

The Battle of Biên Hòa TẾT 31 JAN 1968 by David Parks, SP5

US Army, 199th Light Infantry Brigade,
out of Long Bien

Biên Hòa Air Base: As a SP5 (specialist fifth class), I was a member of an Army Radio Intelligence Team (two of us) who were billeted with the 7th Air Force, 3rd SPS, on Biên Hòa AB, in January of 1968. We were there the night of Tết 1968. My parent unit was the 856th Radio Research Detachment, attached to the 199th Infantry Brigade, Light, Separate, out of Long Bien.



David Parks, SP5, US Army, 199th Light Infantry Brigade, out of Long Bien, RVN.

Do I ever remember Tết! A fellow by the name of Carpenter and I (I wish I could remember his first name) were billeted with the Security Police Squadron, on Biên Hòa Air Base, the night of Tết 1968. We had been with them for only a few days. I think the Fire Base we were on was called Keene, big place, lots having been relocated west of Saigon (don't know the name of that op, lots of VC/NVA). There had not been any *friendlies* in there since the French War. A brand new in country brigade of the 101st' relieved us and got their asses kicked, *and kicked*, and kicked again at that place.

The security unit had a great party a day or two prior to Tết, featuring a red headed Aussie striper (a round eye!) that was to die for. I still dream about that winch, what a strip-show she put on. I understand that, that unit took a lot of KIA/WIA during Tết, I'm glad they at least got to have that party and see that striper before Tết came down.

My partner and I had set up a PRD-1 radio Listening Post atop a very high and large *sand pile* at the [west] end of one of the runways, across the wire from the Buddhist monastery (not at the end that took the ground attack). The Buddhist monastery was across the wire and to our front and overlooked our position. That worried us, but we were assured by an Air Force officer that the Viet Cong never started anything from that location.

Beyond, and to the right of the monk's compound, I remember a medium sized river. There was a ARVN compound on the other side of that river. Those ARVNs (our allies?) liked to snipe with M60's at aircraft on final approach, and, would send a bullet or two our way on occasion. Several times we witnessed aircraft having to veer off after taking fire from that compound. They always did it at night. We were sniped at from that direction the day of Tết. More on that later.

I have often thought of that night and how close a lot of us came to getting our tickets punched, some did of course. First the rocket attacks, then sappers and ground attacks, and then the next morning and all day—snipers.

The evening of Tết, Carpenter and I were on top of the *sand pile*, in the little sandbag bunker we had built, and were manning our position as usual. About midnight, every VC/NVA radio in the county went silent, "*Nil More Heard*" for sure! We could not raise a *ditty-bop* for love nor money. It was the damndest thing I ever didn't hear. Complete radio silence. We knew from intelligence reports that the VC/NVA had something in mind for their Tết celebration. *Remember there was a truce in effect!* There had been many warnings issued by various Intel Agency's in the weeks preceding Tết.

There were 87 separate Intelligence agency's in-country! Of course, you learn to take those reports with a large grain of salt. Carpenter was on his second tour, and had far more experience than me. His remark after the radios went silent, and I have never forgot this, was, "If anything is going to happen, it will start at three o'clock, we should go and get some sleep." Here I was with this dread loaded into my heart, due to the VC radio's going off the air, and his suggestion is that we go and sleep!! We went back to the Security Police hooch, had a C-Rat snack, and went to bed.

Ka-Boom! 0300 hours sharp, 122mm rockets are walking fast toward our area. Those rockets made the most god-awful sound, a roar with ever increasing volume, and then BOOM—a very large explosion. A terror weapon for sure. Those things could and did blow a barracks to toothpicks.

I leaped off of the top bunk and ran like hell for a bunker, unlike our Air Force cohorts, Carpenter and I slept with our boots and fatigues on. I was the second one to the bunker and dove in head first, others piled in on top of me as the rockets walked through our area. Soon after arriving in the bunker I noted that I had failed to grab my weapon (I carried a M-79 for the most part, had a .38 pistol, and for good measure, kept an M-16 in the jeep or leaned against the PRD-1). Not one soul in that bunker had a weapon, I believe the Air Force fellows were made to lock theirs up at night.

After the rockets stopped, AK-47's started (or maybe they were there all the time). That's when we found out that there were sappers on the base. I felt like a damned fool for having left my weapon hanging on my bunk. By now I was wide awake, scared and really starting to miss my weapon. I was sure the sappers could hear my heart pounding. The folks in the bunker held a brief debate, in their skivvies, on whether to leave the bunker or not.

