

## *Biên Hòa Air Base*

# *Red Horse Augmentees!*

### *3rd Security Police Squadron*

© 1999, by *Robert (Bob) Vitray, Augmentee*



**RED HORSE**, created during the Vietnam War when the service recognized the unique need for a mobilized heavy repair and construction outfit, RED HORSE squadrons can deploy quickly to remote locations around the world. At their deployed locations, they are able to provide the Air Force with a remote construction capability in which bare bases can be set up to support the deployment of other military forces. Additionally, during wartime, the unit performs heavy damage repairs required for the recovery of critical Air Force facilities and utility systems.

*Red Horse airmen have supported operations in Vietnam, Desert Storm, Somalia, and Bosnia. Squadron airmen are often the first DoD military personnel in a theater of operations and are prepared to meet all civil engineering challenges, in keeping with their motto: "Can Do, Will Do, Have Done."*

### **Red Horse Augmentees, 3rd SPS, Biên Hòa Air Base, 1967**

**Robert (Bob) Vitray**, Engineering Entomology Specialist, 3rd SPS Augmentee.

**Biên Hòa Air Base — Tết 1968:** The truth about Security Police *Red Horse* Augmentees is that we were the guys who could be spared. It was not so much that we were a bunch of misfits, though there were elements of that in our selection. For most of us it was just our jobs...*Me*, for instance; I was supposed to spray bugs and trap rats. That is, after all, what MOS 56650 engineering entomology specialists do...I also received some *vital to the mission* cross training into air conditioning—I was taught how to carry the compressor- end (heaviest) of a window unit in order to earn my very small end of the take (light) when we fixed air conditioners and ice makers for other outfits. I would do this in accordance with the basic Red Horse mission which was to carve a base capable of handling a squadron of heavy fighters from virgin territory in 30 days. If you are trying to do this in a jungle or swamp or somewhere that diseases are carried by critters like mosquitoes or ticks then Red Horse was going to need bug stompers (*me*) to protect our guys from the nasty critters and air conditioner failures. And even if we weren't needed for our main specialty we were cross-trained into nearby related fields.

I occasionally worked on our water truck and helped SSgt Nonaka haul water from the base plant up to our elevated tank on Red Horse Hill. Of course, we maintained Red Horse equipment for free which meant that the Red Horse dayroom was always cool and always had ice. We had built our own barracks with its own little quad and individual cabins for our senior NCOs. Our Colonel lived in a fine trailer over on the old part of the base and his air conditioning always worked. I was very distant from the Colonel, but I liked my working environment.

I was able to take off to do "termite inspections" for whole mornings. I read and shopped and dropped into the NCO Club for pre-lunch drinks with some other characters who somehow had been temporarily cut-loose from accountability in the middle of this

strangely peaceful war; and that was the strange thing about it. Daytime on Biên Hòa Air Base was, if anything, even livelier and more colorful than daily life on a stateside base. Because bug sprayers are charged with chasing varmints in base housing I got to know a little about some of the strangeness of family-life. But the invariable rule stateside was "that nothing can be seen from the street"—Biên Hòa was in the heart of the orient, and they didn't have that rule.

The base was a collage of laundry flying from backyard lines, structures of every sort of function and design. Vietnamese single-family huts could be seen from some sections of the perimeter and their version of a townhouse from the section next to the town itself. On the base, we lived in sandbag bunkered hooches, with cloth tops, individual hooches and trailers, large two story 50 men barracks, and an assortment of hangars, butler buildings, Quonset huts, French bunkers and several institutional buildings done in something from the French Colonial era. The French stuff looked like a concrete version of Napoleon's idea of classic Greek architecture. Heavy and stolid and overlaid with a patina of mold or something that had darkened and mottled the exterior wall into various shades of greenish tan.

I was knocked out of my job as a bug-bonker by the Ranch Hands who flew over Biên Hòa every month or so in their spray bar equipped C-123s, and dosed the bugs-and-us with Malathion. We were moving into two story wooden barracks when I arrived. The two hooches still in use over by the outdoor theater didn't want any new guys so we moved right in to these fairly plush conditions of two story wooden barracks with fully louvered screened sides. Each two-men bunk had a 36" ceiling fan. In the evening this arrangement was fairly comfortable and permitted us to sleep. I must have got the habit there because now it is almost impossible to sleep without a fan blowing air over me.

