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Valor

By John L. Frisbee, Contributing Editor

Hero of Bien Hoa

Bien Hoa was a key to the enemy's capture of Saigon. It had to be held at all costs.

Of some 160 officers and airmen who were awarded the Air Force Cross in southeast Asia, only two of the officers were not aircrew members. Both were security police officers-- Capt. Reginald V. Maisey, Jr., and Capt. Garth A. Wright. Both were decorated for extraordinary valor during North Vietnam's Tet Offensive of January 1968. This is the story of Captain Maisey's heroic leadership of men assigned to the 3d Security Police Squadron at Bien Hoa AB near Saigon.

Older readers and students of the Vietnam War will remember the Tet Offensive as a critical turning point in domestic support of our military commitment in southeast Asia. The media portrayed Tet as a defeat for American forces, which, in their view, had little chance of saving South Vietnam at an acceptable cost.

In reality, Tet was a smashing defeat for North Vietnam, which had assembled an estimated 84,000 of its own and Viet Cong troops for an assault on major cities and military bases throughout South Vietnam. All of their strikes were turned back within a few days, with the exception of the city of Hue, parts of which were taken and held by the enemy until March. More than half of the invading force is believed to have been killed and many more wounded.

A major objective of the offensive was to capture Saigon, South Vietnam's capital. The North counted on support by the South Vietnamese populace and relied heavily on surprise since a cease-fire had been negotiated for the Tet holidays. Neither happened. American commanders did not believe the North would honor the cease-fire and hence were on alert when the country-wide offensive began between 3 and 4 a.m. on Jan. 31.

Key to the capture of Saigon was seizure of the huge US air bases--Bien Hoa and Tan Son Nhut--a few miles to the north and west of the city. At 3 a.m., the enemy hit Bien Hoa with two infantry battalions and a reinforced infantry company. About 60 percent of the attackers were North Vietnamese regulars, especially trained for the operation.

In order to reach the flight line, they had to bypass Bunker Hill 10 at the east end of the base. There, a reinforced concrete bunker built by the French when they controlled Indochina was lightly manned by the 3d Security Police Squadron. The attack started with a 10-minute rocket bombardment of the bunker, followed by infiltration of a large number of Communist troops who continued to blast the bunker with rockets and automatic weapons.

When the attack began, Captain Maisey was at the west end of the base. He knew that holding Bunker Hill 10 was critical to defending the base. Maisey moved immediately to the Central Security Command Post and volunteered to lead the defense of the bunker, occupied by a handful of men who were firing furiously through the gun ports of the octagonal structure. Outside were 30 to 40 security police who had come to the aid of their comrades. Maisey had to drive through the enemy's field of fire but, miraculously, was unhurt.

To organize the defense and to communicate by radio with the command post, Captain Maisey had to leave the relative security of the bunker, exposing himself to enemy fire. This he did many times. His bravery and skill in directing the defense were an inspiration to the small force of security police, vastly outnumbered by the enemy and with a third of the defenders wounded.

The ferocious battle continued with enemy troops on three sides of the bunker. Ammunition soon was running low. SSgt. William Piazza drove his truck loaded with ammunition through a hail of fire to save the defenders [see "Valor: The Battle of Bunker Hill 10," January 1985]. Sergeant Piazza was shortly to find himself in command of the defense.

On one of his sorties out of the bunker, Captain Maisey was hit by enemy fire but continued his report to the command post and his encouragement to his men. Now supported by helicopter gunships and an AC-47 "Spooky," they still were in imminent danger of being overrun.

At about 4:30 a.m., Captain Maisey again left the bunker to contact the command post. He was hit by a rocket and killed instantly, but the men he had led so brilliantly continued to contain the enemy until Army reinforcements arrived at dawn. Many lives and millions of dollars in aircraft had been saved by holding Bunker Hill 10 against a massive assault. For leadership of the defense at the cost of his own life, Captain Maisey was awarded the Air Force Cross posthumously.

Today an imposing building at Bolling AFB, D.C., bears the name of this gallant man, the first nonrated Air Force officer to be awarded the nation's second highest decoration for valor.

SSgt. William Piazza, one of the heroes of Tet, volunteered for a third tour of duty in Vietnam.

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