



Tan Son Nhut AB TO THE LAST MAN:

Sgt Alonzo J. Coggins
(Silver Star)

Tet 1968
377th SPS

O51 Bunker, the next morning... stands today as it was on Tet 1968.

The 377th SPS and the Viet Cong (VC) were not strangers. Between December 2nd and the 5th, 1966, members of the 377th clashed with Communist forces more than once. Security Police suffered three killed*(1), but killed 28 and captured four of the enemy force. However, for the Communists, Tet 1968 would be their most ambitious assault against U.S. Forces at Tân Sơn Nhứt Air Base--and the most deadly for both sides.

On the morning of January 31, 1968, Bunker O51 (Oh-Five-One) was manned by five Security Police NCOs: Sgt Louis Fischer led the fire-team of Sgt William J. Cyr, Sgt Charles E. Hebron, Sgt Roger B. Mills, and Sgt Alonzo J. Coggins. Heavily armed, they manned the old French bunker at the west end of the main runway at Tân Sơn Nhứt Air Base.

At about 0320 hours, Bunker O51 was struck by an intensive barrage of mortar, artillery, and rocket fire in preparation for a massive ground assault by 1,500 North Vietnamese regulars and Viet Cong guerrillas against the giant Air Base.

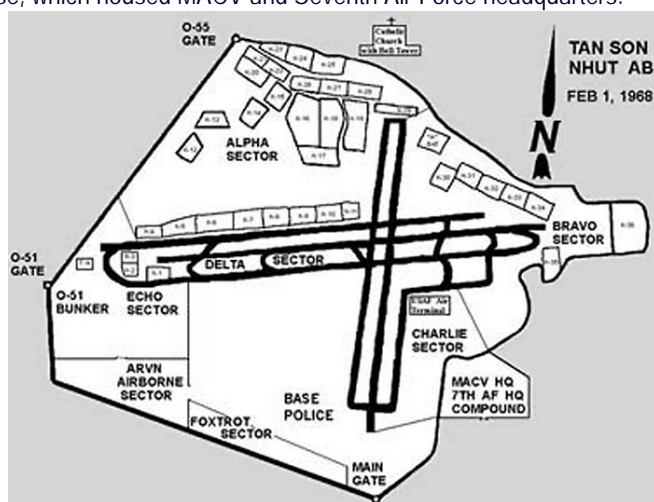


Photo: Perimeter Tower, [Tango-4](#), in the distance, fired on NVA soldiers attacking O51 Bunker, and recognized Sgt Coggins as an American, as U.S. Airmen fought to retake the bunker. Tango-4's last radio transmission: "There are 300 VC directly under my tower."

"Three battalions of VC attack the western side of Tan San Nhut Air Base, which housed MACV and Seventh Air Force headquarters. They attack from positions they have occupied since midnight at the Vinatexco Mill, just across Highway #1 from Gate #51. The consolidated VC attack takes place by the 269th VC Battalion attacking from the northwest, the 267th VC Battalion attacking from the southwest and one battalion attacking from the east. They manage to overwhelm the ARVN defensive force and enter the airfield. MACV headquarters guards and members of the US Air Force 377th SPS stall their advance until reinforcements arrive from the 25th Infantry Division in Cu Chi, at 6: 00 a.m. The final enemy soldiers are not driven out until approximately noon." (Staff Duty Log of the 716th MP Battalion)

