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SECURITY POLICE AND AIR BASE DEFENSE OF TAN SON NHUT

by

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SECURITY POLICE AND AIR BASE DEFENSE OF TAN SON NHUT

The Vietnam Conflict is a controversial subject. To the security policeman, issues concerning Air Base Defense are just as controversial and are often hotly debated. The purpose of this essay is to give a brief history of Air Base Defense (ABD) at Tan Son Nhut. Many issues in this essay deal with not only Tan Son Nhut but all ten bases in Vietnam. Therefore some quotes apply to all the bases not just Tan Son Nhut. I will touch on doctrine; some equipment problems; tactics employed; personnel issues; physical security; and where possible, first hand applications of them.

Tan Son Nhut was built by the French in 1920. (3:-) It is located between Bien Hoa and the city formerly called Saigon. Air Base Defense throughout Vietnam was not considered critical until the attack on Bien Hoa, 1 November 1964. The attack "by unconventional ground forces was without an Air Force precedent." (7:1)

The old axiom, the squeaky wheel gets the grease, is true. It was so with air base defense in Vietnam. The following excerpt from an oral interview with a security police officer who served at Tan Son Nhut lends credence to this statement. Lt Col Frederick A. DePalma stated "The evolution of air base defense in SEA [South East Asia] has been one of priorities. We have only been able to get sufficient manning and equipment after the fact. The build-up began after Bien Hoa was hit in the fall of 1964. After Tan Son Nhut was hit in early 1966, our force was again increased. Then in 1968, the TET offensive brought our strength up to present levels. Base commanders give defense a high priority after an attack, but as

the frequency or severity of attacks decrease, so do resources allocated to base defense. We stop filling sandbags, stringing wire and installing lights." (4:5)

In a recent briefing on US Military Doctrine at the USAF Senior NCO Academy, Gunter AFB, Alabama, Colonel Dennis M. Drew (He served at Tan Son Nhut in 1966 and personally witnessed a sapper attack on the base) stated "There were almost as many of our aircraft destroyed on the ground in South Vietnam as were destroyed over North Vietnam in the air." (5:-) This information was apparent to those tasked with securing the air bases.

Security police commanders in Vietnam realized the doctrine used for air base defense was inadequate and the command lines were not well thought out. Both were the subject of end of tour reports and historical interviews. "Existing doctrine has no application in RVN [Republic of Vietnam] because it is addressed exclusively to operations under cold war conditions...Security Police forces have been organized, manned, controlled, employed, trained, equipped and mentally oriented in accordance with policies utterly unrelated to the operational environment." (8:3-4)

Colonel Feldman said in his oral interview "When I arrived in 1964, we were operating under the AFM 207-1 security concept. Basically, this involves controlled entry to the base and high priority areas such as the flight line and combat operations center with security guards on the flight line and combat aircraft areas as well as sentry dogs. The idea is to deny entry to unauthorized personnel by strictly controlling ingress and egress. By January

1965 it was obvious that the 207-1 concept was not adequate for this environment." (6:1)

If we don't learn from history we tend to repeat mistakes. "Reliving the Korean War experience, the Air Force commenced in 1961 to send more and more aircraft to these combat exposed bases [refers to all 10 USAF bases in South Vietnam]. At the same time, there was no policy or tactical doctrine for their ground defense. ...more than 6 years (November 1961 - May 1968) elapsed in Vietnam before combat tactics and techniques were adopted." (7:107) There was no concise doctrine for security police until Pacific Air Forces Manual (PACAFM) 207-25, Security Police Guidance for Guerrilla/Insurgency/Limited War Environments, was published 20 May 1968--after the TET offensive.

"But publishing a new defense concept is a far cry from getting the job accomplished. The problem then, as now, is a question of priorities. We could not get priorities for construction of bunkers, towers, fencing, etc., so we had to begin construction piecemeal, using security policemen in self help projects of our own. It was not until after the 1968 TET offensive that we finally got sufficient priorities to develop an adequate defense posture. Even then, after our defenses improved, emphasis relaxed. (6:3)

The internal security concept outlined in PACAFM 207-25 "called for a three zone deployment of USAF security forces in sectors. These zones were termed preventive perimeter, secondary defense and close-in defense. The preventive perimeter traced the base boundary line as closely as possible. Being the first line of defense, it had to detect, report, and engage the enemy as far as feasible from

the resources protected. The secondary defense zone separated the preventive perimeter from the locations of aircraft, munitions, fuel, and other operational resources....The close-in defense positioned sentries on the boundaries of areas harboring operational resources, to guard against sappers and saboteurs stealing in."

