



## BATTLE OF BIÊN HÒA, TẾT OFFENSIVE 1968

**LTC Robert M. Deets,**

Commanding Officer, 145th CAB, Battalion Operations

*Reprint Courtesy of the 145th Combat Aviation Battalion Association.  
Thanks to LTC Robert M. Deets, Battalion Commander 1 December 1967 to 1 July 1968, for this fine detailed report on the Battle of Biên Hòa.*

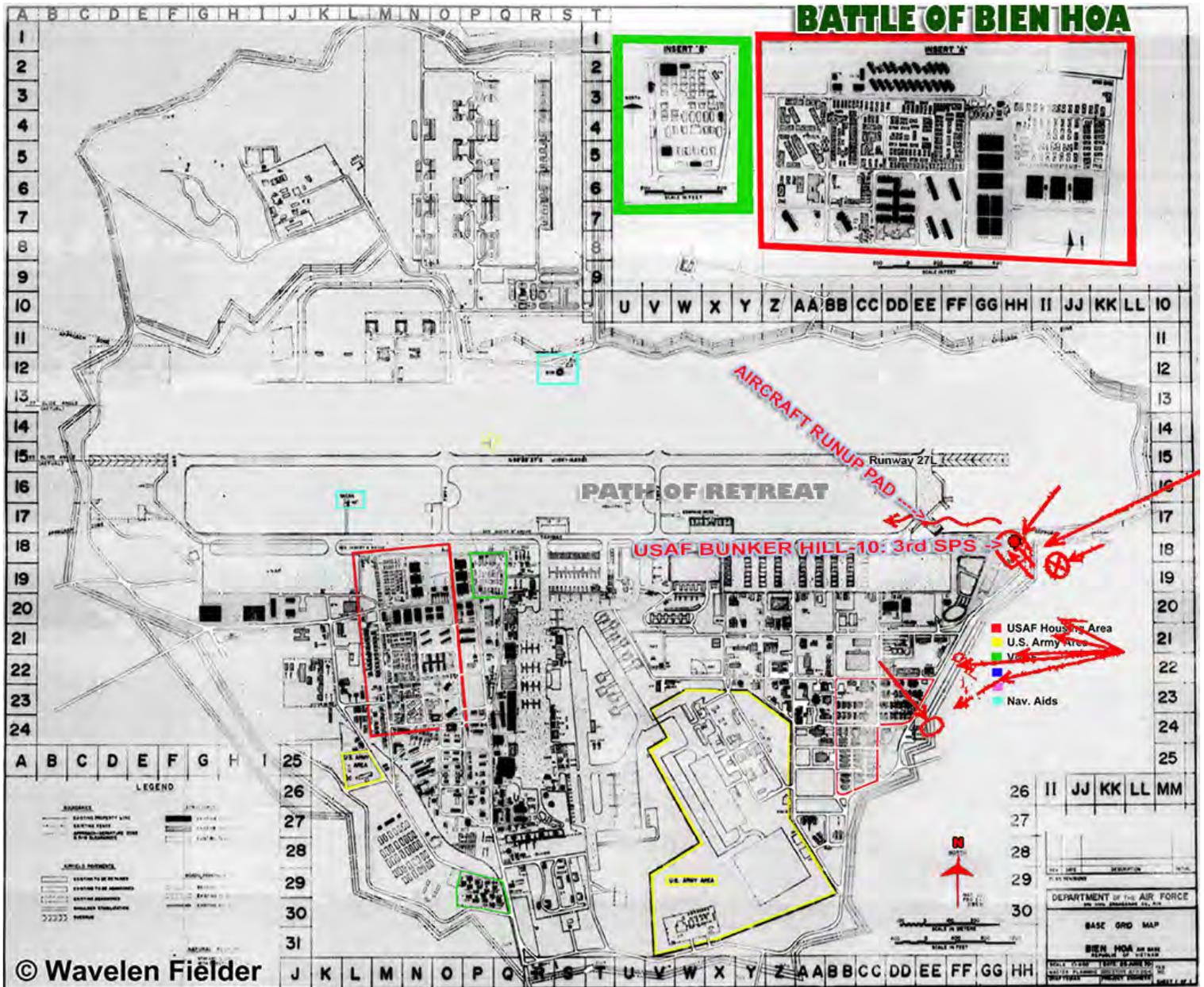
**Approximately 1600 hours, 30 January**, Lt. Col. Robert M. Deets' secretary reported to the 145th Battalion Operations Office that her home was taken over by the Viet Cong and was to be used for the operational headquarters within the city of Biên Hòa.

**On the morning of 31 January 1968**, the Biên Hòa Air Base, III Corps Headquarters, the Prisoner of War Compound, and other key installations around the Biên Hòa - Long Bình area received enemy mortar and rocket fire. The Communists were starting to carry out a plan that they had studied for a considerable period of time. The attacking forces, elements of the *274th and 275th Viet Cong Regiments*, along with the *68th Regiment, 9th VC Division*, had been recruiting and training their leaders for a substantial length of time. It was instilled in the minds of their soldiers that this ultimate plan could not fail, and that victory would surely be theirs.