Carpenter and I just up and unassed the bunker, heading for our weapons. Along the way we decided the best place for us was our sand pile, going there seemed a good idea for some reason.

Doing short rushes, we finally made it to the barracks, going in presented another problem, what if there were sappers inside? What if our own troops were inside and armed? If we went in unannounced we could get zapped. We decided and rushed through the door, running for our bunks and grabbing our stuff. We loaded our jeep and headed for the sand

pile.

Carpenter was driving and I was on shotgun duty. We were going fast, that seemed the best way to avoid getting hit if we were fired on. We knew by now there were definitely sappers on the base. There was a crashed Spooky gunship about half way down the runway to our right, we could see other damaged aircraft too.

We were driving down a taxi way when suddenly spotlights blared and someone on a bullhorn ordered us to HALT in no uncertain terms! It was the Air Force Security people—and they meant business.

Carpenter did a great job of locking up the brakes and got us stopped before running over the roadblock, I did a great job of throwing up my hands! I felt for sure that these guys would shoot first and ask questions never. Both sides in this encounter were heavily armed and scared, not a great combination.

The jeep slid to a stop, and we followed commands to get out, and assume the prone position on the flight line! Fortunately, one the Air Force fellows ID'd us to the others, and we were allowed to proceed to our sand pile.

It was pitch black out near the sand pile, and there were firefights going on in any direction you wanted to look. Near us however, all was calm. We made it up to our little bunker and proceeded to go to work. From our vantage point we watched one hell of a firefight going on down at the other [east] end of the runway. The VC were trying to overrun that [east] end of the base. Stray rounds from that fight caused us to keep our heads down. The fight went on darn near all night, until a gunship nosed in and began whaling on Charlie.

As quiet as the enemy radios had been earlier, they were making up for now, with radio chatter everywhere. We looked for "ducks," the loud ones, and RDF'd [Radio Direction Finder: device for finding direction/bearing to enemy radio source] them to the net. We worked the rest of the night in relative peace, keeping a sharp lookout for sappers. I noted the ARVN compound across the river was NOT getting the crap kicked out of them like other areas of Biên Hòa Air Base.

By dawn the next morning, the firefight at the other end of the runway had cooled somewhat. The Air Force had managed to clear the runways and get some ordnance flying—watching a Spooky working out was a joy to behold. Loved them!

It was going to be another hot day. Carpenter and I discovered we had not brought nearly enough water and thought we should go and get some. I was elected. I stood up and began putting on my battle gear, a bullet impacted the sand bag near my leg. About four inches higher and it would have impacted me! We were under the careful eye of a sniper! That @!#\$%# did not let us show our heads for the rest of the day. Every time you showed him a target—*zing!* right over your head. He was a good shot and came

close several times. The bullet would arrive first, followed a couple of seconds later by a faint pop. The guy was between us and the Biên Hòa Army Post, and a long ways off. We could not locate him to return fire. That was very frustrating to me, I wanted to shoot that bastard in the worst way. I never got the chance.

I'll tell you one thing, I have fired most of the common weapons in the Commie arsenal they are all pretty much crap as far as accuracy that sniper must have had a scope and a tuned rifle to come as close as he did, as often as he did. He was a darned good shot, and remember it was a hot day and the heat waves were affecting his shooting. Today, I'd shake his hand if I had the chance, then I'd kick him in the butt for shooting at me.

We stayed atop our *sand pile*, avoiding our friendly sniper, till dark then went back to our Air Force home, and to that lovely mess hall. Sorry to say, my Air Force friends had suffered greatly that night and day.

Carpenter and I really were loving living with the Air Force: real beds with sheets and everything, and oh, *great food!* I will never forget those Air Force guys treated us *right*. The Biên Hòa Air Base mess hall was overwhelming: *real eggs, fruit, steaks*, and, honest to God *real milk*—not that powered stuff! A nice change from C-Rats three times a day! I will never forget going to the mess hall for breakfast the first morning and being asked, "*How do you want your eggs?*" I was *astounded* and overjoyed.



BIEN HOA AIR BASE: Christmas, 1967 has just passed, and New Year's celebration is at hand. Vietnamese New Year, TET, is coming, and just days-away. Two 3rd Security Police Squadron A2C Airmen sit down in Bien Hoa's Enlisted Chow Hall for breakfast, unaware of the coming *Battle of Bien Hoa*, 31 January 1968. *Their lives are about to change. . . FOREVER*