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Air Base, Vietnam in December 1966

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BACKGROUND PAPER
ON
377TH AIR POLICE DEFENSE OF
TAN SON NHUT AIR BASE DECEMBER 1966

USAF officials in Vietnam had reason for concern about the probability of a Viet Cong (VC) attack against Tan Son Nhut Air Base. According to the official report following the attack on Tan Son Nhut Air Base on April 13, 1966, it was recognized that an attack on the Air Force Headquarters so close to Saigon would be an important psychological victory for the VC. As early as 1964, following the successful Viet Cong mortar attack at nearby Bien Hoa Air Base, Lt. Gen. Joseph H. Moore, Commander, 7th Air Force, had expressed concern of an attack, and had made considerable efforts to prepare for it (1:1). This is an account of the 377th Air Police Squadron's valiant response and reprisal to the 4 December 1966 VC attack. Let's start off by looking at some events preceding the VC assault and mortar interdiction.

During November and December 1964, General Moore had meetings with the Vietnamese Air Force Base Commander and the Senior Advisor to the Capital Military Region (CMR), who was responsible for the area surrounding Tan Son Nhut. The Senior Advisor stated that troop units allotted for the defense of Tan Son Nhut were less than fifty percent manned and could not provide proper defense (1:2).

While internal base defenses were continually being reviewed and dry run exercises conducted to reveal weaknesses, it was understood that internal defense could not prevent a mortar attack on the base (1:2). Overall responsibility for the protection of Tan Son Nhut was SMSgt McComas/Flt 27/SNCOA/6-5037/mgm/6 May 97

vested in the Vietnamese Air Force. USAF air police from the 377th Air Police Squadron were primarily responsible for securing Air Force elements and resources. Outer perimeter defenses were a responsibility of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) (2).

Reliable intelligence sources indicated that Tan Son Nhut was a priority Viet Cong target; base defense was of urgent concern to air police officials. The 377th Air Police Squadron was faced with a serious personnel deficit; of an authorized 713 personnel, only 623 were assigned. The mandatory requirements for securing aircraft and other internal sensitive resources left too few men for desired perimeter security. A plan to augment the security forces with 120 non-air police personnel was approved, but only in the administrative implementation stages prior to the Viet Cong attack of 4 December 1966 (1:3).

As stated in the Combat After Actions Report, dated 25 December 1966, in the month preceding the attack there was no significant increase in intelligence reports received by the security forces. Credibility of the majority of intelligence reports received was quite low, either because they were not rated, or because the rating assigned by the evaluating unit placed the intelligence in the "rumor" category. An intelligence report on what was probably the mortar force was furnished to the security forces at 1730 hours on 3 December, by the Tan Son Nhut Sensitive Area—no rating was assigned this information. The message originated from an undisclosed source in Gia Dinh Province. The source reported there was reason to believe that the 1st Company, 2nd Battalion of the VC, had moved into the hamlets of Thong Tay Hoy village, and that its mission was to attack Tan Son Nhut on the night of 3-4 December 1966. The village of Thong Tay Hoy is located approximately ten kilometers west of the base (2:7).

Several months had passed since the Viet Cong mortar attack against Bien Hoa Air Base.

Meanwhile, every other major USAF air base in Vietnam, except Tan Son Nhut, had been subjected to enemy assaults. USAF officials correctly presumed that an attack against Tan Son Nhut was imminent and that the Viet Cong were merely awaiting the most opportune time.

At approximately 2045 hours, on 3 December 1966, the maximum security posture was reached with the posting of the 2000-0400 hour mid-shift security flight. The force consisted of 318 air policemen, 220 stationary/walking posts, 48 sentry-dog posts, 5 three-man primary Security Alert Teams (SATS), 5 three-man secondary SATS, 1 thirteen-man Quick Reaction Force (QRF), and Central Security Control (CSC) personnel including the Duty Officer and Flight Commander. In addition, Law Enforcement Section had reached its normal daily 1930-0330 hours posture of 25 one-man stationary/walking posts, 6 two-man patrols, and supervisory personnel—total of 43. The 377th Air Police had a force totaling 361 Air Police personnel at the time of the attack (2:2).