A prisoner later captured stated that he was told by commanders that Biên Hòa would "drop into their hands like a ripe apple". "Charlie" felt that such an offensive, one that involved ground attacks on major military complexes, would be completely unexpected. He was right, but he completely underestimated the retaliatory firepower of the allied forces, and most of all, the devastating assaults of the armed helicopter. While a silent Biên Hòa Air Base slept, Colonel Nick Psaki and LTC Deets set up their Operational Plan Charlie-Charlie, knowing the enemy forces would unleash a devastating attack.

**Beginning at 3 O'clock in the morning of 31 January 1968**, they launched their surprisingly well-coordinated assaults at major installations throughout the countryside. The assaults came within minutes of each other. Throughout Vietnam, Americans awakened to a new phase in the war. The Biên Hòa Air Base received approximately 150 rounds of enemy rocket and mortar fire. Almost simultaneously, the Viet Cong ground forces made their move to overrun the base. Formed into four companies of 52 men each, his soldiers penetrated the perimeter between bunkers in the 101st Airborne Division cantonment area and the III Corps Headquarters, gradually making their way to the approach end of runway 27 [See battle map below].

Battle of Bien Hoa, Battle Map. Note Legend, and Red Arrows denoting NVA and VC attack positions.



It was there they were met by the gunships led by Captain Kenneth Rubin, 334th Gunship Company, assigned by the Command and Control of Checkmate Charlie-Charlie. Captain Rubin and his "Firefly" team had just returned from a mission near Duc Hoa when they were told to engage the enemy on the east side of the airbase. They spotted the Viet Cong off the eastern end of the runway and awaited clearance to fire. An emergency standby fire team from the 118th Assault Helicopter Company was soon airborne and on station. Captain Rubin was then given permission to engage the enemy.

After approximately 30 minutes, his team needed to refuel and the mission was given to the 118th Gunship Team. Captain Rubin and his Australian Co-pilot were both wounded and their helicopter shot-up so bad it was rendered non-flyable. Captain Rubin was given another helicopter and then formed another "Firefly Team", and later returned for further action.

Lt. Col. Anderson and Major Jarrett requested and were given permission to insert their Cobra "NETT" Team into the action. Their flying was outstanding and was a major factor in winning the Battle of Biên Hòa. Contact with the Viet Cong lasted until late in the morning. By that time, almost every helicopter fire team in the battalion had participated in the effort to destroy the firmly emplaced enemy in this action.

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.

III Corps Headquarters, adjacent to the air base came under mortar attack at 0545 hours. By 0700 hours the VC had begun to move from his vulnerable position off the end of the runway to the buildings across the street from the headquarters. The occupants of the compound received automatic weapons and RPG rocket fire from the new enemy emplacements. Gunships and armored vehicles from the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment engaged the enemy forces in house to house fighting and drove them from their positions.

The Viet Cong casualties were extremely heavy during this encounter. Elements of the 145th Combat Aviation Battalion supported other hard-hit installations during the widespread Tết Truce Offensive. At the same time Biên Hòa Air Base received its first incoming rounds, the nearby Long Bình Complex, Headquarters II Field Force, received rocket mortar fire. Elements of the 274th and 275th Viet Cong Regiments launched a heavy ground attack around that area. Twenty-four hours earlier the most elaborate military headquarters in Vietnam had enjoyed an uneventful duty day, but suddenly it was fighting for its life.

Attacking from across highway 1A from Khu Gia Vien Village, commonly known as "widows village," the heavily armed enemy assaulted the defensive perimeter. The

"Mustang" fire teams from the *68th Assault Helicopter Company*, and "Striker" AH-1G "Cobra" helicopters from the NETT Team proceeded immediately to the area to give fire support to the embattled friendly forces. Continuous air assaults were provided by these ships to repel the enemy attacks.

It was later learned that beneath "Widows Village", "Charlie" had built an elaborate tunnel complex, complete with ammunition and supplies, making himself well prepared for an assault on the 12th CAG and the Long Binh complex.

The Viet Cong also launched a major effort in the Saigon-Cholon area. The "Bandits", gunships of the *118th Assault Helicopter Company*, launched combat assaults against Viet Cong firmly emplaced in the Phu Tho Race Track. Elements of the *68th Assault Helicopter Company* were in heavy contact with enemy forces occupying the Cholon district of Saigon. Cobra aircraft from the 334th Armed Helicopter Company and Cobra NETT Team were also dispatched to Saigon to add their devastating firepower on the enemy.

Helicopters of the *190th Assault Helicopter Company* were called upon to evacuate the besieged defenders of the American Embassy, who were hard hit by the daring enemy. Since the American New Year, there had been strong indications the enemy was planning such a major offensive. Since January 20th United States military along with our own Vietnamese intelligence sources had suspected the enemy's intentions. The *274th and 275th Viet Cong Regiments* were located as far north as Bu Dop in early January. Their north to south cross-country movement placed them in the vicinity of the Dong Nai River by the end of the month. The *68th Regiment of the 9th Viet Cong Division* moved from a position near Tay Ninh in early January to Biên Hòa in time for the attack on January 31.

