

A WAR STORY
30th Anniversary
ROCKET SPOTTERS - TANGO-10
Tet 1968
3rd Security Police Squadron
(c) 1998, SSgt Thomas N. Tessier, TSN 1967-1970

In the early hours of January 31, 1968, NVA and VC forces began an attack on Biên Hòa AB aimed at driving the US forces from Vietnam. The men of the 3rd SPS were determined that the enemy would not achieve their goal. With limited weapons and strong dedication the men of the 3rd ushered in the *new* Security Police, with their advanced weapons that we know today. We need to remember these men, both living and dead, as we observe the 30th anniversary of that battle.

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Tan Son Nhut's Rocket Spotters

SSgt Thomas N. Tessier, TSN 1967-1970

*Security Control . . . Tango 10 . . . Incoming Rockets
from the Northwest!!!*

*377th Security Police Become Target Acquisitors in
Tan Son Nhut's elite Tango Sector.*

*Security Control Tango 10. We have incoming rockets
from the north, northwest - sound the sirens. A vertical launch
- possible 122 Mike Mikes. Mill reading 3430. Tango Alpha
Tango, call in your readings.*

During my three years at Tan Son Nhut I spent almost 30 months in the three rocket spotting towers which were in Alpha, Charlie and Delta sectors of Tan Son Nhut's Charlie Flight (midnight shift). I remember those radio messages vividly today, thirty years later!

In 1969 we became Tango sector and had 10 to 12 men assigned to the three towers permanently. SSgt. James Harbert of Pensacola, Florida was the first NCOIC. I trained because of my long in-country status. I was angry when he was given command as a new in-country SSgt. But we became friends and still stay in touch today.

To my knowledge no one ever recognized our strenuous, exciting and stressful but highly important duties. How many lives did we save at Tan Son Nhut? Tango 10's orders read, "The single most important security post on Tan Son Nhut." On many occasions we had the sirens going long before the 107 mm Chinese and 122 mm Russian rockets hit. We had return fire going out on a couple of occasions before the incoming rockets impacted on Tan Son Nhut and surrounding areas. On one occasion we had secondary explosions at a launch site!

It all started in late February and early March 1968 (according to my illegal diary which I maintained and kept for three years). I was on Tango 14 with SSgt Autrey (first name forgotten). We saw these huge flare-like objects going up from the ground off the western perimeter by the old French Catholic Church where we had receive sniper fire during Tet in February earlier in the year. We called it the North Church. It was the first rocket attack. Fifty plus Russian 122's hit Tan Son Nhut. Everyone was shocked when these 122's impacted with great destruction of lives and property and we were now under a new set of rules to be established by OJT, experience and acute vigilance on the night shift (later called Tiger Flight).

For a couple of weeks I spotted the rocket launches from small Tango 14 in the diesel filled pit of Alpha Sector's extreme northern perimeter of Tan Son Nhut. I got so good at it that I was transferred to Tango 10 and learned how to use the artillery scopes from Sgt. Dave Tolley of Maryland. Sgt. Mike Page of Rocky Mount, North Carolina joined me later in the year as did many others during my three-year tour. I wish I could remember all of their names.

None of my men were hurt during their long months but the stress of constant vigilance and the knowledge that others could die if we failed our mission was stressful and few of our hand-picked group ask to be transferred out - some because they could not stay awake or handle the stress. We got the best S.P.'s who volunteered or were chosen because of their reputation on perimeter duty as the best and most professional of Tan Son Nhut's 377th SPS Charlie flight.

In late '69 I was given command of the group as a 22-year-old sergeant. I was promoted to Staff Sergeant in December 1969 when I extended my tour again and length of service by six months. Now I had to leave Tango 10, my home for 16 months, to go to Tango 1. Tango 1 was the 160-foot tall red and white checkered water tank in the ARVN Ranger Compound visible from the SPS barracks area, down the road

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from Hotel 3, the arriving helicopter landing zone on Tan Son Nhut.

I worked as NCOIC of the three towers: 1, 10 and Alpha. On Tango 1, I coordinated our efforts with two Army NCOIC's on the tower and two to four ARVN target Acquisitoners and for one year, an ARVN airborne ranger assigned to radio duty on the tower. The tower was about 40 feet across at the top and about 60 feet wide on the second level with an inside room protected by 4 foot steel reinforced concrete. The ladders to climb up were almost vertical. Of course the period of weeks just following Tet was the worst test of our endurance, courage, discipline and vigilance but the constant knowledge that Charlie could lob in a few unannounced rounds of H and I and pure terrorist rounds against the civilian populace of greater Saigon kept us ever vigilant long after Tet.

A sad part of our Vietnam experience was the loss of contact with guys we ate with, slept with, sat back-to-back with for months watching for those enemy launches. Not one person was ever commended for this high priority duty. I am proud of my three years and proud of all the guys who went out every night committed to warn our fellow airmen, other military and civilian American and the friendly forces of Vietnam and other countries which participated in various military duties around Tan Son Nhut and Saigon. I want to thank the officers who probably don't remember me but who left me to command a very select group of Target Acquisitoners on those towers. Capt. Forde and Capt. Tripp were gracious and respectful of my experience when they became OIC of Charlie Flight and our unit. They agreed to allow me to command and report only by performance. Yes, we missed a couple of launches but overall our ratio was about ten sightings to one missed. I still have nightmares of missing a sighting. I still mildly suffer from the effects of three years of vigilance (Vigilance Syndrome). I still think of my duties and can recall the long nights and the sounds and smells as though they were today, not 30 years ago. When I am out at night camping or just watching the stars, I remember the view of the constellations in the sky over there that we don't have here. I remember briefing the troops, asking them to commit to excellence every night before posting. Who were they? Where are they now? Do they share these feelings?

I recently revisited the Vietnam Memorial again, The Wall. I've been to all the major dedications: 1982, 1984 and the Women's Memorial in 1993. I cry every time I go. I cry when I read books on Vietnam. I am saddened when I think of all the guys who died, especially the four guys killed in Echo Bunker on January 31, 1968, TET, when our west end was breached and their bunker overrun. And whatever happened to my Vietnamese counterpart, Sgt. Tran Dinh Khien? I received my last letter from him in 1973, three years after I came home.

For me, the three years were a growing up experience. I

was a shy, quiet fellow who when I got there and I left a confident leader of men. My experience at Tan Son Nhut, especially as NCOIC of the Tango Sector Towers, made a man and a leader out of me. That leadership is with me today. I own and operate one of the most successful financial planning practices in New Hampshire and my leadership skills have allowed me to lead many civic, charitable educational and professional organizations over the past twenty years. I left Vietnam and went directly to college, earning a Bachelors Degree in Accounting.

I give credit to the Air Force, the Security Police field and the people who mentored me during my 4 1/2 years SP career. Little did I know when I graduated from basic training at Lackland and was shockingly assigned to Air Police School that my life turned for the better at that point forever. I would not change a thing if I had the opportunity. I am so proud to be a former SP and now a proud member of AFSPA, VSPA and the Tan Son Nhut Association. Some day I'll complete the book I started to write on my way home on August 5, 1970.

If you recognize my name and story from Tan Son Nhut, please call me collect at 1-603-880-1630. Thank you all for what you did during your AF SP careers.

*Thomas N. Tessier, SSGT. USAF 1/66 to 8/70
NCOIC Tango Sector
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