A significant factor not reflected in the 377th Air Police Squadron strength totals was that 49 percent of the assigned personnel had been in the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) less than 60 days. Thirty-five percent, including key senior NCO's, had been in RVN thirty days or less (2:2).

The initial alarm that VC had penetrated the base came via radio at 0110 when a sentry dog handler on a perimeter listening post, Alpha K-19, immediately north of the runway, advised CSC that unidentified individuals were approaching the base on the north side of his post. CSC immediately dispatched the primary SAT to investigate the report and support the sentry dog team. Explosions and small arms fire immediately ensued, while CSC instantaneously ordered execution of the "Security Rapid Reaction Plan." Almost simultaneously, at 0114 hours, post Delta 15, a Main Line of Resistance (MLR) bunker, reported that VC were coming through the

Delta Sector MLR and that after firing at this group his weapon had jammed. This element of the VC assault force, estimated to number eight or nine, entered the taxi-way from between concrete revetments, which contained RF-101 aircraft. Concurrently, during the penetrations of the MLR at Delta 15, another group consisting of at least thirteen VC crossed the runway attempting to access the aircraft parking area via the west end of the taxi-way. This latter VC element hastily crossed into Delta 11's MLR field-of-fire. The M-60 machine-gunner posted at Delta 11 was credited with killing nine VC. Additionally, two other Air Policemen in the same bunker, fired M16s killing the remaining four, three of whom attempted to out-flank the bunker and silence it from the rear (2:9).

Subsequent reconstruction of VC activity in the aircraft parking area by interviewing witnesses and by surveying the scene suggested that no member of the assault element succeeded in passing post Delta 11. The group which penetrated the MLR breached the concertina wire by cutting a strand in the bottom tier, separating the coils with their hands, and crawling through. After passing between aircraft revetments they stopped beside a pick-up truck which they used as cover while surveying the area. All except one continued south into the C-47 and helicopter parking area. At this time CSC was informed that VC were in the C-47/helicopter parking area and that Air Policemen posted as close-in security guards were firing on them. A power unit parked adjacent to an RF-101C in revetment number seven exploded in flame and the fire soon engulfed a major portion of the aircraft. It was initially assumed that this revetment had sustained a direct hit by mortar; subsequent investigation, however indicated that the explosion was in all probability caused by a grenade. An unconfirmed number of VC in this group sprayed a 180-degree area with automatic weapon fire while tossing hand grenades into the

C-47/helicopter parking area.

There were multiple explosions while fuel cells on one helicopter erupted; grenade or 60mm mortar shells found other aircraft targets. The one VC who broke off from the main body proceeded south-west, down the taxi-way tossing hand grenades into unoccupied sand-bagged personnel shelters. Before he could grenade an occupied bunker, the VC was killed by an Air Policeman armed with a shotgun (2:9-10).

Sporadic explosions continued on the C-47 ramp while the VC and Air Policemen (AP) from the 377th Air Police Squadron exchanged fire. The VC were concentrating their efforts in an attempt to gain access to the aircraft revetments. AP forces repelled their assault, blocking access. One AP on the C-47 ramp was firing tracer rounds from his M16 which the VC may have mistaken for a machine gun; contributing to the VC's confusion and hesitancy amid the relentless peppering of automatic machine gun fire by the hand of the AP's. While AP forces were engaged with VC on the aircraft ramp, several other fire-fights were occurring (2:10).

It had been a mere 8 minutes since the Alpha Sector Primary SAT had responded to Alpha K-19's distress call. Alpha K-19 radioed CSC at 0118 that his vehicle an (M-151 jeep) had been hit by a mortar or grenade, and that he was wounded. At 0140 Alpha Post K-33 reported that he had entered the drainage ditch near his post, and was pursuing VC. At this point the pattern of alarms reported to CSC by perimeter sentry dog handlers, indicated the retreat route being taken by the VC withdrawing from the aircraft parking area. With this valuable information CSC directed a blocking force of approximately 150 AP's (2:11).

