

TET 31 JAN 1968

Biên Hòa Air Base

First Alert: Robert (Bob) Press [WIA], Sentry Dog Handler, Diablo X313 [KIA]

LTC Kenton Miller Squadron Commander,

3rd Security Police Squadron

0300 hours, 31 January 1968,

Biên Hòa Air Base:

The battle started with a long rocket-mortar barrage. Undercover of the barrage, the enemy maneuvered undetected through the mined double-chain-link perimeter fence line until detected by an Air Force Sentry Dog [Diablo X313, KIA] and his handler Robert (Bob) Press (WIA), who sounded first-alarm.

The combined VC/NVA (North Vietnam Army) force [1,500] fought their way on base as far as the aircraft engine buildup area, approximately 50/60 yards from the riveted F-100 aircraft, with the SPs taking them under fire all the way.

The enemy's initial thrust was impeded by sentry dogs and their handlers, bunkers manned by Security Police machine gunners and riflemen, Sabotage Alert Teams (SAT) with jeeps with mounted M-60 machine guns, and Quick Reaction Forces (QRF) riflemen. The enemy advance was halted at the engine buildup with a counter attack led by an NCO.

The 3rd Security Police Squadron bunkers were bypassed and in some cases surrounded, but none were overrun.

It would be nearly noon, and during the first-sweep (perimeter-sweep) to neutralize VC/NVA surviving forces, concealing in tall grass, until Robert Press would be found on the battlefield, wounded four times during the night by both enemy and friendly-fire. Sentry Dog Diablo X313, was KIA.

SSgt Piazza (SMSgt Ret., Silver Star), Biên Hòa AB, 3rd Security Police Squadron: relates additional information about Airman Press valor:

During the Perimeter-Sweep (first-sweep) that morning, K-9 handler Bill Press was found lying on the battlefield severely wounded. Airman Press had sounded first-alert when he set loose Sentry Dog, Diablo (X313) to attack and fired his M16 at hundreds of Viet Cong and NVA storming through the barb-concertina perimeter wire. Diablo was shot dead and Bill Press wounded.

K-9 Bill Press later related the perimeter wire had lit up with trip flares and enemy weapons firing. Wounded, he played dead as NVA and VC soldiers literally ran around

and over him, probably believing him dead. He lay there through the night as battle waves of surging enemy-infantry fought against Bunker Hill-10.

Hours passed until early daylight, when Airman Press found the strength to get up, and began to wave at a helicopter hoping they would recognize him as a friendly. However, being in the middle of the battlefield and without his K-9, he was presumed hostile, and gunship rockets were fired at him. He turned in time to avoid being killed, but chunks of shrapnel from the gunship's rocket blast hammered him in the back. That time he didn't get back up, and was not found until the field was being swept a second time (during the Interior-Sweep) later that morning.

Airman Bill Press later said that he first arrived at Biên Hòa Air Base just in time for Tết 1968. He was the first WIA casualty on the Tết Biên Hòa battlefield, wounded by the enemy, hit by friendly rocket-fire shrapnel during the battle, medevac to Japan and spent weeks in healing. Weeks later, he returned to Vietnam on 2 March 1968—to complete his tour!

Mike J. Mahan told me he saw Bill Press's scars, and it was amazing he wasn't killed. As Capt. Strones led field sweeps toward the perimeter, I and four Airmen remained at the bunker all day, without food and little water. We helped give cover to the men who made two-sweeps with him just north of Bunker Hill-10. During both sweeps, CSC's radio called upon us to give them fire-support, plus I would radio information from Captain Strones to CSC, and vice-versa.