

Tan Son Nhut Air Base,
377th SPS

Tet 1968

The Tet Offensive at Tân Sơn Nhứt

by **G.M. George (RIP)**

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Tân Sơn Nhứt Air Base, 1967-1968, was an experience that tested men's resolve and intestinal fortitude and saw the death of many brave individuals. In June 1967 I was assigned to the 377th APS, 377th Combat Support Group (PACAF), and remained there until June 1968.

I had the benefit of performing duties with some of the best Air policemen in the Air Force. In my case I had several duties while assigned there, NCOIC Training/Firing Range, NCOIC Armory and NCOIC Air Police Investigations. Major Bender was the Operations Officer (with whom I later served at Travis Air Force base, where he retired as Lt. Col.) At a few minutes before January 1, 1968 we Air Police knew something was up because Air America (this was CIA) Aircraft were locked up and the ARVN, Vietnamese Army forces, were no longer at their post around the perimeter of the base.

At this minute we knew it was only us left to protect the base; there were slightly over 900 of us. During the first 15 minutes of the Tet Offensive we lost our Chapel in a rocket attack, a lot of duds were also fired at us; some just bounced down the runway.

A group of us--an officer, an NCO and SAT teams, on Jeeps--responded to the area where the VC had broken through the perimeter fence. The break had occurred right next to the bunker where Air Police were inside. NVA/VC had thrown a long Bangalore pipe bomb on the fence, clearing their way. Our intent was to save our buddies from the besieged O51 Bunker and of course kill the enemy. We tried very hard to reach them. Over 100 VC lost their lives and four of the five Air Policemen in the bunker also lost theirs (the VC threw hand grenades in the bunker).

When we reached the bunker a lot of us had tears in their eyes. The VC tried to enter the base at several other locations, including an area by the city of Saigon called Cholon. We were able to hold them off without further casualties on our side. To illuminate the area, we had to fire our hand flares directly forward so we could light up the bottom half of the buildings.

APS members were on duty at least 48 hours--some were on longer. Many hours later, the US Army was able to get to us to help secure Tân Sơn Nhứt Air Base. Later, we had to wear gas masks while burying the dead Viet Cong, and used a front-end loader to put them in a common grave. There wasn't much left of the men we lost in the bunker; we recovered as much as we could.

I am very proud of the Air Policemen who were assigned to Tân Sơn Nhứt during the Tet Offensive. I consider them to be the finest fighting Airmen in the U.S. Air Force; they can stand tall among any of the other military services. I don't know of one member who complained; everyone knew what was supposed to be done and did it. When I left Tân Sơn Nhứt, I felt I was leaving my family.

We had other attempts at penetration by the Viet Cong long after the Tet Offensive, but were always able to keep the base secure. The significant point we had learned was that the security of Tân Sơn Nhứt was up to the Air Police--and we did just that. The one thing we hated was that even though we were receiving enemy fire, we were not authorized to return fire without the prior approval of COMZ Headquarters--which sometimes never came. We knew what to do and we did it.

The Air police also had the task of curtailing the selling of drugs and marijuana on the base. The Vietnamese were selling it right on the base, in exchange for black market items from the BX. There were times when the QC (Vietnamese military police) were the ring leaders. I was told more than once to "back off" by them on the drug issue, but we didn't; we did our job to protect our men and women in the service.

There is one group that seldom receives any praise, but I saw them work up close and personal. They patched me up from the bullet wound I received. The Air Force Medical Corps is another organization that can stand tall. They had a very difficult job to do.

In closing I want to thank the members of the APS at Tan Son Nhut for their outstanding performance. A large number of us received the Bronze Star with V device for performing our duties, although I really believe everyone assigned there deserved one. I thank you again.

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