

Tan Son Nhut Air Base, 1877th Communications Squadron



Tet 1968 CONDITION RED! O51 Bunker

by **Dan McKegney**
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In Memory of 7th Air Force Security Police KIA, Tet1968 Cyr, William J.* Sgt Tan Son Nhut 377 SPS 31JAN68 Combat Silver Star Fischer, Louis H.* Sgt Tan Son Nhut 377 SPS 31JAN68 Combat Silver Star Hebron, Charles E.* Sgt Tan Son Nhut 377 SPS 31JAN68 Combat Silver Star Mills, Roger B.* Sgt Tan Son Nhut 377 SPS 31JAN68 Combat Silver Star Maisey, Reginald V. Capt Biên Hòa 3 APS 31JAN68 Combat **Air Force Cross** Muse, Edward, G. A1C Biên Hòa, 3 APS (Augmentee), 31JAN68 Combat Purple Heart * *TSN O51 Bunker*

Tan Son Nhut, 1967-1968

I was with the AF 1877th Comm. Squadron working as a radio operator on TSN. Photo right is of me standing inside the Radio Communications Compound, and next to our sandbagged bunker, shortly after TET. Our primary purpose at Tan Son Nhut was to maintain HF air-to-ground radio communications with aircraft entering or leaving the South Vietnam flight zone, and informing the Saigon ATCC of their positions. But in the early morning of TET 1968, I was operating our point-to-point radio. This was a radio net which connected most of the Air Force installations in South Vietnam. We, at TSN, were also assigned the function of point-to-point radio net leader whose function it was to receive and relay reports to 7th Air Force HQ of significant South Vietnam Air Force installation events.



Đà Nẵng Air Base reported "condition red" early that morning of TET 1968. But, Đà Nẵng being under attack by the enemy was as routine as just daily brushing your teeth. I thought nothing extraordinary was occurring. And then in short order, spaced maybe five minutes apart, one-by-one moving from north to south, Air Force installations made radio contact with me, each saying they were in condition red." TSN was the last in line before the Delta, and it was soon evident that TSN was also condition red, or under attack, as a horrendous fire-fight started at O51 Bunker. Air Force installations in the Delta soon reported attacks.

The B&W bunker photos are of the 377th Combat SPS standing atop O51 Bunker, which was immediately inside the TSN Air Base perimeter. O51 Bunker, just after the initial assault, was the concrete bunker which took the brunt of the TET 1968 offensive on TSN. As I saw things, I understood that the enemy had overrun and taken the bunker. The large visible gaping holes in it are owing to air strikes against what became an enemy position on the base.

Security Police Sergeant CYR, with the 377th SPS, died while defending that bunker. I knew him, as he and another Sarge would routinely stop at our 1877th Communications radio compound during their jeep rounds of the perimeter prior to TET. They stopped by for coffee, for a quick hand or two of poker sometimes, and just for a little BS. It was CYR's misfortune to have been assigned to that bunker on the night of TET1968.

Soon after TET the Sarge (I think a Staff Sgt---cannot recall his name) continued to stop by our radio compound, along with his new partner. But



the Sarge had an extraordinarily long face and somber countenance, inasmuch as he had suffered a loss which was very personal to him, Sergeant CYR.

On one occasion, and shortly after the initial offensive, the Sarge and his new partner abruptly left our radio shack, after having received some kind of local radio message. They jumped into their jeep, and sped out of our radio compound entrance, turning right toward the perimeter... instead of left toward a more secure position. I saw their jeep speed right, then saw and heard the chattering of the M60 machine gun, which was mounted on the right hand side of their jeep, firing in the direction of the suspected enemy (have color pic of that jeep) who were launching 122mm rockets onto TSN. The Sarge rode shotgun on the right-hand side of the jeep, and was the machine gunner.

We were located amongst the ammunition dumps on TSN, and I was grateful to see those SP's taking off in their jeep and with great purpose, since prior rocket explosions had sent shrapnel all about us, and it was easy to walk around the radio compound and spy and pick up those pieces of razor-sharp shrapnel, which I did.