I had the Life of Riley. In the morning, we would very visibly run our rat traps in the cantonment area. Then, having done our duty for all to see we would separate after agreeing to meet later in the day to perform more "duty." This was where my free time came in. I was working my way through the James Michener and Frank Yerby collections down at the paperback trading library. I would go over to the music library and record stuff to bring back to the reel to reel in my cubicle. Once, I decided to go swimming at the small pool at the NCO Club. It was like swimming in over chlorinated-piss. Once was enough, but I had to do it once just so I could tell the tale.

So they had a certain number of us at loose ends and General Momyer or somebody wanted to have his "pink ponies" live up to the line in their song "We can build and we can fight." We had all gone through two weeks of basic infantry training under the supervision of some very able Sergeants from the Air Police Academy at Lackland AFB, San Antonio, Texas. These guys treated us with respect while they taught us to respect our weapons. It was while I was on bivouac during this training that my M-16 jammed. We were using blanks for realism during maneuvers which made a jam more likely. It was the damnedest, most frustrating thing. I am grateful that I was not in a real war at the time. We were in a field exercise and I had just fired. I heard the spring in the shoulder stock go "sprong" and the slap of the bolt. I pulled the trigger for the next round and it didn't move.

I had trained on the M-1 Garand, M-1 carbine, '03 bolt action Springfield. I tried pulling the charging handle. Nothing happened. I tried to find something to slap to force the bolt forward. No luck. I remembered that if the weapon had been fired enough it might have enough heat to cause the round in the chamber to fire by "cooking off". Even blank rounds can be dangerous if they go off unexpectedly. I sat down and waited while the rifle cooled. It seemed like an hour because people were running around me in the Florida panhandle forest firing off blanks and capturing each other and being ruled dead by the umpires and I had to hide out and wait for my M 16 to come to its senses and get to work. I dreaded having that happen when it was for real.

So, there I was running at large on a big Air Base—you know it was too good to last. Eventually somebody in the office figured out that the bug sprayers weren't really doing anything. Then they put that together with the fact that the SP squadron needed warm bodies. I also had apparently demonstrated some sense with firearms. The worst they expected us to do under actual fire was freeze up. That's bad, but it is redeemable. A kick in the ass is recommended as initial therapy. And it is not the worst. It is not suddenly standing up from the hole like John Wayne and bravely facing the enemy down with your fierce visage as you spray him with .223 lead.

### *after* **Christmas, 1967**

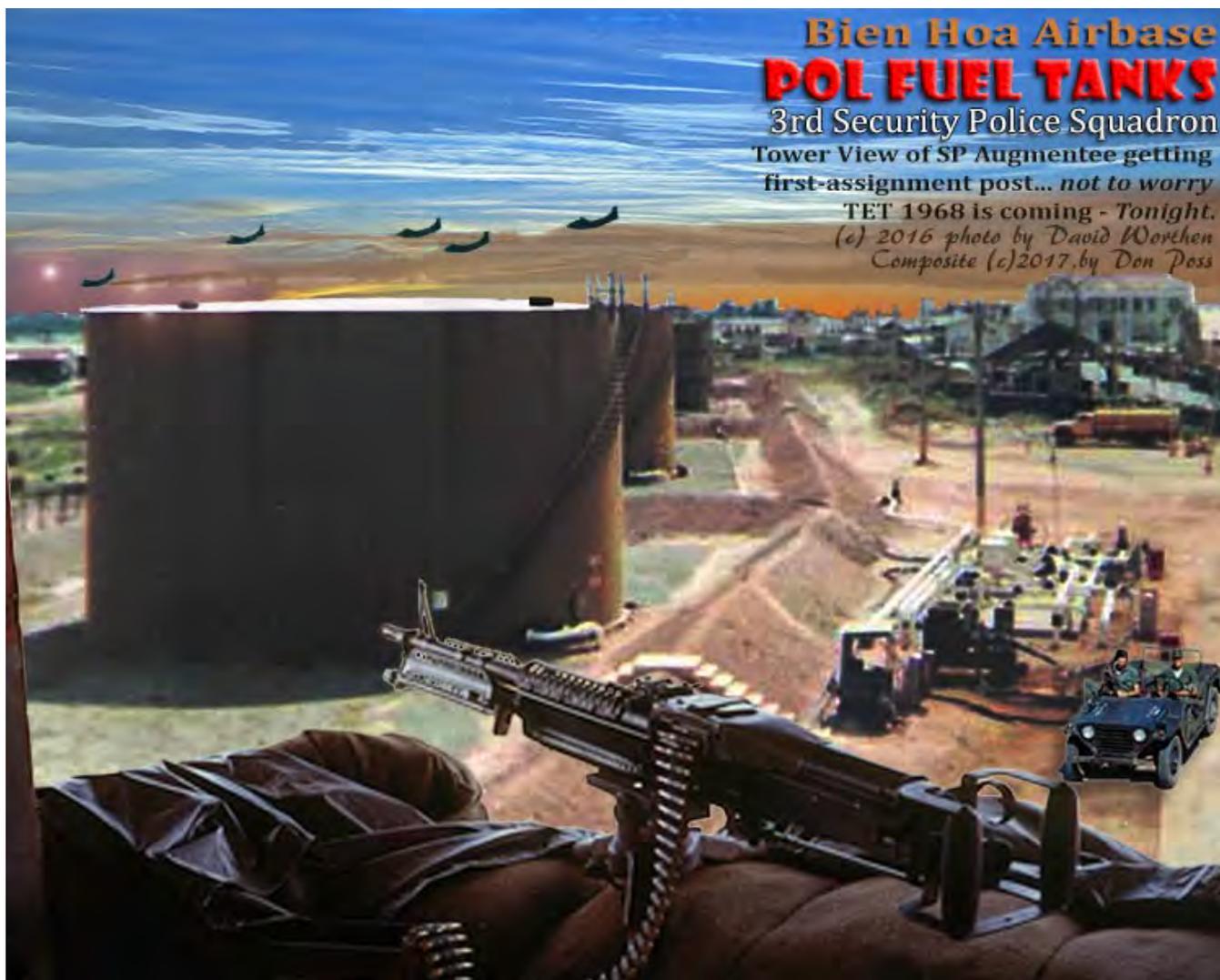
I think that we started our initial augmentee-assignments just after Christmas 1967. During this time, we were either delivered to the SP squadron at Guardmount or, more often, parceled out to various SP positions as directed by one of the shift NCOs. Once I actually wound up in the back of a jeep watching the real SPs pull on doors in the work and storage area and answer calls while a can of beanie-weenies was cooking on the manifold. This was just routine police work. Or, a couple of us might wind up assigned to one of the French forts, or one of us might join an SP in his "foxhole"—that's what we Red Horse types called them although they were just a little circle of sandbags laid on the ground. I wondered how effective they would be against a round from an AK-47.

