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FILE TITLE: Background Paper on Security Police Defense of Tan Son Nhut AB

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BACKGROUND PAPER
ON
SECURITY POLICE DEFENSE
OF
TAN SON NHUT AB

During the early morning hours of 31 January 1968, the 377th Security Police Squadron came under a massive attack. Although the Security Police lacked formal training and proper weapons they were credited with saving Tan Son Nhut AB and the lives of thousands of people. The purpose of this paper is for you to understand why Security Police need be well trained in Air Base Defense.

First this paper will discuss the primary mission Security Police had prior to Vietnam. Then it will inform you about events leading up to the attack on Tan Son Nhut AB. Finally, this paper will guide you through significant events during the battle for Ton San Nhut.

Security Police and their application of Air Base Ground Defense evolved tremendously during the Vietnam war. Prior to the TET Offensive in 1968 the primary mission of Air Force Security Police stated in AFR 207 directives, was to protect Air Force personnel and resources against small unit and terrorist attacks. To accomplish this resource protection, Security Police use flight line sentries, vehicle patrols, and entry controllers. After the TET Offensive, and specifically the massive attack on Tan Son Nhut Air Base, the mission of the Security Police would be altered.

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This was reinforced when PACAF IG MSgt Fred Zarzour stated, "When the enemy escalated and made its first major attack against Tan Son Nhut Air Base, we found it necessary to reevaluate and bolster our base defense system". (1:16) It became apparent that Security Police are the first line of defense during attacks where the mission is to overrun an airbase. With this becoming clear, Security Police needed to engage the enemy as far from USAF resources as possible and at the maximum distance their fire power would allow. Therefore it was necessary for Security Police to build up and man bunkers over the entire perimeter of an airbase in order to establish interlocking fields of fire. Security Police realized they were no longer just flight line security. They needed to know small squad tactics, patrolling techniques, heavy weapons, and the ability to call for effective artillery.

However, this was not the case during the Vietnam War. The majority of Security Police entering the country receive no additional training prior to their arrival. The 377th Security Police Sq., stationed at Tan Son Nhut AB, took it upon themselves to train their people. The 377th SPS would require newly arriving SP's specialized training in areas of heavy weapons and tactics. Had this not been the requirement, their battle during the early hours of the TET Offensive may have been disastrous.

The TET Offensive of 1968 required a great deal of planning, coordination, and equipment. The primary purpose of the offensive was to incite a general uprising of the urban populace believing this would unite the country.

Attacking and then controlling the capital city of Saigon was a very high priority for the North Vietnamese. (6:59) An integral part of controlling Saigon was the Air Base at Tan Son Nhut, (TSN). So important was this, that 7 of the nine battalions of Viet Cong secretly infiltrated into the Saigon area were committed to attacking the airbase. In their pockets they carried the orders to defend at all cost, any gains they had made. (7:2)

The responsibility of capturing TSN fell to 35 five year old Colonel Nam Truyen, commander of the 9th Viet Cong Infantry Division. In 1967, This division was reported to be 10,260 soldiers strong. (2:263) In a bold move on Christmas day 1967 Col Truyen, disguised as a student, visited TSN airbase for a first hand look. (6:59-60) It has been documented that extensive reconnaissance of U.S. Airbases prior to TET focused on Security Police patrol and relief schedules. (3:-)

Intelligence reports and raw data indicated some type of enemy action may take place during the TET holiday. Although it was estimated that the enemy could mount a large scale rocket or mortar attack. The reports went on to say the enemy were limited to mounting a ground attack with no more than a reinforced battalion. However, this was enough information to cause the 377th SPS commanders to initiate an exercise designed to test the capabilities of the security forces assigned to TSN. At 0025 hrs on 27 January 1968, Exercise TET began. The most vulnerable point on base was considered to be on the West perimeter near a bunker numbered 051. Exercise commanders selected this area to practice enemy penetration scenarios, then discussed after action plans.

