

BUNKER HILL-10
BIÊN HÒA AIRBASE, RVN
HOWARD G. YATES,
Augmentee (12th Air Commando Squadron),
3rd Security Police Squadron



Bien Hoa Air Base, Airman Howard Yates, Augmentee, 3rd Security Police Squadron, USAF. Tet 1968.

30 January 1968

About 1500 hours, 30 January 1968

Howard G. Yates, Augmentee (12th Air Commando Squadron/3rd Security Police Squadron):

Condition Red - As we walked past the guard shack, the sentry yelled, “Hey – aren’t you guys Augmentees?”

I thought his recognizing us was so cool that I blurted out, “Yeah, we are.” “Well, you better get your gear and report to the SP armory, ASAP!”

“Why ... what’s up?” Larry Wasserman inquired. The Security Policeman just glanced up with this We’re in a world of hurt expression on his face and pointed to the security placard over the door—it was red. Now, we knew darn well what that meant. “Condition Red” means attack is imminent. Even so, we convinced ourselves that this was probably just a readiness-drill.

About 1600 hours, 30 January 1968

We had hustled to our hooch, grabbed our web belts, helmets and whatever else we thought we might need and made-tracks to the SP squadron armory. By the time we arrived, preparations for the defense of Biên Hòa Airbase were well underway.

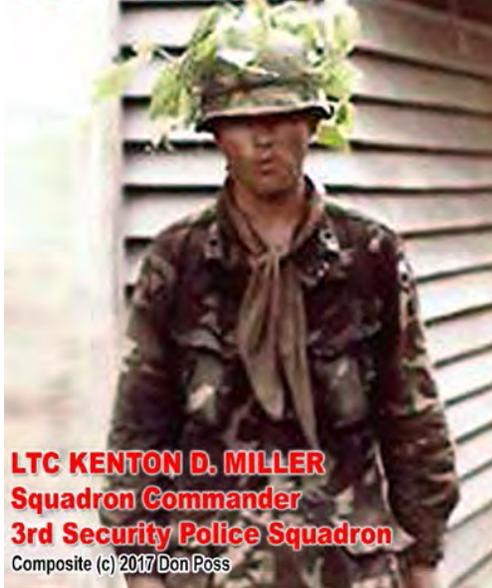
Weapons and ammunition were being issued at the supply window in a hurried but very orderly manner. Security Police and Augmentees, already equipped, gathered in small groups talking amongst themselves. Some were busy checking and rechecking their weapons while others were draping ammo bandoleers and stuffing every available pocket with extra ammo magazines.

The air was filled with an undertone of anxious chatter and an occasional plume of cigarette smoke. When it came my turn at the armory window, I was handed an M-16 and told to grab some ammunition. I asked, “How much can I take?” Now, I don’t recall this guy’s rank or what he looked like, for that matter, but I do remember his overly accommodating reply: “Partner, you can take as much as you think you’ll need.” That comment dashed any thought

I had of this exercise being a drill. I stuffed every pocket so full that I clanked when I walked.

Guardmount: No sooner did we get our ammo, when someone yelled, “Ten-hut!” An officer, later identified to me as Lt. Colonel Kent Miller, commander of the 3rd Security

**BATTLE OF BIEN HOA, BUNKER HILL-10
TET 1968**



LTC KENTON D. MILLER
Squadron Commander
3rd Security Police Squadron
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Police Squadron, walked hastily into our midst and began, “*We don’t have time for that,*” (meaning the proper protocol) and immediately told all present to sit down and listen up.

Biên Hòa Air Base: LTC Kenton Miller, Squadron Commander, 3rd SPS Tết 31 Jan 1968.

LTC Miller began his briefing by pointing to an aerial infrared photo map that had just been rolled out, and made particular reference to the area shaded in red. *(I will paraphrase LTC Miller’s comments.) “That big red blob you see to the east of Biên Hòa Airbase is what military intelligence believes to be a battalion-size concentration of North Vietnamese and Viet Cong soldiers.”*

When I heard the word “battalion” I had no inkling of what that meant in terms of numbers (The Air Force had “squadrons” not “battalions”), but having seen most of John Wayne’s war movies I figured that a battalion was more folks than we wanted to try to get on base—uninvited!

