

## BATTLE OF BIÊN HÒA, BUNKER HILL-10 TẾT 31 JAN 1968 VC/NVA Attack Biên Hòa Air Base

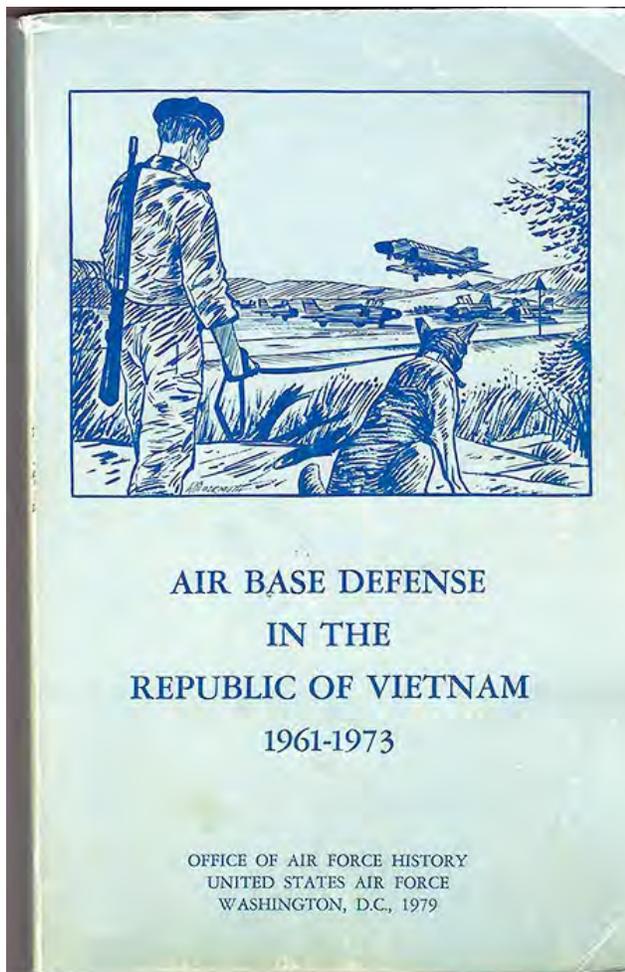
**Roger P. Fox, LTC (USAF Ret.)**

*Air Base Defense In The Republic Of Vietnam, 1961-1973*, by Roger P. Fox (LTC, Ret.)  
OFFICE OF AIR FORCE HISTORY UNITED STATES AIR FORCE WASHINGTON, D.C., 1979.

*“An estimated 60 percent of the troops attacking Biên Hòa were North Vietnamese nationals.”*

**LTC Robert P. Fox’s book**, *Air Base Defense In The Republic Of Vietnam, 1961-1973*, is often called the *Bible* documenting the “...unique problem of defending air bases during the Vietnam War.” The widely referenced book is essential for research, and includes 475 known VC/NVA attacks against ten key air bases in the Republic of Vietnam. Don Poss

*The following excerpts regarding the Battle of Biên Hòa, Biên Hòa Air Base and Tết 1968 are from Roger P. Fox’s book.*



LTC Robert P. Fox’s book, *Air Base Defense In The Republic Of Vietnam, 1961-1973*. [KINDLE](#)

**(Fox, p29)**

“The VC consisted of RVN nationals who joined up or were forced into service. Being a conventional conscript force, the NVA was generally the better trained, equipped, and motivated. The Viet Cong planned and executed most local operations such as attacks on U.S. bases. The NVA began by helping out but after the 1968 Tết Offensive virtually took over from the VC. The two as a rule strove for a common aim, responded to a single control, and used the same tactics, weapons, and equipment.”

**(Fox, p31)**

“By striking at USAF air power on the ground, the VC/NVA hewed to a military concept old in theory and application. As early as 1921, Giulio Douhet, an early and most influential prophet of air power, theorized that the only effective way to counter enemy air power was to destroy it at its bases on the ground. Combat experience during World War II and the Korean War confirmed this concept.”