During the next few days Intelligence agencies gave no indication of any type of enemy activity in the Saigon area. (4:543)

But this was of no consolation to Gen William Momyer, Commander of 7th AF. At 1730 hours on 30 January 1968, he ordered Security Police at Tan Son Nhut to assume Security Condition Red, Option 1. Thus, the 377th Security Police became the only forces in the Saigon area to be in this high security posture. (4:3) The increased posture led Security Police Commander, LtCol Billy Carter, to increase his manning of security forces. In addition to the 457 Security Police already on post, eight-13 man Quick Reaction Teams, (QRTs), were formed and ready for immediate response. LtCol Carter also had three platoons of US Army personnel, (Task Force 35), at his disposal and placed them on a five minute standby status as a reserve force. (5:8) The 262 remaining Security Police were armed and billeted in the squadrons barracks for immediate recall.

The first reports of enemy activity were received by the Joint Defense Operations Center, (JDOC), located on TSN. At 0300 on 31 January 1968, JDOC was notified that the US Embassy in Saigon was under attack. 20 minutes later a Security Policeman in Guard Tower #16, located on the SouthEast area of Tan Son Nhut, reported small arms fire coming from off base directed at the POL area. In addition Security Police at Gate #2 also reported small arms fire. At 0327, security forces in a Northern bunker reported the sighting of 300 men, 400 meters from their position. A helicopter Light Fire Team, (LFT), was directed to take off and orbit the area. At 0333, five members of the 377th Security Police located inside Bunker 051, watched as a taxi drove up to the West perimeter fence.

Even with all the other reported hostile activity around the air base, the Security Policemen inside Bunker 051 were prevented from firing on individuals approaching the fence. MACV Rules of Engagement prevented Security Police from firing on people until they exhibit hostile intent. (8:8) A minute later Bangalore torpedoes exploded and ripped a hole in the perimeter wire. This work was likely done by members of the C-10 Sapper Battalion. These Sapper units originally served with infantry battalions to clear obstacles and lead attacks on built up positions. (2:84) The breach in the perimeter enabled the VC to pour into TSN airbase. The SP's inside Bunker 051 notified their command post of the assault and at the same time returned fire. Shortly after engaging the lead sapper unit, Bunker 051 received two direct hits from rocket propelled grenades, killing four of the five Security Police inside.

Upon receiving Bunker 051 calls for help, Central Security Control immediately dispatched four separate security alert teams. The first SAT to arrive was a four man team, (Echo-1), which took a position just East of Bunker 051. Here they engaged the enemy pouring into TSN until they were forced to withdraw due to lack of ammunition. Echo-1 withdrew 150 meters South of the bunker, received a new supply of ammunition and re-engaged the advancing Viet Cong. Additional Quick Reaction Teams and one platoon of US Army Task Force-35 arrived to form a blocking force to contain the attack.

By this time, an estimated 600 Viet Cong were penetrating the airbase and advancing. The main assault force were armed with RPG2 and RPG7 rockets, 81mm Motars, .50 Caliber machine guns, explosives and automatic weapons. The Security Police and TF-35 were outnumbered and out gunned 4 to one. But they were able to maintain a steady field of fire and halt the advancing Viet Cong. (8:9)

At 0359 hrs Tower #4, which is 50 meters East of Gate #51 and right in the middle of the battle, reported that enemy forces were mounting an additional assault South of his tower. As Tower #4 was reporting this, a US Army squad on patrol engaged this unit believing it to be platoon size. After a few minutes of intense fire they realized the force was much larger. In fact it was later determined this force consisted of two reinforced battalions totalling 1,000 men. This unit was probably elements of Col Truyen's 9th VC Infantry Division. (8:392) The Army squad called for a helicopter Light Fire Team, (LFT), to strafe the area and cover their withdrawal. It is believed this unit were reinforcements coming to aid the initial enemy assault. However, once the LFT engaged this force, they dispersed for cover, thus delaying the second assault.

At this point the Central Security Control requested fire support from this same LFT. They were to strafe the area immediately around the breach in the perimeter. However, once over head the LFT could not determine between friendly and enemy forces. The fighting between them had become just to close, so they were forced to withdraw.