Now, almost [40] years have passed since TET! Sgt Coggins was among those five SP's on Bunker O51 stood firmly between me and the enemy at the beginning of TET. My thanks to him, however belated they may be, as well as my grateful appreciation to those guys who perished in the defense of TSN. "Thanks" and "grateful appreciation" are words which are really insufficient to express my feelings for them and about what they did.

I remember the TET Offensive event so clearly now as I recall looking at our South Vietnam map of Air Force installations, and noted that each in its turn, and moving from north to south, reported to me that they were under attack. I remember thinking then, and even as I do now, that those guys (the enemy) were pretty damned good at what they were doing. However... to the guys of O51 Bunker at TSN... Coggins, Cyr, Fischer, Hebron, and Mills... thanks boys. You saved my butt! Of that I am sure. It is good to know their names... and remember what they did.

Sgt Alonzo J. Coggins, who was severely wounded and medevaced immediately out of Vietnam, has been located and will receive the Silver Star 12 Feb 1999, at Lackland AFB, Texas! VSPA is the "official sponsor" of the Alonzo J. Coggins Silver Star award ceremony at Lackland!

Watch for Sgt Coggins' story here at VSPA!

Major Bender was also awarded the Silver Star for organizing and rallying the base's second line of defense and personally killing eight enemy soldiers despite being hit repeatedly by enemy fire, resulting in 54 separate wounds. 157 enemy were killed inside the installation and over 350 more outside the base.

USAF email follows, along with VSPA's suggested reading for the battle at Tan Son Nhut Air Base.

From: Joyce Thomas F Maj HQ AETC/SFI

Sent: Thursday, January 14, 1999 2:25 PM

Subject: Alonzo Coggins Silver Star Ceremony

Here's the package I sent up to General Newton at HQ Air Education & Training Command. He's approved the ceremony for Friday, 12 Feb 99, at 1000 during a Lackland AFB Basic Training graduation. We're building the itinerary so if anyone wants to get in, let me know.

Medal Presentation Ceremony for Alonzo J. Coggins

Purpose

* Conduct a medal presentation ceremony for a security policeman who fought and was wounded in a battle 31 years ago and earned the Silver Star and Purple Heart medals for his valor and gallantry.

Why?

* Alonzo J. Coggins never received his medals. He was rushed from the battlefield, medevaced to a stateside hospital to convalesce for six months, and medically discharged from the Air Force. Instead of a formal ceremony, Mr. Coggins received his citations in the mail (minus the actual medals).

Background

* A1C Alonzo J. Coggins, along with four other sentries, manned an old French bunker (bunker O51) at the west end of the main runway at Tan Son Nhut Air Base on 31 January 1968. At about 0320 hours, his position 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 Vietcong guerrillas. Bunker O51 was primary to the security police defensive strategy and a major objective for the enemy as they intended to neutralize air power over Saigon in an all-out attempt to destroy U.S. forces and establish a Communist government in South Vietnam (Tet Offensive). Machine gun fire from Bunker O51, flanking positions, and repeated strafing runs by AC-47 and Cobra helicopter gunships failed to blunt the enemy's forward progress. As Communist forces closed with and enveloped Bunker O51, A1C Coggins' four comrades were killed. The badly wounded airman hid among their bodies when enemy soldiers sprayed the inside of the bunker with AK-47, automatic fire and took over the position. A1C Coggins continued to survive for the next eight hours while U.S. and ARVN forces attempted to retake the bunker. A1C Coggins endured repeated 105 and 155mm artillery barrages, air strikes, and another ground assault by security police and U.S. Army main-battle tanks. At around 1100 hours, A1C Coggins escaped during the confusion of a partial enemy withdrawal and found his way back into friendly lines.

Recommendation

* HQ AETC/CC present medals to Mr. Coggins during a basic military training graduation ceremony at Lackland AFB.

2 Atchs

1. Silver Star Citation
2. Purple Heart Citation

Maj Joyce/AETC/SFI/7-2961/11 Feb 99

As Webmaster for VSPA, I strongly recommend a book called "[The Battle for Saigon](#)" which really tells the Air Force SPS's side of the battle! Don Poss



"The attack force (against TSN AB) numbered 2,665 VC and NVA. The 350-man 269th F Battalion spearheaded the attack on the O51 Bunker... the 267th MF Battalion and the 1st Battalion, 271st Regiment were in column formation behind it. The attack was 'on a very narrow front,' noted a U.S. after-action report. The lead battalion's mission was to effect a (base perimeter) penetration, the second battalion in the line was to exploit the penetration, and the third battalion in line was to destroy the equipment and facilities of TSN...."

