

## WATER TOWER SNIPERS

Battle of Biên Hòa—Tết Offensive, 1968

*Personal Remembrance of...*

by WO/2LT Lonnie G. Schmidt, Pilot, 118th AHC, 1967-1968

*(Reprint courtesy Jim Bodkin, National Director/Coordinator, for the 145th Combat Aviation Battalion (Vietnam) Association. Read LTC Deets' report.)*

“All night long personnel had received sporadic small arms fire from the water tower near the entrance to the air base. The 12th Combat Aviation Group Commander, Colonel Nick Psaki and elements of the 68th Combat Aviation Company, personally eliminated the enemy while men on the ground observed the battle only 100 meters away. By noon the tower was under control and the enemy guerillas were dead, but they were hard to beat in their well-fortified positions.” LTC Robert M. Deets, Battalion Commander, 145th Combat Aviation Battalion



**Biên Hòa Air Base, Tết 1968: Water-Tower outside main gate of base.**

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### **about 0530 hours, 31 January 1968**

**Lonnie G. Schmidt, WO/2LT, Pilot, 118th AHC, 1967-1968:**

After an eventful night on alert at the Birdcage [AHC gunship apron], I was awakened (trying to sleep in bunker) at first light to the sound of a M-60 chattering away. The weapon was aimed at the newly built and painted (orange-white checkered) water tower by the main gate. I asked one of the men, "What are you firing at?" and the gunner replied, "VC on the water tower".

After telling them to stop shooting unless they could see someone, I went to our Operations shack to check-in and see what was going on, and found myself the only officer around.

About the time I arrived, a jeep pulled up with an Army MP Major May who asked me if we could get up to the top of the water tower. He said that there were VC snipers and had shot two of his MPs at the front gate. He said they couldn't get up from the ground, as there was an unfinished small opening in the bottom, and the VC opened up whenever they approached. He asked, "Could we get some CS gas up there?" I sent an NCO to get some CS, and called the CO (MAJ. Bill Bradner) on the radio, as he was on short final, and asked him to keep his ship running, we needed a lift to the water tower.

I had 4 fragmentation grenades on my flak jacket and traded them for 6 CS, and gave 6 to the Major. I had an AR-15 and six clips loaded with straight tracer, two .38's, and Major May (in Khakis) had an M-14 with one clip.

The MAJ Bradner picked us up and headed for the water tower. I told the Crew Chief to keep his M-60 trained on the tower as there were VC snipers up there. As we approached, I could see no VC, but spotted a metal hatch covering approximately a 3'x 5' opening on the top and gate side of the tower. I realized dropping gas on top wouldn't work. As we approached, I asked the CO to get us closer, and he hovered about 6' over the tower. I got out on the skid and jumped onto the tower, looked up and motioned for the Major to follow. He was shaking his head in the negative, so the Crew Chief "helped" him out with a *gentle* shove. Guess he didn't want to leave me there alone.

The Major and I took cover behind a slight bubble in the tower's center, an 18" rise. Then MAJ



*Bien Hoa Air Base, 188th AHC, "Birdcage" (AHC gunship apron, 1967-1968)  
Battle of Bien Hoa, Bien Hoa Air Base. 188th AHC "Birdcage" gunship  
apron, Tet 31 Jan 1968; NVA attack at the Main Gate new Water Tower.  
Photo © Jean Aker.*

Brander left and it got real quiet. The Major said, "Crawl over there and put some gas down inside." He had the rank (I went over a WO1 and had received a direct to 2nd Lt in November '67). Soooo, I said, "Cover me", laid my AR down, and low crawled over to the hatch cover. As I came along side, I found a small number of brass casings, so knew there had to be someone inside. I rolled on my back, took a CS grenade, held the handle down and pulled the pin. With my left hand, I eased up the lid far enough to slip the grenade inside. Pulled the pin on a second grenade, and repeated the motion, hearing the handle "pop" on the first one as I let go of the second. I then scurried back to the Major and "shelter".