I was assigned with Larry Wasserman and a young fellow named Terry, whose last name escapes me, to ride with SP Sergeant Richard Lee and Airman First Class Simmons. Our call sign was “Defense-6” and our duties that night consisted of traveling the entire circumference of Air Base, along what was appropriately called “Perimeter Road,” delivering hot coffee, sandwiches, and ammunition to the various guard posts.

We drove north along Perimeter Road and passed some 8 to 10 Augmentees, who had taken up a defensive-position, just south of the Army’s Military Police Check Point. We exchanged some rather earthy salutations with them, also meant to ease the tension, and drove on to the MP Check Point. Even though the MPs at the check point were Army we did the Air Force thing and offered them some coffee. They told us they were good to go, so we moved on, making rounds.

Hours passed....

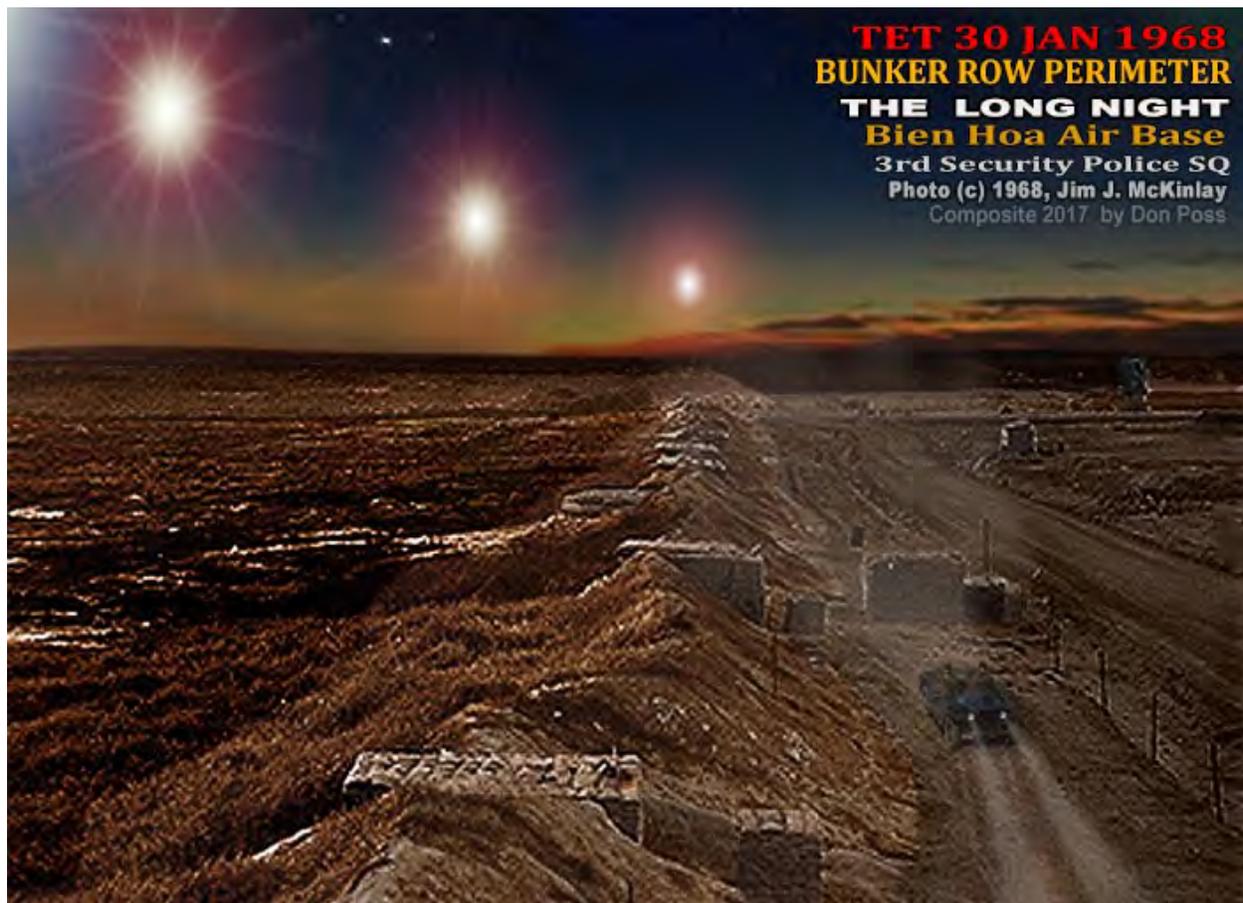
31 January 1968

0200 hours, 31 January 1968

Defense-6: It was somewhere around 0200 hours (2 a.m. for you civilians) that we pulled up next to Bunker Hill-10 (an old French concrete fortification that was somewhat modified with sandbags and lumber to meet Air Force Base defense needs) for the first time. A1C Simmons and Sgt Richard Lee chatted briefly with a couple of the occupants, and the exchange of several one-liners meant to fend off the anxious tension we all felt. As we pulled away, A1C Simmons told them we would see them on our next trip.



Biên Hòa Air Base, Bunker Hill-10, Tet, 30-31 Jan 1968: They're Coming!



Biên Hòa Air Base, Tết 31 JAN 1968: The 3rd Security Police Squadron mans all Air Base Defense posts. [Click to see DAY photo.](#)

0300 hours, 31 January 1968

Defense-6 drove around to the west side of the MP Check Point and A1C Simmons parked the truck. He told us we might want to grab a bite from our box lunches while we had the chance. In retrospect, the timing of his statement was perfect; eerie, but perfect. I ate my sandwich and drank some coffee but saved my apple for later. I lit my C-rat cigarette and pushed my helmet back on my head. Almost immediately I heard his “crackling and whooshing” noise right over my head.