During this first 30 minutes of battle the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army were simultaneously attacking eight other points around the base perimeter. Security Police commanders were deploying 13 man Quick Reaction Teams, (QRT's), and three man Security Alert Teams, (SAT's) all around the base. Multiple Response teams were deployed to the North perimeter to reinforce Republic of Vietnam personnel. One QRT and two SAT's were deployed to defend the POL site, which had come under heavy enemy fire. Additional teams of recalled Security Police were deployed to Gate #1 and the Main gate which were under attack from positions off base. Elsewhere members of the Security Police were also heavily engaged in fire fights on the East perimeter. Of the 905 Security Police and Soldiers at his command, LtCol Carter had one last platoon from Task Force 35 left. This thirty man force, he kept in reserve in the event of a Viet Cong break through. Meanwhile, LtCol Carter work feverishly trying to secure artillery, armor, and infantry support for his beleaguered Security Policemen. (8:9) After an hour of intense fighting on the West perimeter, Security Police were being pinned down. By this time Bunker #51 had fallen into enemy hands, and they were firing captured recoilless rifle rounds into friendly positions. Furthermore, the formidable force located just outside the West perimeter began to re-assemble. As they were forming up, three Vietnamese light tanks arrived. Unfortunately within fifteen minutes, two tanks were destroyed and the third was forced to retreat. At 0523, nearly two hours after the initial attack, the first artillery rounds began slamming into the VC assault forces.

Still, the reinforced battalions continued to penetrate the Western perimeter. VC and NVA Forces were now maneuvering to outflank the Security Police blocking forces.

By now a number of units in the blocking forces were running dangerously low of ammunition and urgent request for resupply were made. Under the intense automatic weapons fire, individual Security policemen raced between units to accomplish the resupply. Because of this action the blocking forces were able to hold their positions and halt the further advancement of the reinforcements. The area estimated to be under enemy control was about 600 meters deep by 300 meters wide, inside the perimeter of Tan Son Nhut AB.

Meanwhile, back at the main gate, military and civilian workers who lived off base began arriving for work at 0600. Not knowing what was happening they found themselves in the middle of heavy crossfire from enemy snipers. A team of Security Policemen defending the gate escorted these people to safety on base, often using their own bodies to shield the personnel being escorted. (8:12) They continued to escort these people in this manner until 0800.

At roughly 0630 hours, elements of the 4th Cavalry regiment began arriving from the North on Hwy #1, towards Gate #51 and engaged the enemy on their northern flank. With the additional forces from the 4th Cavalry, the Security Police and members of Task Force 35 were able to increase their firepower, and engage the enemy heavily for the next hour. It was at this time the VC began to withdraw through the perimeter. Realizing this, the 377th Security Police and other defensive forces counterattacked from the East. After two hours of slow but steady maneuvering most of the VC had been driven from the base.

The only enemy resistance left inside the perimeter of TSN lay inside of Bunker 051. As a result, VC occupants inside of Bunker 051 were directing effective fire into the Southern flank of friendly forces. At 1000 hrs, most attention was directed at securing Bunker 051.

First, US tanks from the 4th Cavalry attempted to knock out the bunker, but failed. Next, A helicopter Light Fire Team, then engaged the bunker but was shot down. Finally, at 1210 members of the 377th Security Police assaulted Bunker 051, and by using grenade fire, neutralized and secured the bunker. (8:11)

By 1230 hours the breach in the perimeter was closed and secured. Security Forces on TSN would continue to receive enemy fire of various intensity for the next two days. However, no other penetrations or large scale attacks occurred.

Members of the 377th Security Police performed heroically during the nine hour battle. Casualties were amazingly light. They suffered only 4 Security Police Killed in Action and 11 wounded. All the KIA had been in Bunker 051 when it was rocketed during the early minutes of the assault, with the fifth SP sustaining serious wounds. It was obvious the VC wanted control of TSN. However they paid a high price with Viet Cong and NVA casualties numbering up to 1,200 KIA. This included 157 bodies counted inside the West perimeter fence and 267 bodies immediately outside the fence. This area was the only breach of the TSN perimeter. Battle damage to the base was extremely low, with only 13 aircraft receiving light damage, mostly from stray bullets.

After this attack it became clear that, Security Police are the first line of defense for an air base. They would soon realize that Air Base Ground Defense tactics needed to be developed, then taught to all USAF Security Police. This has become a reality in today's Air Force. Security Police are among the best trained and equipped fighting forces today. They have at their disposal a variety of training sites that provide various levels of instruction depending on your rank or duty title.

However Security Police were not the only one changing tactics as a result of the attack on Ton San Nhut. After the TET Offensives, VC/NVA virtually abandoned attempts to overrun US positions by frontal attacks. (2:84)

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