**(Fox, p50-51)**

“Battalion-Size Attacks: During the 1968 general Tết Offensive, battalion-size forces struck Tan Son Nhut and Biên Hòa in the most sensational and highly publicized of all VC/NVA operations against U.S. air bases. Without precedent or sequel, these two simultaneous attacks were unique in the history of air base defense in the RVN. For this reason, there is no basis for reliable generalization on the tactics and techniques used in this form of operation.”

“Tan Son Nhut and Biên Hòa Air Bases were situated in III Corps Tactical Zone near Saigon, a city of immense political, economic, and psychological importance. Probably the VC/NVA regarded the seizure of these two bases essential to the seizure of Saigon—apparently the key objective of the entire offensive. So, in contrast to the hit-and-run tactics of earlier standoff attacks and sapper raids, the VC/NVA at this time aimed at overrunning and holding the two installations.”

“At Tan Son Nhut the VC/NVA committed one sapper and four infantry battalions; and at Biên Hòa two infantry battalions and one reinforced infantry company.”

“The terrain facilitated infiltrations by large VC/NVA units to the areas surrounding Saigon. Save for a few radial roads, the city is bounded on the north, west, and east by a combination of paddies, jungles, and swamps, interlaced by waterways.”

“Routes for clandestine approach to the city were excellent. This plus VC/NVA skill in camouflage, concealment, and tunnel construction for storage of arms and supplies rendered it virtually impossible to secure all avenues of approach. Traversing this terrain, the units that engaged Tan Son Nhut, Biên Hòa, and other objectives in the Saigon area made formal tactical marches over set routes and through prepared base.”

“Upon arrival, they immediately cut through the perimeter fences and attacked the base. The main attacks at both bases were supplemented by secondary ones ... [from] base camps. They were held in assembly areas 9 to 12 hours marching distance from their targets until time for the coordinated assault...”



**VC/NVA prisoner taken during the 1968 Tet attack on Bien Hoa Air Base (above).**

*Photo: One of the 25 VC/NVA prisoners who were captured during the 1968 TẾT attack on Biên Hòa Air Base. Bunker Hill-10, 3rd Security Police Squadron.*

“An estimated 60 percent of the troops attacking Biên Hòa were North Vietnamese nationals ... Evidently, the enemy meant to subdue the U.S. ARVN defenders by sheer numbers.”

*Courtesy of Wikipedia:*

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/274th\\_Regiment](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/274th_Regiment)

**The 274th VC Regiment** [5th Division] consisted of a headquarters and three battalions (1st, 2nd and 3rd Battalions). Each battalion of the regiment consisted of a HQ, three rifle companies and a heavy weapons company. The regiment consisted of about 1,500 men, recruited from outside the area of their operation supplemented by North Vietnamese Army regulars. Local Viet Cong elements acted as scouts during operations.

**(Fox, p51)**

“By mounting their general offensive during the 1968 Tết holiday, the VC/NVA hoped to achieve the maximum tactical surprise. In this they were disappointed. Indications from a variety of sources (captured documents, prisoners, and allies) all pointed to a winter-spring offensive, spearheaded by attacks on population centers and Allied military

installations. This intelligence convinced USMACV and RVNAF that a mid-January attack was certain, and caused them to concentrate forces in the Saigon area. What the Allies did not foresee was the true magnitude of the impending offensive. This was slightly offset by a serious error in judgment by the VC/NVA command.”

**(Fox, p53)**

“Aftermath of the 31 January 1968 VC/NVA Tết attack on Biên Hòa Air Base. The attempt to destroy the base was thwarted by timely preparations by the base defense force. Damages, and allied losses, were minimal while the attackers suffered heavy casualties; many were captured.”

**(Fox, p77)**

“Excessive vegetation at Tan Son Nhut and Biên Hòa hindered the base defenders throughout the 1968 Tết attacks. At Biên Hòa the approval process for aerial defoliation was termed “hopelessly complicated,” one that might take two or more months. Plant growth meanwhile continued unabated. Even when authorized, a project was apt to be fettered with restrictions. Thus, aerial delivery of *Orange* was denied at Biên Hòa, and only parts of its perimeter were approved for chemical defoliation. Accordingly, because *Blue* and *White* were not suited to local conditions, *Orange* had to be dispensed from a tank truck by a power spray that did not reach beyond the second fences.”