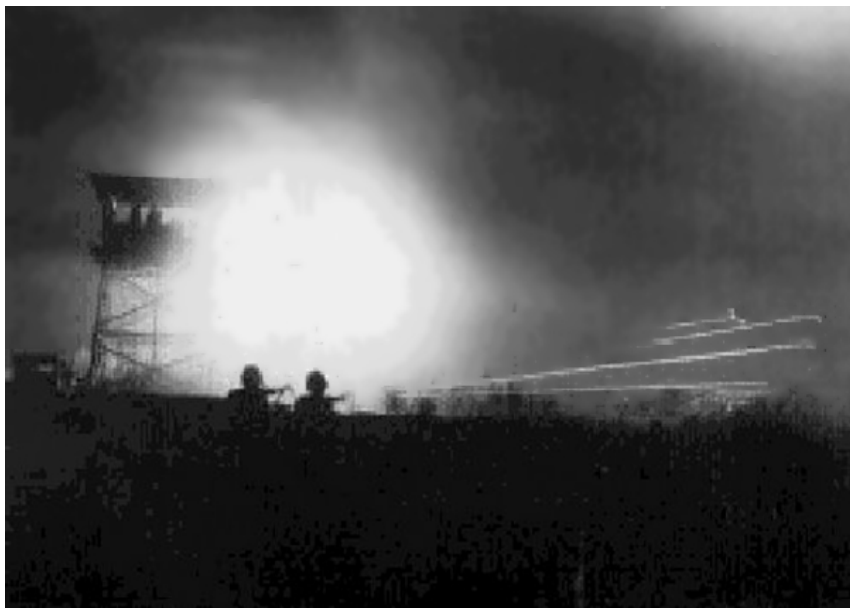
Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army Regulars swept down Highway One, blew a hole in the Tân Sơn Nhứt fence and swarmed toward Bunker O51. The main thrust of the attack had begun at the western perimeter, with 600 enemy dedicated to the defeat and overrunning of Bunker O51.

The NVA knew Bunker O51 was primary to Security Police defensive strategy at Tân Sơn Nhứt Air Base. Therefore, Bunker O51 was a



major objective in the path of victory: neutralizing air power over Saigon, and an all-out attempt to destroy U.S. Forces and establish a Communist government in South Vietnam. Attacking NVA forces were to capture the U.S. Forces Headquarters located at the base, and assist with the capture of Saigon.

Photo: Perimeter Towers on both sides fire on NVA soldiers attacking O51 Bunker.



The North Vietnamese attacked the bunker in full force. Records of taped radio transmissions recorded the twenty-four minutes Bunker O51's defenders fought against such overwhelming odds. Communist forces closed with and enveloped Bunker O51. Machine gun fire from Bunker O51, flanking positions from SP Towers, and repeated strafing runs by AC-47 and Cobra helicopter gunships failed to blunt the enemy's forward progress.

The number of enemy dead around Bunker O51 gave evidence to the violent struggle taking place. Enemy soldiers had advanced over the bodies of more than a hundred of their comrades, killed in the first wave assault against Bunker O51. Although mortally wounded, Sgt Fischer continued to fight after all of his team members were apparently either dead or dying. He knew the importance of giving time to the blocking force to halt the advance of the North

Vietnamese forces. After running out of ammunition, Sgt Fischer still communicated to the end, indicating enemy positions and losses, which eventually allowed the blocking forces to push the enemy off the base.

NVA soldiers reached the walls of the bunker, sprayed the inside with AK-47 automatic fire. One by one the Security Policemen's guns fell silent... and with a final radio transmission... they were gone. The Security Policemen in O51 Bunker fought to their death --to the last man-- after taking 20 direct rocket hits from the main attack thrust. [Four were KIA, a fifth was WIA and so badly wounded he was left for dead during the battle by the NVA]

The NVA's first objective was achieved by finally taking over O51 Bunker. But Air Force Security Police were responding and laying down ever increasing heavy fire.

Although Sgt Louis H. Fischer was killed in action at the age of 19, and while leading the key defensive position at Bunker O51, his fire-team of USAF Security Policemen had stopped the enemy's advance cold for twenty-four precious minutes. Denying enemy forces access to Tân Sơn Nhứt Air Base for those crucial minutes would later prove decisive to base defense. But at that moment, the NVA's plan and timetable were not in jeopardy.



Photo: O51 Bunker, overrun by 600 attacking NVA, was retaken by USAF Security Police after air-strikes and heavy artillery. Unknown then, badly wounded Sgt Coggins was alive during the battle!

Sgt Coggins' four comrades were dead--killed in action defending the Air Base.* (2) The badly wounded Sgt Coggins lay among their bodies, spent shells, scurrying enemy, concrete chip dust, heat, shouting Vietnamese, and the continuing hell of battle. Severely wounded, and often unconscious, Sgt Coggins did not present a threat to the NVA and VC that had overrun the bunker. He was obviously critically wounded and not worth shooting, as they continued desperately fighting to hold the bunker and resume forward motion.





