

AFEHRI File 100.075

Research Materials/Source Documents  
STUDENT PAPERS

FILE TITLE: Security Police and Air Base Defense of Tan Son Nhut, Vietnam

AUTHOR: SMSgt David W. Turner, SNCOA Student, May 1993

Reviewed by:

AFEHRI Representative HR. Akin date 30 DEC 97

EPC Representative John Chis date 14 Jan 98

Scanner Operator Sung Rodha date 14 Jan 98



Gary R. Akin

GARY R. AKIN, CMSgt, USAF

Director

Air Force Enlisted Heritage Research Institute

746  
2-5-50

USAF SENIOR NONCOMMISSIONED OFFICER ACADEMY (AU)

SECURITY POLICE AND AIR BASE DEFENSE OF TAN SON NHUT

by

Senior Master Sergeant David W. Turner, USAF

USAF ENLISTED HISTORY RESEARCH SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY

May 1993

AIR UNIVERSITY  
MAXWELL AFB, GUNTER ANNEX ALABAMA

## SECURITY POLICE AND AIR BASE DEFENSE OF TAN SON NHUT

The Vietnam Conflict is a controversial subject. To the security policeman, issues concerning Air Base Defense are just as controversial and are often hotly debated. The purpose of this essay is to give a brief history of Air Base Defense (ABD) at Tan Son Nhut. Many issues in this essay deal with not only Tan Son Nhut but all ten bases in Vietnam. Therefore some quotes apply to all the bases not just Tan Son Nhut. I will touch on doctrine; some equipment problems; tactics employed; personnel issues; physical security; and where possible, first hand applications of them.

Tan Son Nhut was built by the French in 1920. (3:-) It is located between Bien Hoa and the city formerly called Saigon. Air Base Defense throughout Vietnam was not considered critical until the attack on Bien Hoa, 1 November 1964. The attack "by unconventional ground forces was without an Air Force precedent."  
(7:1)

The old axiom, the squeaky wheel gets the grease, is true. It was so with air base defense in Vietnam. The following excerpt from an oral interview with a security police officer who served at Tan Son Nhut lends credence to this statement. Lt Col Frederick A. DePalma stated "The evolution of air base defense in SEA [South East Asia] has been one of priorities. We have only been able to get sufficient manning and equipment after the fact. The build-up began after Bien Hoa was hit in the fall of 1964. After Tan Son Nhut was hit in early 1966, our force was again increased. Then in 1968, the TET offensive brought our strength up to present levels. Base commanders give defense a high priority after an attack, but as

the frequency or severity of attacks decrease, so do resources allocated to base defense. We stop filling sandbags, stringing wire and installing lights." (4:5)

In a recent briefing on US Military Doctrine at the USAF Senior NCO Academy, Gunter AFB, Alabama, Colonel Dennis M. Drew (He served at Tan Son Nhut in 1966 and personally witnessed a sapper attack on the base) stated "There were almost as many of our aircraft destroyed on the ground in South Vietnam as were destroyed over North Vietnam in the air." (5:-) This information was apparent to those tasked with securing the air bases.

Security police commanders in Vietnam realized the doctrine used for air base defense was inadequate and the command lines were not well thought out. Both were the subject of end of tour reports and historical interviews. "Existing doctrine has no application in RVN [Republic of Vietnam] because it is addressed exclusively to operations under cold war conditions...Security Police forces have been organized, manned, controlled, employed, trained, equipped and mentally oriented in accordance with policies utterly unrelated to the operational environment." (8:3-4)

Colonel Feldman said in his oral interview "When I arrived in 1964, we were operating under the AFM 207-1 security concept. Basically, this involves controlled entry to the base and high priority areas such as the flight line and combat operations center with security guards on the flight line and combat aircraft areas as well as sentry dogs. The idea is to deny entry to unauthorized personnel by strictly controlling ingress and egress. By January

1965 it was obvious that the 207-1 concept was not adequate for this environment." (6:1)

If we don't learn from history we tend to repeat mistakes. "Reliving the Korean War experience, the Air Force commenced in 1961 to send more and more aircraft to these combat exposed bases [refers to all 10 USAF bases in South Vietnam]. At the same time, there was no policy or tactical doctrine for their ground defense. ...more than 6 years (November 1961 - May 1968) elapsed in Vietnam before combat tactics and techniques were adopted." (7:107) There was no concise doctrine for security police until Pacific Air Forces Manual (PACAFM) 207-25, Security Police Guidance for Guerrilla/Insurgency/Limited War Environments, was published 20 May 1968--after the TET offensive.

"But publishing a new defense concept is a far cry from getting the job accomplished. The problem then, as now, is a question of priorities. We could not get priorities for construction of bunkers, towers, fencing, etc., so we had to begin construction piecemeal, using security policemen in self help projects of our own. It was not until after the 1968 TET offensive that we finally got sufficient priorities to develop an adequate defense posture. Even then, after our defenses improved, emphasis relaxed. (6:3)

The internal security concept outlined in PACAFM 207-25 "called for a three zone deployment of USAF security forces in sectors. These zones were termed preventive perimeter, secondary defense and close-in defense. The preventive perimeter traced the base boundary line as closely as possible. Being the first line of defense, it had to detect, report, and engage the enemy as far as feasible from