### **28 January 1968**

The night of January 28th was not quite as routine as my previous assignments. We were informed that Intelligence had "good information" that something was up and we might be hit. I was assigned to the end of a ramp (delta?) down by the POL dump. I think there were one or two other Augmentees and a couple or three SPs as well. I thought I was very military at the time (Red Horse could do that to you), so I asked what our assignment was and where we were to take positions [cover] if we were attacked.

"Take positions? Crap! I'll tell you what to do—pray!" said the SP three-striper who was evidently in charge. "You see those POL tanks?" He gestured in the direction of the massive fuel storage tanks. "*That one* is full. If it gets hit it'll burn, but the dike should hold it. Now *this one* over here is about 2/3, 3/4 full and you pray it might burn too—I don't know. Now this one," the POL guys told me about "it's empty. And you better pray like hell that it don't take a 122. Cause if it does—we are all going to be greased."

"*Oh,*" I said, "I never thought of that."



*Biên Hòa Air Base: A1C David Worthen, view from, POL Tower. Photo by David Worthen. Biên Hòa Air Base, 3rd SPS 1969-1970.*

"But don't worry." He continued, "Charlie's not really after us. He wants to hit the planes. We only get fried by accident. Why one time when they killed an Airman in a rocket attack, Hanoi Hannah apologized and said they were truly sorry because the brave freedom fighters of the South Vietnamese People's Army and their brave volunteer comrades from the Army of the Peoples Republic of Vietnam had only meant to hit the planes." I had no way of knowing if this was true, but it sure sounded impressive.

So, the conversation began. The SPs filled us in on their experiences and we shared ours. I got the impression that SAC bases were pretty rough on SPs. These guys recounted I got the impression that SAC bases were pretty rough on SPs. These guys recounted experiences of going out the barracks window barefoot into the snow with civvies in hand to avoid having to go and stand next to a B-52 (which was in no real danger because it was miles from anywhere remotely civilized guarded by blowing snow and 5 degrees below zero temperatures). just because somebody who thought he was the next Curtis LeMay had decided to call an alert. We talked about our girls and how much time we had to go in the war.

The area supervisor, a tech sergeant, came around in his jeep with a coffee urn wired to the back. He said things were pretty quiet around the base then continued on his rounds. We smoked, and talked, and walked around, and stared at the distant horizon looking for trouble. Somewhere between two and three AM (my time may be a little off) the coffee jeep came back. I filled my canteen cup from the tank. The area "supe" said if nothing happened soon they were going to call it a night and send the Augmentees home. That sounded good to me.