Members of the 377th SPS open up on Communist forces who infiltrated Tan Son Nhut AB during the Tet 1968 Offensive. (USAF photo courtesy USAF SP Museum.)



Tân Sơn Nhứt Air Base was under major attack from all sides by two regiments of North Vietnamese infantry. However, forward attack at the crucial west perimeter was being checked by arriving Security Police Quick Response Teams and troops, whose numbers grew by the minute. Nevertheless, the NVA believed their forces adequate to overrun the Security Police. They were surprised by the ferocious base-defense encountered--and recognized that it was essential to renew the advance.



Members of the 377th SPS, supported by armor, move to resecure Tan Son Nhut AB after penetration by Communist forces on January 31st, 1968.

Sgt Coggins continued to survive for the next eight hours while U.S. and ARVN forces attempted to retake the bunker. Believing Coggins and all Security Police defenders of the bunker were dead, U.S. Forces approved heavy weapons use to retake O51 Bunker. Sgt Coggins endured repeated 105 and 155 mm artillery barrages, air strikes, and another ground assault by Security Police and U.S. Army main-battle tanks. At around 1100 hours, Sgt Coggins was either released, or escaped, from the bunker, during the confusion of a partial enemy withdrawal. He found his way back into friendly lines, when spotted by a Tower Security Police (Tango-4) who had survived the attack.



[The Silver Star was awarded Sgt Coggins](#) but not presented to him for 31 years after Bunker O51! Read the story of how the Vietnam Security Police Association (USAF) arranged for an inspirational Silver Star presentation.

At 1300 hours, January 31, 1968, Tân Sơn Nhứt Air Base was once again secure. 962 enemy soldiers lay dead.

For the next few days four enemy soldiers would be captured and placed with NVA/VC POWs. Others would be killed fighting as they were discovered as Security Police cleared the base and fields.

The 377th SPS, and five brave Security Policemen, were etched in the history of the Security Police.

Photo: Mass grave of VC/NVA soldiers who attempted to overrun Tan Son Nhut, Air Base during TET 1968.



377th Security Police view the bodies of Communist forces killed in the attack on Tan Son Nhut Air Base during Tet Offensive.

The inscription reads: "This is the resting place of those soldiers lost

on the night of the first day of TET 1968. Their spirits beg all countrymen to wholeheartedly work so that peace will



come quickly to our beloved Vietnam."

Photograph by ' Roger P. Fox
(Read full story at [NVA / Viet Cong Locator.](#))

Read the stories of these Security Policemen:

*(1)

[Bevich](#), George Michael Jr. A2C Tân Sơn Nhứt 377 APS 04DEC66

Combat: mortars; K-9; Silver Star

[Riddle](#), Oliver John A2C Tân Sơn Nhứt 377 APS 04DEC66

Combat: mortars; Purple Heart

[Cole](#), John Matthew A2C Tân Sơn Nhứt 377 APS 04DEC66 Combat: mortars; Purple Heart

*(2)

[Cyr](#), William Joseph Sgt Tân Sơn Nhứt 377 SPS 31JAN68 Combat: 051 Bunker; Silver Star

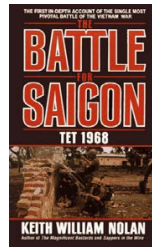
[Fischer](#), Louis Harold Sgt Tân Sơn Nhứt 377 SPS 31JAN68 Combat: 051 Bunker; Silver Star

[Hebron](#), Charles Edward Sgt Tân Sơn Nhứt 377 SPS 31JAN68 Combat: 051 Bunker; Silver Star

[Mills](#), Roger Bertha Sgt Tân Sơn Nhứt 377 SPS 31JAN68 Combat: 051 Bunker; Silver Star

[051 Bunker Today](#): Read about one Airman's revisit to Vietnam, and his discovery and photographs of the old bunker.

Recommended Reading... if you can find a copy!



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