(7:108) This concept was employed until we left Vietnam. As you can see Air Base Defense doctrine was hammered out under fire. In the Korean War, ABD took three years to straighten out, in Vietnam it took seven years to be employed effectively. When will we learn not to repeat our mistakes?

Vehicle support fared no better than doctrine. Colonel Albert Feldman, citing vehicle priorities, in his interview states "... at Tan Son Nhut in the Fall of 1964, we had only six vehicles which we had to check out of the motor pool. We had to use these vehicles to patrol 16 miles of perimeter. There were few repair parts and you can imagine the maintenance problems when the vehicles needed repair." (6:2)

Four years later, although there were more vehicles and maintenance personnel, vehicle operations still could not meet the demand to keep security police vehicles operational. At Tan Son Nhut during the TET offensive, "11 security policeman fixed vehicles and dispatched them under sniper fire and in one instance had to exchange tools for guns and repel Viet Cong intruders." (3:-)

When Colonel Feldman returned to Tan Son Nhut in 1969 he had the following comment about vehicle repairs: "The motor pool is overworked and simply cannot take care of our needs and keep all of our vehicles in use. Thus we have to attempt to make mechanics out

of security policemen. I am sure that 100 of our personnel are used for this purpose in RVN right now." (6:6)

After the TET offensive SF vehicles received more attention. However, some fixes were not always welcome. "We have 32 APCs [Armored Personnel Carriers] arriving in-country in mid-1969. Although most bases want these vehicles to provide mobility and protection for their QRTs [Quick Reaction Teams], I have my doubts about their ultimate effectiveness. They have a history of maintenance problems and their tracks may tear up the paved roads....They are still vulnerable to armor piercing weapons and unless deployed to preselected bunkers, their tracks can still be hit and they can thus be immobilized by a variety of weapons....In my opinion, the \$39,000 cost for APCs plus their history of maintenance problems, does not warrant their use in RVN. The money would have produced more mobility at less cost had we purchased more jeeps." (6:15)

Vehicles weren't the only issue end of tour reports addressed. Tactical radios were not assigned to security police units. Without them security policemen couldn't easily and timely coordinate defensive actions. "We still need tactical radios in order to communicate with other friendly forces, aircraft (such as AC-47s, helicopter gunships, and FACs) and other elements who participate in defending the bases during an attack." (4:5) Note: Tactical radios were still an issue as recently as the assault on Grenada.

Equipment issues and tactics go hand in hand. "Captured VC tell us that lighting and fencing inhibit penetration of base perimeters more than anything else....Sentry dogs have done a tremendous job

for us, alerting us immediately so we can get into the proper security posture, arrange our firepower, etc.. I cannot overestimate their value. If I sound as though our defenses have been dangerously inadequate in the past, I intend to. In many instances were it not for the plain raw courage of security policemen on post we would have bought the farm. Their courage under fire has been phenomenal and has contributed immeasurably to our ability to withstand attack." (6:6)

Not all of our tactics were sound and most couldn't be changed without USAF IG approval (Security Police was under the Inspector General until the late 1960s.) "Many of our bases in RVN have mounted 50 calibre machine guns in towers. You simply cannot use this weapon effectively in this manner. Anyone with basic infantry training will tell you that the purpose of this weapon is to set up a [sic] grazing fire at ground level. It is not accurate enough to shoot at an angle from a tower 60 feet high, and the tower places the weapon in a vulnerable position for capture, allowing it to be turned against your own forces." (4:2) Some tactics were immediately changed at field level. "When you install a claymore mine and the enemy turns it around so you will get hit when you detonate it, you learn to install them in concrete...." (4:3) Our personnel are still our most valuable asset.

