

VIETNAM
WORKING THE COBRA
3RD TOUR 1970

Tour-3: June 1970-June 1971

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12th Security Police Squadron

Biên Hòa AB, Vietnam

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WORKING THE COBRA



At the time, I was stationed at Dyess AFB, Texas. One day I was called into operations and told I had a PCS assignment along with follow NCOs (SSgt James Burkey and SSgt Norman Bisson). I went and checked with personnel and found out all three of us were going to Phù Cát AB, Vietnam. It was also the same base as our former commander (Capt. Alpert) was assigned too.

So in June 1970, I started my third tour in Vietnam. Flying from McChord AFB, Washington to Cam Ranh Bay AB, RVN was simple. Flying from Cam Ranh Bay AB to Phù Cát AB was harder. But with some luck, and a guy I used to know, I was on my way on a C-7A (Caribou) aircraft.

Upon arrival at Phù Cát AB (II Corp area), no one was there to meet me, but they had a system that you had to call your squadron and they would come and pick you up. I called the squadron and someone came by and got me. Then I was taken to the orderly room and checked in and put up for the night in a four-man hooch (TSgt and above) in the SP area (old Red Horse area). Not bad for SPs. Over the next couple of days I checked in and found my way around the base.

To say this base was different from the other bases (Cam Ranh Bay AB and Biên Hòa) would be an over statement. I could walk out my hooch and if I had a 9-iron, pitching wedge or sand wedge, I could play golf on the 9-hole sand golf course built just south of our hooch area! I could walk up to the main barracks area and play *putt-putt* golf on the 18-hole course (also gets the clubs here to play the sand course) setup by the MLR (Main Line of Resistance) across from the ROK artillery camp just east of the base.

The base is located 20 miles northwest of the city of Qui Nhon in Binh Dinh province. Before it became a RVN/US Air Base it was a VC training center. The flying mission of Phù Cát AB was mainly F-4D (Phantoms) from the 12th TFW, with AC-119 (Shadow Gunships), EC-47 (USAFSS) and C-47 (Skytrains), C-7A (Caribou's) and O-1 (Bird Dogs) and O-2 (Super Skymasters).

The 12th Security Police Squadron (rotated from Cam Ranh Bay AB) had three-flight system (Ranger, Tiger and Cobra flights). It had three sectors covering the base, Sector-I covered the Westside of the base, Sector-II covered the flight line and southern portion of the base, and Sector-III covered the north and east portions of the base and the bomb dump.

There was also a Fire Direction Control (FDC) with five 81mm mortar pit crews posted around the base. Mainly four pits worked with Cobra flight (1800-0800 hours) each night. Also a Military Working Dog (MWD) section (K-9), and a Sniper Ambush Team (Safeside squad that went out at night to detect any enemy movements).

There was a free field of fire zone around 2/3's of the base. This gave SP's a chance to fire the weapons while on post and get to know the area in front of each bunker or tower. We also had what was called the "Texas Towers." These were steel towers from forty to ninety feet tall, and were manned 24 hours a day to ensure that the VC/NVA could be seen before they could get close to the base MLR. They also were used to spot rockets coming into the base.

The squadron conducted a lot of Harassment and Interdiction (H&I) firing over the time I was there. Sometimes the base folks where not sure who were firing, the enemy or us, but they learned to live with it. Many a time I would have base personnel ask to come out and ride on an APC (track) or V-100 (rubber ducky), fire a weapon or just put up a slap-flare so they could say they did something. A lot of these folks would remember you the next time they saw you in their work area.

Then one day I became the Sector-III supervisor and set upon to know my work area, which covered from the eastside of the runway, east along the north side of the bomb dump, then south back along the MLR towards Tango #3 tower, the SP housing area, and everything in between.