As early as the 2nd of December, a warning order had been given to the residents of Biên Hòa City that they had better stop cooperating with the U.S. Forces or face annihilation. At seven o'clock in the evening of 30 January 1968, seven Viet Cong rode by the main gate of the 145th Combat Aviation Battalion and shouted, "Yankee--tonight you die". These VC were armed with pistols, automatic weapons, and one grenade launcher.

Minutes before the first rocket round impacted on the air base, the enemy forces had penetrated the perimeter and were poised for the attack. The attacks of the Viet Cong caught almost everyone by surprise except Colonel Psaki and Lt. Col. Deets. Those who were accustomed to the unimpeded everyday routine of "rear area" living suddenly found themselves thrust into action against a determined enemy force. In place of an

uneventful night's rest, the American and Allied Force on the air base were shaken from their beds by the blinding flash and deafening explosion of impacting Chinese Communist 122mm rockets. Suddenly the Biên Hòa Air Base wasn't secure as it was thought to be.

Immediately following the initial rocket attack the sky was lined with tracers and one was faced with the stark realization that this was no ordinary mortar attack. The action seemed painfully close, and immediate reaction to the harrowing enemy threat was paramount. Crew Chiefs quickly readied their aircraft for action. Maintenance personnel prepared themselves to keep all aircraft flyable. Aircraft commanders gave last minute briefings to their crews and were soon airborne in an all-out effort to repulse the Communist intruders. In order to continue to give the ground commander the maximum effort he had learned to expect from the 145th, all personnel worked longer hours under more strenuous conditions; "Charlies" presence was keenly felt. Maintenance personnel worked virtually around the clock in order to put damaged aircraft back in flying conditions. Ground crews refueled and reloaded their helicopters in record time.

Company clerks and cooks learned how to be door gunners, and basic infantry training was put to use. For the first time in many months there was no mail, it was backlogged in Tan Son Nhut Air Base or stacked up in San Francisco. Everybody became accustomed to "C" rations, and meals in the mess halls were few. The effort put forth by the members of the *145th Combat Aviation Battalion* resulted in the successful defense Biên Hòa, while Air Force fighter aircraft were initially forced to remain on the ground, Army helicopters were quickly aloft and defending the perimeter of the air base. The men of the *145th Combat Aviation Battalion* kept the enemy in place until the job was done.

## Operational Data

### 145th CAB

#### 31 January 1968 to 29 February 1968

Passengers Transported .....	24,069
Sorties Flown .....	14,673
Tons of Cargo .....	7,199
Hours Flown .....	13,380
Passengers Medevac.....	201
Confirmed Viet Soldiers Killed.....	407
Estimated Viet Soldiers Killed .....	513
Structures Destroyed .....	676
Structures Damage .....	168
Sampans Destroyed .....	70

In January 1968, the 74th Aviation Company (Fixed Wing) was transferred to the 210th Combat Aviation Battalion that was assigned to Long Thanh, Vietnam on 15 January 1968. And in March of 1968 the 145th CAB received the 135th Assault Helicopter Company from 223rd CAB.

The Vietnamese Cross of Gallantry with Palm (Second Award) was awarded to the 1st Aviation Brigade and its assigned and attached units for the period 27 March 1967 to 17 May 1968. The first award was for the period 1 March 1967 to 26 March 1967.

I invite all of you to send in any corrections and/or additions to this and the other Battalion History reports. They are all entered into the overall Battalion History report. And I need information for future Battalion History reports. I have almost no info for after the Battle of Biên Hòa.

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**Battle of Biên Hòa, Audio Cassette Tape**

We have audio cassette tapes of the Battle of Biên Hòa as reported by Air Force Master Sergeant Jack Thompson at dawn on the morning of 31 January 1968 from the top of a building next to the Air Force runway. It is an audio record of the 145th CAB helicopters battling the Viet Cong on the Air Force runways and on the perimeter. On the tape, you can hear all the sounds of the battle, the gunships rolling in, the mini-guns firing, 2.75 rockets impacting, incoming 122mm rockets exploding, fuel and ammo dumps blowing up, as MSgt. Jack Thompson describes the action. It's really a great asset to supplement our battalion history report of the Battle of Biên Hòa. They sell for \$15 each and as an extra value the other side of the tape contains a recording made from a gunship from the 190th AHC, we call this side of the tape "Gunship Action". Fundraisers like this one help fund our Association and make it possible to keep locating more people. So please, if you can, order one of the tapes, order form on back of newsletter.

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**339th TRANSPORTATION COMPANY**

I just found out about the 339th Transportation Company. The 339th arrived in Vietnam on the 7th of February 1962 to provide maintenance support to the Aviation units. When the 45th Transportation Battalion arrived in Vietnam the 339th became part of it and stayed with the 45th / 145th for many years. It will now be listed as one of our unit in all future ads to locate new people. Hopefully soon we will have many people located from the 339th Transportation Company.

I want to say Welcome to the 45th / 145th Association to all the former members of the 339th. And thank you to Bryce Whitson for the information about the 339th, he served with the 339th in Vietnam from February 1962 til February 1963. He has many interesting stories to tell from that time period. I hope to see him and everyone else at our next reunion.