

**Tân Sơn Nhứt Air Base  
377th SPS**

## **No Dead Heroes!**

It's sunrise January 30th, 1968: Tet.

Tango-4 was screaming: "There are 300 VC directly under my tower!"

by [Bob Uchman](#),

VSPA Life member # 67

(Zbigniew Uchman AKA Bob Uchman)

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**March 1967, "No Dead Hero's" that's the first thing I heard**, after we touched down in country. Our orders were for Que Nhon Air Base, part way "Up Country". There a C-123 flew us a short hop north to Phù Cát. The base was under construction with no permanent runway's, only a couple of hundred yards of PSP.

After some orientation, and accelerated night training during our first month, orders were cut for us to head down south. Attached to the orders were a thirty day TDY diversion to Biên Hòa. More OJT, this time off base patrols, a little taste of search and destroy. The lucky ones dropped out as we covered the area, setting up for a Tiger Patrol (night time ambush).

At the end of May, we arrived PCS at Tân Sơn Nhứt, Air Base. The second thing I heard when we arrived in-country, was CMH does not stand for "Congressional Medal of Honor," it stands for "Coffin Metal Handles."

Alpha Sector at TSN Air Base is the most remote sector. It is the locus of the bomb dump and firing range. It is the largest geographic sector, and has the longest mined outer-perimeter. Charlie Flight was the coolest duty literally -- from sundown to sunrise, none of the unbearable heat of the day. Those of us who were Caucasian could be identified as Charlie Flight, by the conspicuous absence of a tropical tan.

**It's sunrise January 30th, 1968: Tet.** We are relieved of duty by the Coppertone Commandos, (a nickname we jokingly used for the day shift). Time for a couple of beers to loosen up, get some rack-time then do it all over again -- another day down the tubes.

**Sometime between 1030 and 1100 hours** I'm roused from the sticky day-heat sleep. I'm shaking off the sleep as everyone in the barracks is woken one after another quietly, and in hushed tones the words "We are in condition red" are spoken. Condition Red is exclusive, and specific to combat readiness. It is understood attack is, or attack is imminent with no other options, and no questions, only reflexes.

A momentary flash disbelief and excitement goes through me as I tie the spider-lacing of my boots. I then recall a few months back in late October:

*I'm humping a bunker east of the C-130 pad, and someone is approaching my position, walking through the tall grass directly in front of me from the east, appearing out of the night darkness. I shout a challenge, the individual answers with the right response. I command him to stop he halts. I move forward ten yards to check him out. I see he is walking with his M16 at port arms, and on his back he is carrying a full field pack.*

The stranger produces a document extends it to me, and commands me to read it. He is MACV Special Ops, walking through the sector in the dead of night, on a mission to hand deliver covert orders, eyes only on a need to know basis. The orders are a stipulation that my primary responsibility

is to the mission, signed by the current commanding officer of MACV. He, the courier, appeared from nowhere, and vanished into nothingness to the west.

With my boots on I grab my web gear, ammo, and piss pot then fallout. A half dozen or so are first out, and we're told to climb up onto the ton and a half truck that pulls up. The truck dumps us at the armory, and heads back for more troops. At the armory they are not arming us with our own weapons, they are simply emptying the racks in succession, as more troops arrive. Our lives are truly in each others hands.

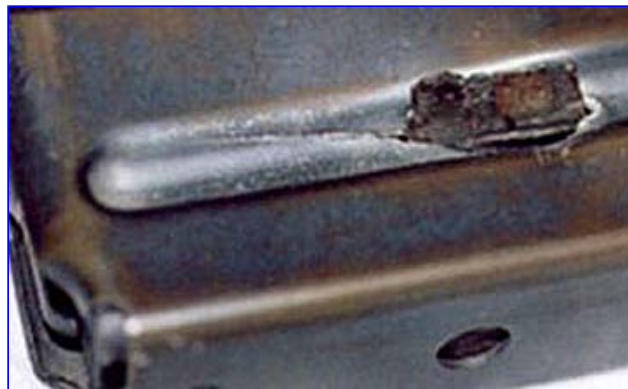
**It's somewhere near 1200 hours on the 30th of January 1968.** Back again on another truck, we roll up a rutted seldom used dirt track for deployment in Alpha Sector. I'm posted at Alpha-21 an M16 bunker. I'm agitated, pacing back and forth instead of taking cover. Without a radio I'm getting nervous. An hour and half of forever passes. Then I see a truck approaching from the west 1/4 mile away.

