

UNCOMMONLY BRAVE

Around 9 p.m. on January 17th, Capt. Reginald V. Maisey of our 3rd Security Police Squadron here at Bien Hoa Air Base, stopped by the chapel in his jeep and picked me up. Earlier in the day I had asked if I might accompany him that night on his inspection round of the perimeter guard. "Love to have you, Father" he said. "The men are a bit jumpy. They'll appreciate seeing a chaplain." While accompanying Capt. Maisey on his security inspection trip that night, I noted that the men were much more reassured by seeing Capt. Maisey than by seeing an unarmed chaplain. I know why now.

That night I spent about four hours with Capt. Maisey, being briefed at the Command Post, driving around the perimeter of the base, and visiting all the posts. His presence visibly reassured the men we visited in their isolated locations. At one stop, he climbed the ladder to visit a guard in his lonely watch on a metal roost some thirty feet above the ground. At other stops, he checked the security of a bunker or the placement of a machine-gun. Along the road, he halted the jeep frequently to chat with a K-9 sentry. You could see that Capt. Maisey troubled himself for his men. He was a professional.

At three a.m. on the 31st of January, the Communists launched their 'Tet Offensive' against Bien Hoa Air Base. It commenced with a ten minute rocket bombardment that sent men scurrying for protective shelter. The bombardment was followed by enemy sapper teams breaching the perimeter of the Air Base on the east end.

The next time I saw Capt. Maisey, I did not recognize him. I can't recall just what time it was during the eventful morning hours of the 31st of January that I conditionally absolved and administered the Last Rites to an officer who was dead on arrival at the dispensary. I do remember someone at one time informing me that Capt. Maisey had been killed at Bunker Hill 10. Later in the day, I unzipped the heavy canvas bag containing Capt. Maisey's remains. I recognized him as the man I had anointed earlier that morning. The story of Capt. Maisey and Bunker Hill 10 is one worth remembering.

Bunker Hill 10 is a reinforced concrete structure, built many years ago by the French. It is situated on the edge of the east perimeter road, a few hundred yards beyond the end of our runway. Immediately after the rocket attack the morning of the 31st, a large number of well-armed, pajama-clad Communist troops penetrated the fence northwest of Bunker Hill 10. They spilled out into the fields to the left and front of the old French bunker. The enemy subjected Bunker Hill 10 to the most intense fire power imaginable, using their automatic weapons, as well as the devastating and destructive RPG-2 and RPG-7 rockets. At the outset of the battle, Bunker Hill 10 was manned by two Security Policemen, Sgts. Neal Tuggle and Marshall Gott, and an augmentee, ALC Neil Behnke.

When the enemy attack started, Capt. Maisey was at the western end of the base. He immediately sped in his jeep to the Central Security Command Post. Realizing how critical holding Bunker Hill 10 was, Capt. Maisey volunteered to go there to direct the defense of that area. Shortly thereafter, he arrived at the bunker and took charge of the small band of men from the 3rd Security Police Squadron in the vicinity of Bunker Hill 10. The Communists attacked the bunker with a vengeance. They knew it was the key to overrunning the east end of the field,

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and gaining access to the planes on the flight line, the maintenance hangers, and other vital areas of the air base. The enemy hit Bunker Hill 10 with everything they had. About twelve direct rocket hits at point-blank range were recorded by the enemy. On top of the bunker, one rocket put Sgt. Tuggle's machine-gun out of action. Sgt. Tuggle went below, grabbed another weapon, and continued to fight from within the bunker. The augmentee, A1C Behnke, remained on top of the bunker, and continued to fire his M-16 at the enemy enveloping the bunker.

Capt. Maisey seemed to be everywhere. To direct and concentrate the fire power of the twenty or so Security Policemen in the general area on the enemy that was within 200 feet of the bunker, he constantly exposed himself to danger. To communicate by radio with the Security Command Post, Capt. Maisey had to leave the relative security of the bunker and expose himself to enemy fire. He did this throughout the battle. Above the noise of the battle, he yelled orders and directions to the men around him. His voice instilled confidence and bolstered the morale of the beleaguered defenders of the bunker.

At a time when bravery was common, Capt. Maisey's bravery under fire was uncommon and contagious. Though the small band of men did not know it, their position at times was surrounded by VC. Capt. Maisey and the other men continued firing. They kept the enemy pinned down not too far from their original point of penetration. No one knows how many enemy were killed by the men defending Bunker Hill 10. After the battle, over sixty dead VC were found nearby.

The bravery of the men in Bunker Hill 10 was matched by the incredible valor of other men of the 3rd Security Police Squadron. Sgts. William Piazza and James Lee did the impossible. Through a withering field of enemy fire, they drove a truck back to the base armory, loaded it with needed ammunition, and returned to their exposed position on the north perimeter road. From there, they proceeded to drive south across what would seem an impassable field - a field alive with VC. The men dauntlessly drove right up to the besieged Bunker Hill 10, and under constant enemy fire resupplied the defenders of the bunker with enough ammunition to enable them to continue the fight. When one knows the terrain these men passed through, and remembers the confusion at the time, and the danger of their cargo, he stands in awe at their courageous feat. It seems impossible. But brave men made the impossible possible.

The bravest of the brave was Capt. Maisey. He fearlessly fought himself, and rallied, encouraged, and directed his men in the area. At one point, while outside the bunker relaying information to the Security Command Post by radio, he suddenly called out - "I'm hit" - and after a pause, he continued talking to the Security Command Post, apprising them of the battle situation.

At 4:30 a.m. that morning of the 31st of January, while Capt. Maisey was outside the bunker, a direct rocket hit ended his life. He fell on the field of battle. But his men fought on. They never gave up. When the battle ended around noon, the men of the 3rd Security Police Squadron still held Bunker Hill 10. The enemy never overran this pivotal point of the base's defense.

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Some men have asked whether an Air Force installation has ever before been exposed to such a sustained and severe ground attack. That question is best left for Air Force historians to answer. Unquestionably, it was a brutal, savage fight. Because of the valor and courage of a few uncommonly brave men, the fight never progressed beyond a few hundred yards of Bunker Hill 10. The 3rd Security Police Squadron suffered only two men killed in action, and 14 wounded.

What would have happened if Bunker Hill 10 had fallen? Would the enemy have gained control of a part of the base, or penetrated the eastern cantonment area? I don't know. I don't think anyone really knows. Thanks to the bravery and courage of men like Capt. Maisey, we shall never know the answer to that hypothetical question.

The courage under hostile fire of the men of the 3rd Security Police Squadron at Bien Hoa Air Base, under command of Lt. Col K. D. Miller - and especially the valor of the men at Bunker Hill 10, is known to only a few. I doubt whether future military history texts will devote many pages to this episode. It will never have the dramatic impact of the American assault on Heartbreak Ridge during the Korean War. But the battle of the 31st of January will be long remembered by those of us who were at Bien Hoa that fateful morning.

Was Capt. Maisey a particularly religious man? I don't know. "Greater love than this no man has, that one lay down his life for his friends. (Jn. 15,13) If Christ measures all by charity, then Capt. Maisey was too big a man to stand measuring. I wear my Air Force uniform just a little more proudly these days because of men like Capt. Maisey.

Ch, Capt, Donald J. Sheehan
Bien Hoa Air Base