About 15 minutes after the arrival of the blocking force, heavy fire from small arms, automatic weapons, rocket launchers, and hand grenades was directed against them from the west side of the road in the vicinity of the perimeter fence. This was the most intense fire

encountered during the entire operation. Air Police forces valiantly maintained their positions during this barrage and returned fire. The fire-fight continued until approximately 0235 when VC fire subsided. Upon advancing in a search-and-destroy mission toward the enemy position, AP's found the bodies of two AP's, Killed-in-Action (KIA), and two wounded AP's were also found. In addition to the two AP's found KIA, three dead VC were found, killed by small arms fire. Later contacts with VC attempting to escape were concentrated near this gap, and indicate it was both penetration route and escape route for the VC platoon (2:11).

At approximately 0305 one of the K-9 listening posts advised CSC that VC had overran his post. He advised that he was receiving fire and requested medical assistance for a sentry dog handler that was wounded. This was the last transmission from the handler. He was later found KIA (2:13).

It was apparent that the VC were withdrawing from action in an attempt to escape. A number of minor exchanges continued to occur throughout the remainder of the night between VC and the 377th Air Policemen (2:13).

At 0400 hours all Air Police activities were placed in a static or "hold" status. This action was intended to prevent indiscriminate firing, to clear certain areas, to locate all friendly forces, and to allow key personnel to regroup and reorganize as deemed necessary. The 377th Law Enforcement Section made a comprehensive search of the cantonment area of the base. Following this search, a thorough sweep was made of the runways, which were found to be safe. By daybreak the base was, for all practical purposes, fully operational apart from the west side where VC were known to be hiding among tombs, old wells and in extremely dense undergrowth.

The main runway opened at 0849 hours 4 December 1966 for normal aircraft operations (2:14).

The VC attack of Tan Son Nhut Air Base on 4 December 1966 as stated in the 7th Air Force message, dated 16 December 19966, was the largest such action directed against a USAF facility in the Republic of Vietnam since the beginning of hostilities (3:3). During the attack, three members of the 377th Air Police Squadron lost their lives in defense of the base. A total of 15 were wounded during the brief engagement. Enemy casualties were reported as 28 KIA, four captured, and three wounded. A total of 20 aircraft were reported damaged with a repair cost estimated at \$60,000 dollars (2:20).

In the Combat Operations After Action Report, several factors seriously hampered the conduct of the operations. Two of which were illumination and vegetation control. Because of the large number of AP and the nature of the terrain which was extremely rough and intersected by deep drainage canals, high mounds of earth, and dense vegetation, adequate illumination was absolutely essential to the identification of friendly forces and to detect concealed VC (2:17). In a letter from Lt Col Francis E. Wilkie, dated 18 February 1967, Director of Security Police, to all Seventh Air Force Bases, immediate emphasis was to be placed on vegetation control around the perimeters of Seventh Air Force installations. Aerial spraying, earth moving machines and other techniques were mandated (4:1).

The effective reaction of the 377th Air Police Squadron precluded the infliction of a greater amount of damage to US personnel an equipment. They were successful in blocking the main penetration/escape route used by the VC. Although the precise location of this route was unknown at the time, CSC's deployment of available forces as a "blocking force," was neither random nor accidental. Based on sentry dog alerts and the apparent movement of the VC on 4

December 1966, the likelihood of a penetration from the west was considered most probable, and

US Forces were deployed in accordance with established guidelines of AP and Task Force 35 forces to counter such an attack (2:24).

The following AP's from the 377th Air Police Squadron were recognized in the "Stars and Stripes Newspaper," for their acts of courage and heroism during the 4 December 1966 attack on Tan Son Nhut (5):

SILVER STAR: Major Roger P. Fox, A2C Alvin W. Curie, A2C Tommy C. Poole

BRONZE STAR: Lt. Col Grove C. Johnson, TSgt Roy D. Brooks, Jr., SSgt Robert B. Walters, A2C Patrick J. Casey, A2C Henry J. Dougherty, Jr., A2C Alfred J. Orr and A2C Robert A. Thornberg, A3C John P. Walker, A3C Carl G. Blair, MSgt Edward Batoe, A2C Robert W. Valentine, Jr., 1Lt Jack S. Howe, Capt Fred Hover and Capt William C. Henry

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4. Ltr, Hq Seventh Air Force, Subj: Vegetation Control, 18 Feb 67.
5. *Stars and Stripes*, "Air Policemen Win Medals," January 1967. (author unknown)