### **0300 hours, 31 January 1968**

I was standing facing the flight line, though I couldn't see it because of the buildings in the way. My back was to the POL storage tanks. The army "black hats" had a big chopper parking area to my right. We had seen army sentries and outfitters over there from time to time. Suddenly there was a loud "BANG!" from that direction. I thought and maybe said, "Those army guys really screwed up this time." I thought they had managed to blow up a chopper while repairing it.

Then there was another "BANG!" also from the direction of the chopper pad. I had never heard a 122mm rocket before except from a mile or more away and inside a bunker. I now think that these were the impacts on the perimeter road which was hundreds of yard on the other side of the choppers. We began a frantic scramble for cover. There was only room in the foxhole for two guys. I ran a couple of paces up the road that ran to the ramp and dropped into the ditch on my left.

Now the warning siren started up. The base seemed to be moaning as if it were a wounded animal. More "BANG, BANG, BANG!". Some of the reports were distant. Some were pretty near. Then "BANG", one that was real close. I heard something go over my head with a sort of wavering hiss or tremolo shriek, my nose itched. I brushed off some of the weeds the shrapnel had cut and dumped on my face. I tried to get deeper into that ditch. Tried to wriggle my way down. We had pissed in that ditch earlier. God knew what else was in there. I didn't care. I wanted to dig back to the world.

There was a bright light and I looked up toward the repair sheds. An F-100 had been hit and was burning fiercely. At the entrance to the POL dump a fuel truck had been holed by a piece of shrapnel. For some reason known but to God, it was not burning. I wouldn't have noticed it except I smelled kerosene.

I saw the fuel flowing down the road into the dump and looked back up the stream to see a yellow fuel truck with a hole in it and beyond that the burning F-100. We had to stay down a long time. As the F-100 burned it began to cook off ammo. No real force of course, it wasn't going through a barrel. We heard a lot of BANGS, and every once in a while the sound of a slug bouncing off the siding of a hangar or skipping down the ramp.



**Bien Hoa Air Base**  
**POL Fuel Dump, TET 1968**  
**3rd Security Police Squadron**  
F-100 Burns on the Flightline as  
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*Bien Hoa Air Base, POL Fuel Dump, Tet 31 Jan 1968. F-100 burns on the flightline as 45 rockets are received, and stray shrapnel has found a POL truck's tank, flooding the field with thousands of gallons of JP4 fuel that flows down the road toward the burning Super Sabre ... stopping just short. An Augmentee radios Central Security Control, but 1,400 Viet Cong and North Vietnamese are battling with the 3rd Security Police Squadron for Bunker Hill-10, and attempting perimeter penetration in four locations. Composite Photo (c) 2017 by Don Poss.*



**Biên Hòa Air Base, POL tanks, and POL refueling truck (top/rt). 31 Jan 1968, TET, 45 rockets were received on base. A POL refueling truck, parked about where the truck is, received shrapnel punches, and gushed JP4 gas on to ground, which flooded down side road toward a burning F-100 Super Sabre, hit by a rocket.**

*Photo left by David Worthen, 3rd SPS, 1969.*

*Photo Right, 2017 satellite image, courtesy of: Google Maps.*

When things cooled off we hunkered down as close to the Motorola two-way radio as we could get, and tried to follow the action by listening to the radio traffic. The dispatcher [Central Security Control, ncoming rockets caused power failure at CSC] was not the usual one. One of the SPs [Sgt Jim Lebowitz, Law Enforcement Desk Sergeant, assumed CSC and LED duties] said the Colonel [LTC Kent Miller] was on the horn, but how would I know.

Sometimes we could hear the incoming calls, usually a request for confirmation that we had friendlies "our people" in a certain area, or have anybody there. Shoot to stop! Shoot to stop!" Then, in response to an unheard transmission response, "Shoot to stop! Shoot to stop!"

I didn't wear a watch, but sometime after daylight they picked us up and moved us to positions right on the flight line. It wasn't exactly clear what we were supposed to do. All around us the techs and mechs were sending up aircraft. In our helmets and flak jackets loaded down with ammo and gear we looked out of place. Sometime in the early afternoon an officer came around and told us that we could sleep provided we curled up in our holes to do so. I was never so grateful for permission to stand down. I started cutting Zs right there in the aircraft parking area while F-100 Super Sabre jets were taxiing by to give the VC a little of their own back.

*That was the first day of Tet 1968 for me, as a Red Horse Security Police Augmentee.*