**(Fox, p81)**

“The most creative change in security police organization came not in the operating units but at staff level. In Seventh Air Force Headquarters, the chief staff responsibility for air base defense belonged to the Director of Security Police. Standard USAF organization at the time placed him under the supervision and direction of the Inspector General.”

“Until 1968 the Security Police Directorate performed as a conventional staff agency. In that year, however, the scale and intensity of attacks on air bases during the Tết Offensive thrust it into an operational role, the Security Police Directorate performed as a conventional staff agency. In that year, however, the scale and intensity of attacks on air bases during the Tết Offensive thrust it into an operational role.”

**(Fox, p85)**

“Encountered in the management of security police officer manning also centrally controlled by the United States Air Force Military Personnel Center (USAFMPC). Midway through the war, a Seventh Air Force Director of Security Police spelled out the difficulties in his end of tour report. Existing procedures, he remarked, prevented rather than promoted proper manning, and amounted to little more than the assignment of numbers to vacancies. Frequently officers arrived with no advance notification. When such notice was received it was rarely sufficient to verify the officer's fitness for the job given him by USAFMPC. Thus, a number of officers, even though unqualified by experience, training, or performance, were frequently placed in critically responsible positions. When an officer failed in his job, he could not be replaced out of cycle.”

“The experience of one hapless officer illustrates the haphazard quality of this remotely controlled personnel system. Without experience or training, he was installed as security police operations officer at Biên Hòa, just in time to participate in repelling the mass enemy attack of Tết 1968. Though he successfully surmounted this challenge, the officer scorned his treatment at the hands of the personnel managers: I came to Vietnam as a security

police officer with no idea of what a security police officer was supposed to do. I was taken from another career field, given no training and shipped to one of the most important bases in Southeast Asia where I was responsible for the protection of over 5000 lives and millions of dollars in vital equipment. Even though the base and I have survived so far, I still believe the assignment was a mistake...I do not think Vietnam is the place for anyone in a position of authority to start from scratch in a new career field.”

**(Fox, p95)**

“The 1968 Tết Offensive drove home the need for heavier security police weaponry. Thus, the air base defense arsenal acquired the M-67 90mm recoilless rifle, the M-29 81-mm mortar, the M-72 66-mm high-explosive antitank (HEAT) rocket, and the M-2 .50-caliber heavy-barrel machinegun.

This ordnance helped the security police to deal with VC/NVA forces fighting from prepared overrun positions or from armored vehicles. The chance to do so did not come however, and the new weapons joined the rocket launchers in H&I fire. The M-2 machineguns and M-29 mortar also took part in combat operations, the mortar being widely used for illumination. On the other hand, there is no documented combat employment of the recoilless rifle or the HEAT rocket after Tết 1968.

Another class of weapons consisted of those informally secured or locally made by the security police at certain bases. At Tan Son Nhut two-gun units were thus obtained, each made up of four M-55 .50-caliber machineguns and a M45C armored mount. With these units bolted to their beds, two 2~ -ton trucks parked every night in reveted positions at either end of the main runway. At Biên Hòa, Phan Rang, and Phu Cat, security police came by several GAU-2BI A 7.62-mm miniguns (the kind of fast-firing machineguns found in AC-47 and AC- 119 gunships). Mounted on jeeps or XM-706 armored cars, the miniguns supplied H&I fire and served as mobile weapons for Reaction force.

At Biên Hòa-where there was a special talent for this sort of thing security police came up with an explosive-incendiary-illumination device and nicknamed it Fire Drum. A modified mixture of phougas [“A mix of napalm and white phosphorous.”], Fire Drum consisted of a metal napalm-filled container, like that used for shipping 175-mm propellant charges. The drum was buried in the ground at an angle, with the protruding open-end covered by a weatherproof plastic membrane and pointing toward the base perimeter. Upon command, an electric circuit touched off the explosive charge under a plunger at the bottom of the container-instantly expelling the napalm that was at once ignited by a white-phosphorous grenade. Range and lateral dispersal hinged on the size and angle of the container and the amount of napalm. The two sizes of Fire Drum at Biên Hòa thrust burning napalm as far as 61 to 122 meters, with sideward coverage of 61 to 30 meters. If steel fragments were wanted in the burning napalm, a claymore antipersonnel mine replaced the explosive charge.