My mind is going yes, yes, stop for me, me, me! I'm told to climb up! There's a few maybe four other troops riding in the back. Alpha QRT is being assembled. At 1600 hours, 30th of January, Alpha QRT arrives at an isolated remote Quonset hut, shielded from view, and is covert operational. Once inside there are double bunk beds situated around an open GI issue aluminum casket. We are told nothing except, stay in harness and put all your weapons into the open casket. It is still and silent except for the click clatter, of M16's dropping into the casket.

We sit and wait, silently scarfing some B-2's. We stretch. We wait. Time elapses then seems to stand still. Communication with the outside is in effect clandestine. Then the word is: "Okay, Let's Go! Mount up. "

Again its first come first serve, the weapon I had dropped in the casket was not mine. Jumping in, the weapon I take out is not the one I dropped in. I double-time to the flatbed ton and a half and someone is in the cab already. I jump in anyway and the team leader gets behind the wheel.

The last troops out carried the weapons-coffin and hauled it up on the flatbed. As we become mobile the remaining weapons are taken: the M60, the M-40s (over-under grenade launchers), and beaucoup ammo.



We begin to roll, lights out to the west, three in the cab and ten on the deck sitting on a casket. A disembodied hand reaches in the shotgun window passing M16 mags. I in turn pass mags on to the left, and lastly, I fill every pocket I have with M16 mags. For a fleeting moment I think one of these mags might stop a bullet -- voila -- instant body armour.

Photo by David M. Dowdell ([Charlie Flight](#))

Normally we carry ten mags in our upside-down quick release ammo pouches. The empty casket is shoved off the side of the truck, and I can hear it tumble and crash but I don't dare turn around. We silently roll onto the firing range. As we dismount, jumping to the ground feet first in a combat crouch all in turn we scatter, our heads are floating like bobble-head toys our eyes adjusting to night vision. Alpha QRT is in it's first covert deployment.

Suddenly through the broken chatter on the truck radio I could hear the exited voices of multiple towers calling in: Bein Hoa under heavy attack! I look to the east-northeast toward the horizon, and could barely make out tiny dragonflies with thin laser-like lines dripping from them, darting in and out of the snake like smoke trails left by drop flares.

The moments pass.

**Tango-4 breaks in on the radio**, with words twice: "Security Control, Security Control... There's approximately a dozen VC setting up mortars one hundred yards west of my tower." Later in hindsight I realize the VC squad is

targeting the minefield immediately west of the grouping of the [O-51 Bunker](#), Tango-4, and the O-51 Gate, which are only twenty or so yards apart.

The VC are softening the O-51 Gate for a banzai style human wave suicide attack. Hundreds of NVA are preparing to storm the bunker. Obviously, Alpha QRT was deployed when Biên Hòa came under attack, minutes before the assault on the O-51 complex.

We mount up again, to our second covert deployment this time to the Bomb Dump, which is completely blacked out. We are held in reserve for a possible second assault on the O-55 Gate. It is so dark in the bomb dump you couldn't tell a Three of Clubs from an Ace of Spades if you held it up to your face. Absolute darkness: just the scorpions and us.

I could feel the cold paralyzing waves of fear up and down my spine. My gut told me I was falling down into a bottomless void. I couldn't remember the last time I defecated. I could hear, but I could not see. Everyone seemed to be stepping on each other's radio transmissions.

You could hear Tango-4 screaming into his radio mic trying to get on the radio to "Control. " Tango-4 is screaming in abject fear. In his voice, terror: "The VC are overrunning the O-51 Bunker -- we need help -- send help -- we need help!" The last transmission I hear from Tango-4 was his screaming: "There are 300 VC directly under my tower!"