My first thought was, “What the hell was that?”



Biên Hòa AB, Rocket Attack, Tết 31 January 1968. Note Tower, bottom center. Photo by Coco.

Within seconds I found out: It was the first of many 122mm rockets to slam into Biên Hòa Airbase in those early morning hours. It hit southwest of our position with a gut-wrenching explosion that plumed into a bright orange and red mushroom cloud. From our vantage point it looked as if our own squadron area (the 12th Air Commandos) had just been blown to bits. I remember thinking — *Oh, God—they're all dead.*

I'm not sure if it was Sgt Lee or A1C Simmons but somebody yelled “Get out!” I didn't have to think about it, I just reacted. We all hit the ditch alongside the road about the time the second or third rocket hit the ground. For a moment, I thought I had swallowed an earthquake. My insides shook uncontrollably from the explosion's concussion shock-wave. I kept telling myself, “Your okay man ... seemed like fifteen or twenty minutes, and then all fell quiet.

This reprieve was to be short-lived.

Not long after *Defense-5* left, a static-filled transmission came over A1C Simmons' radio. It was a *Windy* unit (Security Police K-9 handler), Airman Robert (Bob) Press, calling *Defense-6* (us), to advise that his dog Diablo X313 was alerting strongly on the fence line and he requested permission to pop a hand-flare. "*Permission granted*" came the reply from CSC.



Biên Hòa AB, Tết 1968: First-Alert, K9 handler Robert (Bob) Press' Sentry Dog, Diablo X313, Alerts toward perimeter.

We could see the hand pop-flare streaking, arcing into the dark night — Pop! It burst into a glow bright enough to light up a football field and then began its slow wobbly descent. Almost immediately we heard a brief but distinct-intense sound of small arms fire. The *Windy* unit, we learned later, had stirred a covey of Viet Cong just outside the wire.