One morning I was doing a post check and stopped at Tango #3. When I got to the top of the wooden

tower, the SP assigned to this tower reported his post to me and then I asked him what he was looking at with the searchlight he had. He said the girl was outside taking a bath again. Now it was on or about 0300 hours in the morning and it was summer time in Vietnam. He turned on his searchlight again and sure enough there she was putting on a show for him and me. Now I know why everyone wanted to work Tango #3.

Then I was picked to be an Artillery Forward Observer. For this I went TDY to the FO school at Nha Trang AB for five days of training. When I came back to Phù Cát AB, I slowly worked myself into calling fire-missions from IDAHO and DC mortar pits in my sector until I could do it in my sleep.

One time I called a firing-mission on a reference point that we were setting up outside the MLR in some ditch that "Charlie" could use to get close to the MLR. Well I had called the fire-mission and the rounds from DC pit came out and over our heads. Two rounds hit on target, but the third round hit the MLR light-line knocking out the lights on the north end by the bomb dump, and the fourth round just missed a tower by a couple of feet. It scared the hell out of the guy in that tower. A check of the mortar rounds was made and several of the fins on the rounds were bent. A check of the rest of the ammo boxes showed other fins were bent too.

Now to say that nothing ever happened at Phù Cát AB would be an understatement. "Charlie" tried many times to send in sapper teams to blow up the aircraft or the bomb dump. But I can say our SP's could spot any movement in the MLR, no matter how far or close. A good example is when a black panther came through the MLR from off base to sleep on base early in the morning. He was always spotted and his location was passed out to the K-9 folks for their safety.

Well, this one night a K-9 handler was taking a latrine break and had squatted down with his K-9 dog on one side and his M16 on the other side of him. He later said, he looked up and saw a pair of eyes looking at him about fifty feet away, but could not tell who or *what* it was. His dog did not want to go after it and then he saw why -- a black silhouette against the MLR light line, and he recognized it as the panther. The big cat looked at him a few more seconds and then walked off into the wooded area. The K-9 handler said he took a deep breath and called for the SRT team to come bring him something to drink.

One time the lights were out along the eastside of the MLR and we had an Army M-151 with a big light on it to help sweep the area where the lights were out. Well, you may have guessed it, an army guy was in the bunker when the SP went out to turn the light on. He turned the light on and there inside the MLR wire was a VC sapper trying to come through.

That was when the fun started -- the Army guy started firing the M60 at the VC, missed him but did hit a trip-flare setting it off. All responding forces fired at this VC running away from the base, but they were not sure if he was hit. I lead a sweep of the area outside the MLR (night and morning), but nothing was found. Now this may seem like nothing, but about an hour later an Army ambulance pulled up to the main gate and requested an escort to the dispensary with a *wounded* Vietnamese Popular Forces soldier who was hit in the butt by our fire while, *he said*, he was sleeping in his bed in his house.

Another time my Texas Tower, by IDAHO mortar pit, was testing out a M16 with an infrared scope on it. The tower guy spotted seven folks outside the MLR coming towards the bomb dump. I had all responding forces move into position and then sent a K-9 unit to see if they could pick anything up. The K-9 alerted on "Charlie" and I had them pull back before we opened fire.

The tower marked them with a tracer round from the M16 and we opened up with everything we had. Now the only problem was once the tower fired the M16 the scope would go blank until it cleared it up. The tower kept telling us which way "Charlie" was moving once he found them again and we shifted our fire on them. Finally, the tower said, that four "Charlie's" were carrying the other three off. A search was conducted, but no bodies were found.

Now working and sleeping all the time did not leave much time for fun. But several of the Cobra Flight personnel put a plan into action for Christmas 1970. We set about to have a Christmas Party for Cobra Flight personnel at the NCO Club. Now in order to do this we would have to have food, drinks and more drinks (ha, ha).

A committee was formed and plans were put in motion to get all the Cobra Flight personnel to sign for the food using their ration cards. This along with some of the extra food we obtained from the base Chow Hall folks would be enough to feed everyone. Of course, in order to do this we had to invite the Chow Hall Cooks to the party, but that was a small price to pay for the food we got.