I began to smell the CS gas, and my eyes started to smart. No gasmask! As I looked around the surface of the tower, I could see small fissures and small chunks of concrete missing, evidence of the Bandits and other guns attacking the tower. The Major said, "Go put some more gas in there. " I replied, "It's your turn." So, he crawled over, and flipped in two of his grenades. Still no sound was heard from inside. Getting bolder, I moved over and put in my remaining four grenades, two of the Major's, and retreated to our shelter. Now, with all that gas in there, it was coming up through the cracks in volume! The Major suggested I go put some rounds down inside. I approached the hatch, my AR on full auto, flipped the hatch completely off the 4" lip it covered, and "opened up. " However, only one round fired. I quickly re-cycled the weapon and tried again: Only one round fired again. I moved back to the shelter and told the Major that there was a steel ladder going down into the tower at a 45° angle, and suggested he try to fire inside while I covered him with my .38. He moved over, stood up and "click"--the M-14 didn't fire. I think the sear must have broken when the weapon fell to the tower when we "landed". Soooo, had we been greeted by VC when we first arrived, we would have had one shot, thinking we had one full auto and a semi-auto!

I set the selector at single shot and moved over to the opening and proceeded to empty my AR, as fast as I could pull the trigger [[AR-15](#) very short firing video]. Interesting to see tracers zipping around in the dark, in a round enclosure! I emptied the first clip, and pulled a second from my left jacket pocket, reloaded and emptied it. *60 rounds inside*. No sound from inside. Pulled the second clip from my left jacket pocket, reloaded and emptied that clip. *90 rounds* were fired and still, no sound from inside. I'd been using my right hand to pull the clips and load the weapon, while cradling it in my left arm. Now with having to change hands to get at the clips in my right flak jacket pocket, it was awkward, and so for the first time, shifting the weapon to my right arm, I stepped back from the edge of the opening. As I did, an automatic weapon opened up from inside, knocking concrete from the lip of the opening. Had I remained where I was while changing clips, probably wouldn't be writing this now. Now I'm mad! I reloaded, moved to the narrow side between the hatch and the edge of the tower, and proceeded to pump two more clips down inside, expending all my AR ammo. Pulled one .38 and fired all five rounds. Decided to keep my other .38, "just in case". Now there was only silence, and a lot of gas!

After about 30 minutes, we tried to get the attention of someone to come and get us off, but no luck. After a short while, we decided to climb down a small, thin, shaky, built for 110 lb. Vietnamese, bamboo and vine ladder left from the construction. I had no sling on my AR, so slid it up under my flak jacket. Ouch! The barrel was still hot! As I started down the ladder, I was probably as scared as any time during my tour! I don't mind flying, but am not fond of tall

ladders and high places, and this was about three stories off the ground! I'd just gotten down about three rungs, repeating the *Lord's prayer* quite fervently, when the Major started down. I yelled "NO! Not two on this ladder! Wait!" No dice, here he came! The ladder held and we managed to get down. The Major's MPs on the ground had a jeep and two six packs of cold orange soda waiting for us. We both finished off at least four of the sodas. CS will really dry you out!

After returning to the Villa, the CO called me into his office and proceeded to let me know that I was an *aviator*, not a grunt, and the Army had a lot of money invested in me, and the idea was NOT to get off ON the tower, only DROP the CS gas, that I was due to rotate home in a couple of weeks, was going to get myself killed, etc., etc., and to get my gear and hop a R&R flight anywhere! I think he said all that in one breath! He probably did save my life!

The next morning as I was being driven to the base, we passed Major May, who pulled over and I got a "after action" report. He said there were three VC inside, so full of holes they looked like "Swiss cheese". No gas masks. Must have kept their faces down in a slight depression in the bottom of the tank to breathe (most of the gas was rising to greet us!). Four weapons, an AK-47, Chinese sniper rifle, and don't remember the other two. He thanked me for my efforts and air support, and promised to save a weapon for me to take home as a souvenir.

Well, never saw him again, no souvenir.

That's my recollection of the life and times of my first day of Tết 1968.

*Lonnie G. Schmidt, WO/2LT – Thunderbird One*