Then we heard "Pop-whoosh" noises on the perimeter and the darkness was illuminated by what looked like gigantic 4th of July sparklers. A1C Simmons broke the news: "Trip flares—they're coming across the wire!"

Oh, this is not going to be a good night, I thought.



K-9 PERIMETER POST
TET 1968, Bien Hoa AB (near Bunker Hill 10)
 3rd Security Police Squadron
 Handler A1C Bob Press fires a hand-flare and radios:
My God, they're everywhere—Charlie's in the wire! He commands his dog to attack.
 Moments later he is wounded and plays dead as VC and NVA swarm over and around him.
 Sentry Dog Diablo (X313) attacks and is quickly shot dead.
 (c) 2015, by Don Poss

(Above) Biên Hòa AB, Tết 1968: First-Alert, K9 handler Robert (Bob) Press' Sentry Dog, Diablo X313, Alerts toward perimeter, pops hand-flare. Handler Press is shot, wounded., and plays-dead.



TET 31 JAN 1968
BATTLE OF BIEN HOA
BUNKER HILL-10
 3rd Security Police Squadron
 (c) 2016, by: Don Poss

(Above) Biên Hòa AB, Tết 31 Jan 1968: A1C Simmons broke the news: "Trip flares—they're coming across the wire!"

I said to no one in particular, more out of apprehension than curiosity, “I wonder how many are out there?” Without taking his eyes off the trip flares, A1C Simmons came back with, “Hard telling.” Well, that sure didn’t make me feel any better. Then it started: Small arms and machinegun fire erupted all over the east perimeter.

About 0325 hours, 31 January 1968

A1C Simmons (*Defense-6*) led us down a slope to a knoll about 15 or 20 yards from where we had left the truck. We ran, crouched and crawled through patches of burnt elephant grass. The Air Force periodically burned the thick tall grass to provide a better field of fire for defenders and to eliminate potential hiding places for Charlie. The ash from burnt grass was like black talcum powder—it stuck to everything—and got up our noses, in our ears and eyes. If there was an upside to the stuff, I guess it was nature’s way of blacking out our faces.



Biên Hòa AB: Perimeter grass fire. Tết 31 Jan 1968.

The VC attacking forces were making their way from the perimeter toward the interior of the base, in a westerly direction. Their path was to our south and took them directly into the unrelenting hail of fire from various Security Police positions, including Bunker Hill-10. Fighting was intense on both sides. We listened to the *Defense-6* radio to keep track of what was going on. The radio voices from the midst of battle were those of determination, and courage, but we could tell they were having a tough time of it.

Weapons' firing was intense and deafening. As I lay there peering over the top of the knoll, with my M-16 poised for the inevitable, I suddenly felt the gravity of our situation. I was pretty sure that I wasn't going to make it home. I made my peace with the Almighty, asking Him for courage in the face of the enemy and to take care of my loved ones back home.

Our direction from A1C Simmons (Defense-6 rider) was fairly-straight forward and simple—we were to hold this position because, "When they try to get out of here, they'll be coming right this way!" I dropped my head down and thought, "Damn, he had to say that."

About 0330 hours, 31 January 1968

During the heaviest fighting, we could see silhouettes running around the Aircraft Engine Run-up pad, but due to darkness we were uncertain if they were enemy infiltrators or Security Police defenders. Not wanting to hit any Americans, we held our fire until we were absolutely certain about our targets.

We could also see and hear the blistering fire power coming from Bunker Hill- 10—the Little Alamo—as some were calling it. We could see and feel explosions after explosions as VC and NVA hand-held RPG rockets blasted the bunker, but Bunker Hill- 10's defensive punishing- fire never stopped! I remember thinking, "Those poor guys are taking a pounding. I hope they can hold on."



Puff the Magic Dragon, an old C-47 aircraft left over from WWII and capable of turning the jungle into tossed salad with its 7.62 mm Gatling guns, droned overhead and began kicking-flares—what a welcome sight.