Then came the morning of 25 December 1970, Christmas, and the party. It started at 0400 hours as the first group of Cobra Flight personnel got off post. The food was being cooked, the drinks were getting cold and the Club was ready to host the party. Then at 0600 hours, the second shift of Cobra Flight personnel got off duty and they too went and had a great time at the party. Also the Cooks showed up with some extra stuff to help make the party last longer. It was the party of the year at Phù Cát AB.

Then there is the time the Army came to Phù Cát AB on an IG inspection tour (yes just like the states). They wanted to know if we could protect the base better than they could do! Well it started out as a normal IG inspection, pulling responses for the LE guys to do. Then they started working on the south and west sector's.

They pulled problems for the towers, bunkers; SAT and ORT teams and watched them deploy to stop an enemy attack against the base.

Now, I knew they would hit my area soon, but “Charlie” had other idea’s that night: One K-9 unit picked up something outside the north MLR in front of the bomb dump. I had all responding units get into place and then had another K-9 unit do a sweep to see if he picked anything up. His dog alerted on the same area and we knew we had someone out there. Now the Army IG folks were monitoring this situation over our radio net, but then we pulled a quiet time on them.

Instead of using the radio I went to the bunker nearest to east-end of the MLR and used the bunker's field phone to talk to FDC. I called a fire mission on several points outside the MLR from both DC and IDAHO mortar pits. My mission was for each pit to fire one flare round to hit the ground, followed by four rounds of HE and one more flare round in the air at two reference points 50 meters outside the MLR. Also all bunkers, towers, SAT teams and QRF teams in front of the suspected “Charlie’s” would fire their weapons once the flares hit the ground.

In the mean time the Army IG had closed down its games on the westside and came as fast as they could to see what we were doing. They split into to groups and went to FDC and came up behind me in the bunker just as the mortar flares hit and the whole night opened up with tracers and weapons fire. After the firing was over a check of the area by K-9 units and scopes came up with no “Charlie’s.” A check the following morning was made and again nothing was found. Later I had to go to FDC and brief the IG team members on what action I had taken so they could document it in their IG report.

Another time someone called the LE Desk to report seeing some folks in and around the BX area. LE patrols were dispatched and then called for backup because they thought it might be the VC/NVA trying to get to the flight line. After all the responding teams got in place a couple of the Vietnamese where captured. They turned out to be Vietnamese BX employers who hid in the area and were trying to steal some of the property to sell in the black market off base.

Each of my tours in Vietnam were different in the actions we had to take against the VC/NVA troops. This one, in 1970, had more rocket attacks than ground attacks. One reason, I beleive, was the free field of fire area around the base. The enemy never knew when our troops were going to fire their weapons, so they did not know if they were seen or not. We also had our own Intel Section manned with SP’s that gave us updated info on “Charlie,” not the out-dated info from HQ.

In June 1971, I departed Phù Cát AB for Homestead AFB, FL. I felt that I went to Vietnam and accomplished the mission I was asked to do on all three tours there. I hope that some day I can go back to visit the bases and see what has changed if anything.

I met and worked with some new but very close friends who were guys I placed my life on the line with, like Capt. Allan Alpert, 1Lt. Kelly, SMSgt Roy D. Brooks and MSgt Joe Thering, SSgt Jim Burkey and SSgt Norm Bisson. I have run across some of them over the years and some have turned in their weapons cards for the last time.

As it was printed in the Cobra Flight book Epilogue by Capt. Loren Pry, quote: “*Not officer, not NCO nor Airman alone gave Cobra Flight its well deserved name, but each and every man from officer to airman doing his share*” unquote. This is true of all Air Police and Security Policemen who served in any conflict or situation during their tour of duty.

William “Pete” Piazza

TSgt

June 1970-June 1971

12th Security Police Squadron (PACAF)

Phu Cat AB, Vietnam

[Pete Piazza earned a Silver Star at Biên Hòa (Logistics Sergeant)].

We Take Care of Our Own

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