[Five months later we run into each other at Suffolk County Air Force Base, West Hampton Long Island. In our conversation I asked him how he survived Tango-4. His reply was the enemy hit his tower with an RPG broadside. He was knocked unconscious, and fell on top of the trapdoor, an act of God or just dumb luck. He didn't know. He mumbled something about his Silver Star, and that he was processing out, getting all the required signatures on his check list because, he was being given a psychiatric medical discharge, a section-eight (and no wonder).]

We unassed the bomb dump, mobile again, advancing south in a series of zig zaging deployments down the northwestern OP road, in a combat suppression mode, against a possible flanking tactic by the enemy.

**At Tango-6, Alpha SAT rolled up to us, with new orders** to fall in behind him, counterassault orders are being directed by face recognition, and not by radio for obvious reasons, his machine gunner and grenadier at the ready, to provide us with suppression fire, as they clear a path for us going into the main division size battle.

All throughout I maintained my front row seat riding shotgun in the cab of the ton and a half. Something that always stays with me is Alpha QRT leader says to Alpha SAT, "I can't do this I have a wife and kids back home." I realized I wasn't the only one scared lilly-white. In a space of a couple of breaths my team leader conquered his fear and we followed Alpha Sat to the northwest tip of the northern most runway, about seventy yards NNE of the O-51 Bunker, which now was in the hands of the VC and NVA at a cost of more than 100 dead.

When I hit the ground and fall to my knees, and then elbows, my mind could not comprehend what lay before me. I was looking into the seven gates of Hell, and then some. Gunships in the air were skimming and banking sometimes no more than thirty feet off the ground, firing multiple discharges of 2.75 rockets, and the sound of a high-pitch whine of a coffee grinder that in reality was a computerized black box Gattlingun firing 3,000 rounds a minute. The very night sky seemed to glow red and green with the light of tracers: flares were hardly necessary.

**It was now somewhere near 0500 hours on the 31st of January 1968.** As we formed a skirmish line we were immediately pinned down by heavy machine-gun fire from the O-51 Bunker, now in enemy hands, sixty yards to the south. The tracers seemed not to move, they floated like a stationary red dot in front of me: just don't come any closer than that.

**Looking eighty yards to the west, an armour column** (Armour Infantry) was roaring down Highway One. The lead

APC takes a direct broadside from an enemy rocket and was smoked instantly. M-1 tanks behind it never paused, maneuvering around it, rolling into the fray.

Alpha QRT remained pinned down by NVA in the O-51 Bunker almost to the end, depleting the enemy's irreplaceable ammo. Throughout we did not return fire, and now I understand why. I later learned our mission was to cut off any attempt at escape to the north by enemy survivors remaining from the assault force. Also, later I learned from recordings of our radio transmissions, that Alpha QRT 2 got into a real hair-ball fight.

At 2100 hours I was removed from QRT duty and posted on the very recent construct replacement O-51 Bunker, about twenty yards east of the O-51 Gate, and ten yards north of Tango-4. The bunker was manned by two Staff Sergeants, M60 machine-gunners, who through the night to sunrise never spoke to me nor ever turned around, they were like marble icons and remained overlooking the barrels of their M60's. I was in back of them sitting on crates of intermingled, and prepped for use, Mark 3's (pineapples) and the latest addition M-26 (lemon) spiral frag grenades.

Sergeant Charles Hebron, one of the KIA's in the O-51 Bunker, was a casual acquaintance of mine, who a few weeks before was with his newly wed wife on RR in Hawaii. He was a real straight arrow: me, I was in the gray zone, pushing the envelope enough to be readily expendable, but not enough to be promoted.

Alpha QRT did not engage directly in battle, nor did any team member receive any valor decorations, ours was a mission of practicality. Just hold the cutoff! Although the experience did leave some unanswered questions: Surprise attack -- I don't think so! Looking back to when I recieved MACV orders, leads me to believe, this was a deliberate trap, based on successful intelligence gathering, an ambush if you will. Further I believe we are backwards in not having provisions for a decoration for emotional wounds and scars, that have a parallel to physical wounds. Money can not dry the tears.

### **No Dead Heroes!**

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