Biên Hòa security police further conceived the Totem Pole, a creation for high-intensity lighting of the base perimeter. Aircraft flares rejected for aerial use by munitions inspectors were assembled. Concave reflectors....

**(Fox, p96)**

“(Totem Poles) were shaped from the steel shipping containers for rockets or propellant charges. The flares were mounted in the reflectors and set inside the perimeter fence, ignition wires stretching to stakes 30-50 feet to the rear. Sentry dog handlers patrolling such areas commonly carried detonating devices for claymore mines. They could accordingly fire these flares at will, while staying concealed in the darkness. The intense flare light let defense forces observe, but temporarily blinded anyone approaching the perimeter from outside the base.”

“It would be a mistake to construe these jury-rigged devices as a reflection on duly authorized weapons. The consistently high quality of the Army weapons furnished air base defense forces formed one of the few bright stars in the support area. As discussed earlier, there were procurement, maintenance, and training troubles. But the weapons themselves posed no real performance problems, for they proved evenly dependable and efficient. According to the AFSC official in charge of air base defense matters, "there never has been a formal request for improved weaponry ... from SEA or PACAF.”

**(Fox, p157) \**

“One prisoner at Biên Hòa placed the VC/NVA staging area at 29 kilometers, a 9-hour march, due east of the air base.”

**(Below) Viet Cong map of Bien Hoa Air Base.**



**(Fox, p175):**

Photo Stats: *Air Base Defense In The Republic Of Vietnam, 1961-1973*, by Roger P. Fox.

Attacks								US Losses				RVN Losses				VC/NVA Losses	
NO	YR	MO	DA	HR	BASE	TYPE	RDS	Aircraft		Casualties		Aircraft		Casualties		Casualties	
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	DES	DAM	KIA	WIA	DES	DAM	KIA	WIA	KIA	POW
								9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18
026	67	09	09	0005	DN	STO	03	000	002	002	010	NR	NR	NR	NR	NR	NR
027	67	10	10	0106	NT	STO	16	000	000	000	001	000	000	NR	NR	NR	NR
028	67	11	05	2240	BH	STO	15	000	000	000	002	000	000	NR	NR	NR	NR
029	67	11	26	0010	NT	STO	30	001	003	000	021	000	000	NR	NR	NR	NR
017	1967 Sub-Total						515	016	139	028	384	002	001	035	050	003	000
030	68	01	03	0400	DN	STO	49	001	020	000	002	000	000	NR	NR	NR	NR
031	68	01	20	0040	PK	STO	08	000	000	000	022	000	000	NR	NR	NR	NR
032	68	01	30	0214	PK	STO	13	000	002	000	001	000	000	NR	NR	NR	NR
033	68	01	30	0328	DN	STO	40	005	025	001	000	NR	NR	NR	NR	NR	NR
034	68	01	31	0300	BH	MBN	45	002	017	004	026	000	000	NR	NR	139*	025*
035	68	01	31	0320	TSN	MBN	NR	000	013	023	086	000	000	032	089	157*	009*
036	68	01	31	2318	NT	STO	02	000	000	000	000	000	000	000	000	000	000
037	68	02	03	1930	BT	STO	09	000	000	000	000	000	000	000	000	000	000
038	68	02	04	0300	BT	STO	73	000	016	001	005	NR	NR	NR	NR	NR	NR

175

\*This data is limited to enemy losses incurred inside the air base perimeters.

LTC Fox's above Casualties stats for the TẾT 31 Jan 1968 MBN attack, against Biên Hòa Air Base, as "139" VC/NVA KIA.

However,

In April of 2017: [The VietnamNet News, April 13, 2017](#) reported:

*"150 remains of soldiers found at southern airport [formally, Biên Hòa Air Base, RVN]: As many as 150 sets of remain believed to be Vietnamese soldiers that died [Tết, 31 January] in 1968 during the American War have been found at an airport [then, Biên Hòa Air Base, RVN] in the southern province of Đồng Nai."*