and his man never showed up. Sergeant Chalk handed him his ID card back, and the captain asked, "How badly hurt was he?" I couldn't believe my ears. Didn't he know? Looking up to the road, I saw that the ambulance had already left, and realized we were standing far away from the pool of blood, and that the officers could not have seen the large pool in the dark. Sergeant Chalk answered, "He's dead, sir." We turned and started walking away. We had only taken a few steps when I heard the captain say to himself, in a whisper, "I can't believe it!" No longer did he sound like a macho, screaming eagle. Now he just sounded frightened.

The other Security Policemen were also leaving and there was no longer any reason for us to remain. SSgt Chalk and I went up the embankment to our jeep and climbed in. "I want to find where that rocket impacted," he told me. As he began driving north, we shined our flashlights off to the sides of the road and peered into the darkness. The little GI flashlights seemed inadequate for the job, but after a few moments, we found it. "There it is!" SSgt Chalk said with certainty. There was no mistaking the crater off to our left. All the grass was mowed down and away from the crater. The soldier must have turned his head toward the rocket just as it exploded. Chalk stopped the jeep and we looked back to where we had parked up the road.

The young Army soldier had gone about one hundred feet before going off the road. We then drove all the way up the perimeter road to the gate shack that separated the Air Force from the Army. It was manned by an Air Force SP, an Army 101st MP, and a Vietnamese QC. We told them about the casualty, and Sergeant Chalk asked if they had seen anything. They had. A jeep had been approaching from the Army side when the rockets started coming in. They had all taken cover in their bunker. When all clear sounded, there was no approaching vehicle in sight. We realized that if the Army troop had just stopped his jeep at the gate and sat there, he would still be alive. Why didn't he stop?! But, we knew why. Still, we were young then, and invulnerable. We used to think "everyone else might get killed, but not me." But in time, we all accepted the idea that we too were vulnerable to lady luck or simply fate.

Later that morning, as we were being relieved by the day shift, some of the other Security Policemen noticed my boots and fatigue pants were muddy up to my knees. A buddy of mine made a wisecrack about it. As I told them what happened, they listened intently, nodded, and then departed without saying much. They had to get on post. They were all veterans of rocket and mortar attacks, but not all had yet seen dead Americans that close and for that long, and they didn't seem to fully grasp it.

When I got back to the states, I found that the people we fought and died for, understood far less. But what was worse was that they cared less than they understood. I soon learned there was no point in discussing a topic with people when it was beyond their comprehension. But how could they comprehend? How could they understand that for years I have wished we had shoveled some dirt over that young soldier's pool of blood? That would have been a burial of sorts. It seems indecent, now, that we all just walked off and left a man's blood there in the open for the insects to feed upon. But that's how it was in war. The bodies of our fallen brothers-in-arms were whisked away without ceremony and everyone went back to their duties as if nothing had happened.

I'm sure the 101st grieved and had a memorial service for their comrade. But for us, the Security Police and Air Force medics, there was no funeral, no memorial service, no shared grieving or mourning or saying good-bye. But years, decades later, you do mourn and even grieve. Only then, now, when you looked back through the eyes of a mature adult, does it occur to you what really happened. A young man's life was cut off forever. Soon thereafter, somewhere back in the states, men in uniform appeared at the door of a couple's home and told them what they had been told concerning the death of their son.

As I walked back to my hotel room in downtown Washington DC, I realized the rain had eased up and it was just a light misty drizzle. I passed groups of students from Georgetown University who were milling about, socializing. At age 42, they struck me as being very young. Most of the students were not as young as those dead veterans named on The Wall. Names of 58,229 whom I did not know. Names of some whom I did know. And the name of one whom I had never met, but whose tragic death I will never forget.

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