As the first couple of million-candle parachute flares drifted toward earth we were suddenly confronted by staggering dark figures, arms outstretched, looming out of the darkness. Three of us opened fire but the bullets ricocheted.

A1C Simmons looked at us and calmly and said—Grave markers. It seemed we had parked ourselves right on the edge of an old French cemetery. Man, did I feel relieved—stupid—but relieved. [Drifting flares cause fixed-objects' shadows to merrily dance through your imagination.]

About that time, A1C Simmons left to retrieve some hand-flares from the truck, but he must have gotten pinned down. It seemed like forever before we saw him again.

Tracers had been zipping all around but for some reason the fighting seemed to subside momentarily. Having been out there for what seemed a lifetime (for some it was), but in actuality was only three or four hours, I had a hankering for a smoke, by this time our ears were ringing and talking in a normal voice just wouldn't cut it.



Biên Hòa AB, Tết 1968, Old French Cemetery shoot out.

I got Larry's attention and motioned that I wanted a cigarette. He mouthed, "I don't have any."

"You don't have any—what happened to them?" I shouted; smoking a cigarette was now a greater necessity than noise-discipline.

"I dropped the pack—if you want one, they're out there somewhere," and with that he pointed to the open field where the tracers had once again begun to fly. I considered the field with a bug-storm of red (ours) and green (VC/NVA) tracers and thought "Nah ... nevermind." So, I took out my two cigars and tossed him one. I motioned that I needed a light by mimicking the use of a cigarette lighter. Larry looked at me, grinned and pointed to the open field. It was probably a bad time to light up anyway.

We knew from the radio-chatter that Tan Son Nhut Airbase was also under heavy rocket and ground attack. What we didn't know was—so was every other major US installation in South Vietnam.

As the SP Defense Forces began making progress in repelling invaders, we could see the enemy had apparently gathered in and around a drainage ditch east of the runway. We figured they were either regrouping for another try, or preparing to get out of Dodge.

We prepared ourselves for the onslaught of their retreat, but it never came in our direction.

Sometime before dawn I heard that familiar whup, whup, whup of Hueys' and Cobra gunships' rotors overhead. It was an Army Huey gunship. I don't remember if I just thought, "Hot damn. We got'em now!" or if I actually yelled it out. The Huey's dared a pass at the Aircraft Engine Run-up pad and drainage ditch area and cut loose with a couple of rockets. Oh, that was so awesome! Then he circled around and hit'em again. On about his third pass he came way too close to us so Larry grabbed the radio and called *Defense-6*, yelling, "Break, Break!" He had to yell to clear the channel. "*Defense-6* to Defense Control."

"Go ahead Defense-6," came the reply.

"Defense-6, we are in an unmarked position, on the east perimeter near the old graveyard and the gunship is firing almost on top of us."

Control came back with an answer that we really didn't want to hear. "We don't have direct communications with the Army choppers; just try to let them know you're friendlies."

Oh great! I'm gonna die here, I thought. As the gunship made another pass overhead, Larry, in an attempt to signal the pilot, waved his hands and "shot him a bird." The door gunner, observing Larry Wasserman's gesture, returned his salute and the pilot redirected his fury in the other direction.

About 1000 hours, 31 January 1968

The fighting continued well into the morning, but the resilience of the North Vietnamese soldier and Viet Cong was apparently running out of steam. Their small arms fire had, but for an occasional burst, fallen silent. We took stock of our situation and discovered that our ammunition had nearly been exhausted.

About 1200 Noon, 31 January 1968, Perimeter Sweep:

By the time afternoon rolled around, teams of Security Police, Augmentees and a handful of Army troops (from whence they came I have no idea) had begun forming up to perform security-sweeps to detect, apprehend, or neutralize any strangling VC or NVA forces.

There were also reports of snipers on base, which didn't do anything for my comfort level. On the other hand—maybe I'll find that missing pack of cigs.

