

Pleiku, Tet 1968

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Pleiku AB, 1967-1968

I would like to give an eye witness account of an action that took place at Pleiku AB, Republic of South Vietnam during the 1968 Tet Offensive. Like Sgt Steve Shelt, I served at Pleiku on the swing shift, "C" Flight, 633rd Security Police Squadron.

By 30 Jan 68, I had been in-country 6 1/2 months. Like Sgt Shelt, I was transferred there from another location (Phan Rang AB), after my first 3 1/2 months in Vietnam. Pleiku was short handed due to rotations and an unfortunate arms room accident. We arrived in the central highlands, 75 replacements, in early October at the tail end of the autumn monsoon season. After having spent time at Phan Rang, Pleiku appeared a wet, muddy and depressing mess. It was as if we had left the penthouse for the outhouse. Such a small area as the majority of it's perimeter covered, it seemed very likely that an assault from either north or south could cross the runway and aircraft parking areas before any sentry could sound an alarm, much less stop the sapper team(s). I can remember thinking, "You ain't never gone get out of this place alive." You could toss a rock from one perimeter to the other. Phan Rang had been new and huge, this supposed "New 'Leek" was postage stamp, and had once been over run--that is why it was called *new* Pleiku. Hell, if that was new, I can imagine what "Old "Leek" must have been like.

The Tet Offensive kicked off, we were already in a state of high alert. We were in the two (2) flight configuration--twelve hours on and twelve hours off. That was strange, we remained in the three (3) flight mode during our Christmas and New Year cease fire agreement, yet for their lunar new year, we were alert. We were even put on permanent posts. You had the same position night after night. I was posted near the GCA (Ground Control Approach) shack in an old bunker on the south perimeter. There on the first night of the offensive, "Charlie" launched at least three to four salvos of 122 mm Katusha rockets on my position, I thought they were personally out to fulfill the prophecy I had conjured in my mind on arrival in the highlands. Each new salvo was a three rocket launch. Three nearly simultaneous explosions, then another, and another, and another. I was awash in fear, dirt, smoke and noise. All I could do was take it. I remember bobbing up and down trying to see if VC were attempting to slip through the wire. I knew there was an OP (Observation Post) 100 yards of to my right, but since the Vietnamese manned it, I didn't know if they were still there, most ARVIN had left for their holiday, no fire came from the OP, I held mine, I had no target(s). One of the rockets struck close enough to the fence line to set of the trip flares, I thought for sure "Charlie come", no target(s)--nothing but dirt, smoke and the acrid smell of cordite. All though it seemed an eternity, it mercifully ended. I suppose the entire episode lasted 10 minutes, I was unhurt, I was scared, but I was still there!

Later that morning, although it was still during the hours of darkness, I heard the clanking sounds of tracked vehicles. This time I thought a ground assault was definitely coming. Even worse, it was coming from my right flank, my rear. Man, I could not believe it when I saw tanks passing behind me in single file. They were heading for the east end of the runway. I was greatly relieved that they were American, my M16, M60 and 40 mm grenades were no match for tanks. Those M60 tanks on Pleiku represented the heavy fire power we were devoid of. They were indeed a comfort to me. By the time the sun arose, we were supported along the entire perimeter by augmentees from various squadrons of the 633rd Air Base Group, I don't know how well they could use them but they were all armed with M16 rifles, and the Air Base bristled with firepower.

That was Pleiku AB on the first morning of the 1968 Tet Offensive as I remember it almost 29 years ago. We did not suffer direct ground assault, we had no KIA's nor wounded as a result. We did not get the press, because things were really jumping in and around Saigon, Biên Hòa, Tân Sơn Nhứt, Huế and up at Khe Sanh. If "Charlie" had real plans for us, he must've left them down town Pleiku, because when he attacked the, city, he got his butt waxed. The armor and infantry broke his back in the "VILL"!

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