"The key to USAF base defenses was the individual security policeman, uniformly young, inexperienced and untrained in the weapons and skills of ground combat, but also alert, enthusiastic, and completely reliable. The valor with which he responded to the enemy challenge and the stoicism with which he endured the

mindnumbing daily routine of his unglamorous calling quite properly evoked commendations from the highest quarters. His efforts more than any others accounted for success of the USAF base defense mission." (1:262)

Manpower assignment, training and specialized units were concerns addressed in several reports. The personnel system was not as responsive as the commanders needed. "Manpower requirements are so centralized in the USAF that they cannot respond to our requirements for changing manpower around the country to meet the changing threat....By the time you get changes approved, the threat has changed again." (6:12)

Another manning issue that severely impacted ABD was the "Hump" problem. "The personnel 'Hump' had its origins in the general buildup of late 1965, and has since then become a normal feature of USAF personnel management in Vietnam. At regular intervals each year, therefore, the Security Police and other units at each base are crippled by the exodus and arrival of masses of personnel....It seems obvious that an even distribution of personnel by DEROS throughout the calendar year can only be achieved by a onetime curtailment/extension of duty tours, however painful the process." (8:13)

To give another example of how frustrating personnel actions could be "In May 1968, for the first time, manning standards related to a concept of tactical operations were established in PACAFM 207-25. When applied to air bases in RVN, these standards validated a requirement for 1,335 additional Security Police spaces. At this point in time, however, the entire issue had become a moot question

due to the imposition of a headspace ceiling. Therefore, barring wholly unforeseen political developments, relief in this area is not anticipated." (8:12)

The lack of training was another major topic of concern. "Why don't officer and senior NCO's in the field know elementary defense tactics and techniques? The USAF has never been able to get light infantry training for security police personnel. My guess is because we are afraid it would duplicate the combat infantry units of the U.S. Army, and is thus not considered a part of the Air Force mission." (4:3) Colonel Follen observed "Due to lack of proper training Security Police personnel arriving in RVN are uniformly and consistently unprepared mentally and unqualified professionally to fulfill their role in the air base defense mission....This necessitates the conduct of an in-country training program which further depletes already inadequate and transitory manpower resources available for performance of the primary mission."

With all of the information above listing problems with doctrine, training, equipment and physical security aids, it is amazing no more than three security policemen were killed at Tan Son Nhut during the 4 December 1966 attack and four during the TET offensive in 1968.

"The attack on Tan Son Nhut, coordinated with other strikes into Saigon and its environs, commenced at 0320 hours 31 January 1968....The main assault was concentrated between Gate No. 051 and a concrete pillbox, Bunker 051, the latter manned by USAF security police....A last transmission was received from Bunker 051 at 0344 hours. Shortly thereafter, all defenders having been killed, the

position was overrun and converted to an enemy strongpoint....Bunker 051...remained in enemy hands until it was successfully assaulted and taken by USAF security police elements at 1210 hours. (1:268)

During the TET offensive at Tan Son Nhut the following losses were incurred: "19 US Army personnel killed. Four USAF personnel killed [Security Policemen], 75 US Army personnel wounded, 11 USAF personnel wounded. 13 aircraft damaged. ARVN losses: 32 killed, 79 wounded." (2:151) "Enemy forces lost 962 personnel killed and 9 taken prisoner." (1:269) 157 of the enemy killed were inside the "wire" of Tan Son Nhut. (7:175)

Colonel Billy Jack Carter commanded the security police and Task Force 35 during the attack on Tan Son Nhut. The citation for his Legion of Merit says he commanded a force of less than 1,000 against an enemy numbering more than 2,500. His personnel papers include many notes that he made to himself regarding the attack on Tan Son Nhut. One such note read "Learned many lessons 31 Jan, need for heavier weapons, importance of quick reaction, the need for teamwork. Enemy is willing to commit multi-battalion forces. Don't forget posted troops need ammo, food and water." (3:-)

Colonel Carter's note sums up most of this essay. Doctrine is important, it must be developed, agreed on, and taught before the next conflict. The career field must be equipped and trained according to the doctrine. In short, we must take care of our people so they can do the mission. Security forces of the USAF, USA, USN, USMC and any other allied force must be knowledgeable of

each others capabilities and responsibilities. And most important, capable of communicating with each other in battle to defeat the common enemy.

On 20 March 1968 a memorial service was held at Tan Son Nhut for Sgt's Louis H. Fischer, Roger B. Mills, William J. Cyr and Charles E. Hebron. (3:-) These security policemen died defending their base and friends. We must remember their sacrifice and not repeat the mistakes we made in Vietnam!

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