Nearly twelve hours after the attack began, the lone survivor of the five men O51 Bunker, Sergeant Alonzo Coggins, was released by the four VC who (still) held the bunker. "... The fire on the bunker came to a screeching halt. It resumed when the delirious, burned, and badly wounded airman proceeded down the perimeter road... the guerrillas did not surrender... (and Tech) Sergeant [Bernard C.] Gifford [Silver Star] of the 377th SPS... peeled off his flak jacket... popped up to hurl a third grenade, which exploded in midair right in the doorway. The O51 Bunker was thus retaken.... Four of the five 377th Security Police at O51 Bunker were KIA. Sgt Coggins, the 5th sentry, was so badly wounded the NVA disregarded him as they spun the post's M60 toward the flight line and opened fire...."



The 25th Infantry Division charged to the rescue and stumbled across the huge force of NVA in the process of attacking the base. The 25th suffered heavy casualties, initially, but as their tanks and reinforcements arrived, they gained a toe hold and broke the back of the attack--- literally saving Tan Son Nhut Air Base.

The savage storming of O51 Bunker by VC and NVA was temporarily successful, but cost tremendous casualties for the NVA, and ultimate defeat. The valiant defense of O51 Bunker delayed enemy advance and provided time for the 377th's SP Response Team to get in line and block the enemies' flight line attack, which gained time for the 25th's arrival. When O51 Bunker was overrun, firing was so intense from the captured bunker that base defenders asked and received permission to fire on the bunker, as everyone assumed the five SPs were dead. The concrete bunker, with Sgt Coggins inside and very much alive, was hit several times.



WILLIAM JOSEPH CYR

Major Award: Silver Star

SGT - Air Force - Regular
22 year old Single, Caucasian, Male
Born on Oct 22, 1945
From WEBSTER, MASSACHUSETTS
Length of service 2 years.
His tour of duty began on Nov 16, 1967
Casualty was on Jan 31, 1968
in GIA DINH, SOUTH VIETNAM
HOSTILE, GROUND CASUALTY
ARTILLERY, ROCKET, or MORTAR
Body was recovered
Religion - ROMAN CATHOLIC
Panel 36E - - Line 5

LOUIS HAROLD FISCHER

Major Award: Silver Star

SGT - Air Force - Regular
22 year old Single, Caucasian, Male
Born on Dec 19, 1945
From WOOD HAVEN, NEW YORK
Length of service 2 years.
His tour of duty began on Apr 15, 1967
Casualty was on Jan 31, 1968
in GIA DINH, SOUTH VIETNAM
HOSTILE, GROUND CASUALTY
ARTILLERY, ROCKET, or MORTAR
Body was recovered
Religion - ROMAN CATHOLIC
Panel 36E - - Line 8

CHARLES EDWARD HEBRON

Major Award: Silver Star

SGT - Air Force - Regular
22 year old Married, Caucasian, Male
Born on Sep 18, 1945
From BRYAN, TEXAS
Length of service 3 years.
His tour of duty began on Mar 21, 1967

Casualty was on Jan 31, 1968
in GIA DINH, SOUTH VIETNAM
HOSTILE, GROUND CASUALTY
ARTILLERY, ROCKET, or MORTAR
Body was recovered
Religion - ROMAN CATHOLIC
Panel 36E - - Line 13

ROGER BERTHA MILLS

Major Award: Silver Star

SGT - Air Force - Regular
21 year old Single, Caucasian, Male
Born on Aug 30, 1946
From HAVRE DE GRACE, MARYLAND
Length of service 3 years.
His tour of duty began on Dec 29, 1967
Casualty was on Jan 31, 1968
in GIA DINH, SOUTH VIETNAM
HOSTILE, GROUND CASUALTY
ARTILLERY, ROCKET, or MORTAR
Body was recovered
Religion - BAPTIST
Panel 36E - - Line 25

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