Side-by-side we began a slow, methodical and very cautious sweep from the perimeter to the runway. As we neared the drainage ditch, which ran perpendicular to the runway, someone shouted, "Hold up!" I stopped and looked toward my left and saw a Security Police member (I think he was an NCO, maybe a Staff Sergeant) standing in the open, confronting a subject in some brush. There was a loud "pop" and the Sergeant went down. What ensued was a brief but devastating report from at least ten nearby defenders. Another VC had gone to the "Big Rice Paddy in the Sky."

As we conducted our search along the drainage ditch I was walking behind one of those army soldiers who showed up to give us a hand. He looked like he had been in the field for

six weeks: He was dirty, smelly, grungy and unshaven, but he was also loaded for bear, and I for one was glad he was there.

Ahead of us and to the left, down in the ditch, was a clump of brush wherein several VC had set up a machinegun position, and the Viet Cong machine gunner and a couple of his buddies were floating, motionless, on top of the bloody water.

Suddenly the ground pounder in front of me let loose with a long burst from his Tommy gun. He killed them all—again. Then he turned toward me, spit a mouthful of tobacco juice on the ground and said, “I thought I saw one move.”

Larry taped me on the back and commented, “That boy’s been in-country way too long.” Rounding the corner of the arming/de-arming maintenance shack on the east-end of the runway, and still very vigilant for enemy snipers, I was confronted by a picture that will be forever etched in my memory: A Viet Cong guerilla fighter lay dead under a portable power unit (a big tractor) which he had mistakenly used for cover during the night. One of his arms had been peeled back at the shoulder and everything above his eyebrows was gone, the obvious result of intense fire power from the Security Police bunker on the airfield. Somehow, I overcame the urge to heave my guts out.

We completed our part of the sweep and were told to gather up near the end of the runway. The officer in charge dismissed several of us, “Men, go get some chow and some sleep. We will no doubt need you again tonight.” Larry and I just looked at each other. I know what he was thinking, but I won’t repeat it.

We turned to leave but lingered just long enough to watch the Quan Canh, South Vietnamese Air Force Police, interrogate a few prisoners, who were sitting on a log with their hands restrained. In a sudden fit of rage one of the Quan Canh rifle butted a restrained prisoner on the side of the head and knocked him to the ground. Now what he did was probably not in keeping with the rules of the Geneva Convention but I just grinned and thought, “Whoops—wrong answer.”

The black-dust from the scorched elephant grass was smeared on my sweaty and greasy face. Intact, we were all filthy, exhausted, and hungry. Our first priority was to head in the direction of the chow hall. As we approached the control tower on the way we notice a couple of officers surveying the damage to a shiny blue and bullet-riddled staff car. Suddenly one of the officers, a colonel, saw us walking toward him. We simultaneously rendered the best salute we could, given our condition. The Colonel snapped to attention whipped his hand through the air and popped one of the finest salutes I have ever seen on us. He asked us if we are doing okay and I said, “Fine Sir, thank you.” He came back with, “Oh, no ... it is I who should be thanking you. You guys saved our butts last night.” As he dropped his salute he said some-thing like, I’ll bet you men are tired and hungry.

We agreed, and went on our way.

I had a suspicion that the cook wasn’t feeling very hospitable as we shuffled up to the serving line. He barely made eye contact but continued to wipe down the grill. “I just cleaned this thing so, nothing till dinner,” he grumbled. We stood there in disbelief staring

at him. When he did look up he got an eyeful. He saw four scruffy looking airmen, weapons slung over shoulders and the look of hungry puppies on their faces. He stared for a moment and then stammered, "Were you out there ... on the perimeter ... all night? Damn man—why didn't you say something?"

That was the best hot breakfast I've had in a long time.

My Bunk - I made a quick trip to the officer's showers (they had hot water), washed off two layers of grime and then shuffled back to the hooch. I crawled into my bunk and laid my head back. "Finally, I can get some shut eye."

I didn't think it worth the energy to find a cigarette.