

TET 1968

BUNKER HILL-10

Biên Hòa Air Base, South Vietnam

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3rd TFW, Air Maintenance Squadron (Electronics), Augmentee, 3rd Security Police Squadron

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1967-1968

FEBRUARY 1966

I **enlisted in the Air force** in February 1966, and went through basic training at Lackland AFB, TX, followed by a couple weeks on hold at Amarillo AFB, Texas, and then sent to Chanute AFB, IL for technical training as an Automatic Flight Control System Technician (AFCST). I graduated from Tech School in November 1966 and was sent to Luke AFB, AZ, for phase-2 of my training. However, when I got to Luke AFB, my field training was focused on the F-100 which had a fairly simple system on it. I was told I would likely spend six months in training at Luke and then be sent to Vietnam.

2 AUGUST 1967

1200 (Noon) hours,

Barry Lyons, A1C (Major, Ret.):

I arrived at Biên Hòa AB, RVN, on a TWA Boeing 707, at noon on August 2, 1967.

Coincidentally, I would depart Biên Hòa AB on a TWA Boeing 707 at 1:00pm on August 2, 1968—a little unusual, but *exactly* a one-year tour.

Sometime around October 1967, several of us were sitting in the office (3rd Tactical Fighter Wing (TFW), Air Maintenance Squadron (Electronics)) and began talking about how we really didn't know what happened once our planes left the ground. We were even allowed to go downtown Biên Hòa during the daytime and see the marketplace, river, and bars. At night, we could see AC-47 Gunship tracers and flares from various sources, and hear the sounds—but didn't really see much evidence of a real fight going on.

One of the guys was of a cowboy type, who was nearing the end of his tour, said you could just go over to the Army Helicopter area and bum a ride on a Huey Gunship. He said it may take several tries, but he had managed to get several rides during his tour. While this sounded intriguing, it was a little more risk than I was up for then, and I knew if I got caught by my boss I'd probably get an Article 15 and be busted (reduced in rank). I was also turning age 21 in mid-October which provided me with enough additional mature brain cells to realize that this wasn't the best idea in the world.



Biên Hòa AB: AC-47 Gunship fires support mission of ground troops east of Biên Hòa.

The cowboy also said that the Air Force 3rd Security Police (SP) Squadron on base had backup augmentees that were drawn from Avionics and the other shops, and the current bunch would be going home between then and Christmas. So, I asked how I might become an Augmentee and he said he'd take care of it.

The next thing I knew I got a call to come over to the SP area and go through training to be an augmentee to help support the SPs when needed. I was excited because I thought I'd now get a chance to observe some of the action from an SP perimeter guard station.

On the other hand, my boss wasn't nearly as excited, or at least in the same way I was! My direct boss was a Technical Sergeant responsible for the Automatic Flight Control Systems (AFCS) shop. Although stern about doing things the right way, he was fair and taught us how to do a good job, which at the bottom line, kept the planes flying. The Captain on the other hand liked to yell at those reporting to him, so my boss took the brunt of the yelling when the shop received the memo assigning me to this extra duty role. Neither were very happy, and for good reason, because if I was off on extra duty, then that left the shop shorthanded. Fortunately, the workload was light during that period and they were able to

juggle things and cover the work.

Looking back, not only was this a dumb move (what was it my Dad advised when talking over the fence at home with some of the other local WWII vets? Oh yes—"Don't volunteer for anything!" but also selfish on my part for my workmates. *Oh well*, what else was there to do?

So, we were trained as 3rd Security Police Squadron *Augmentees*. Most of us didn't know each other because we had been picked (or volunteered) from different shops so as not to short-man any one area. From what I remember, the Augmentee training wasn't very in-depth, to be honest. I thought all of us had M16 training before leaving the states. But now we went thru it again. I always thought it was fun (we shot at nonmoving targets with the M16 trigger set on semiautomatic, so you only fired as fast as you could pull the trigger and hit the target). We also had to dismantle, clean and reassemble our weapon. I did well enough to get the *Small Arms Expert Marksmanship* ribbon.

We were generally told not to use fully automatic mode because it used too much ammo too fast and, if you weren't experienced, it was easy to let the end of the barrel climb up toward the roof. Holes in the ceiling were not appreciated by the trainers. When it came to the M60 they showed us how to load and fire but the actual demonstration was done by a couple SPs. Oh well, I didn't think I would need to know how to use a M60 anyway.

We were taught how to say "halt" or "hands up", or something like that, in Vietnamese, when we got close enough to communicate with the enemy. After all we were just out there to observe and support the SPs, weren't we? They also told us not to shoot if the enemy was in a surrender position. Did I say "observe?" As you can tell these lessons were not something I remember well and hadn't planned to use anyway.

So, we were loaded onto trucks and began our familiarization-tour by going from the SP area west toward the end of the runway and around to the south side. The runway ran east-west for a length of 10,000 feet (about 2 miles) with a taxiway ramp running parallel on the south side. We were told sometime during 1968 that we were the busiest airport in the world, including fixed wing aircraft and helicopters. It was said that we were just ahead of Chicago O'Hare. I can't verify that claim, but it certainly was a busy place.



K-9 USAF Sentry Dog (MWD) fighting hole.

We drove on a side road on the north side of the runway which included going by the ammo dump, firing range, fuel storage and other logistic support areas. As we passed these areas I noticed that most had some level of sandbag protection. Riding along trying to take it all in, I also noticed there were a few individual circular sandbag barriers about six feet in diameter and 2-3 feet high (and as deep, and usually with a foot or so of water)--big enough for two to

four guys to “jump in” if an attack occurred, or one K-9 handler and his dog. I assumed that the SPs had built those there to provide a safe holding area when attacks occurred.

We continued east down along the north side, to the east end of the runway. I was told the 101st Airborne Division was headquartered off to the north-east but we didn't go that far over.



F-102 Delta Dagger, fighter bombers, on interceptor alert in case the NVA made a bombing run at us from Cambodia.

I assumed they thought they had things well covered from their direction. We went around the corner and across the east end of the runway/taxiway where a road split off to the east and slightly to the south. We went a little farther south and intersected with a road coming out from the aircraft ramp area, with five or six F-102 Delta Dagger, fighter bombers, on interceptor alert in case the NVA made a bombing run at us from Cambodia (as far as I know this never happened).

And finally, another road came out-going east from the ramp area that included about ninety F-100s. The Three roads came out going east from the ramp area, and all merged into a single road that went east, past a sandbagged cement structure called Bunker Hill- 10 (not sure how it got that name) about 100 yards through some swamp and rice patty area, and turned north to the 101st area.

From the beginning of the F-102 ramp, several paths could be taken either along the north or south side of the F-100 ramp on across to our A-37 and F-5 ramp and on over to the Vietnamese A-1E ramp. Then the ramp went by the control tower “I still remember the sign on the control tower that said “Biên Hòa 34 feet ASL”, and down to the parking area for C-123 defoliation aircraft. The road then continued to the parking ramp for freedom-birds’ personnel and for cargo loading and offloading ramp for the other aircraft that came to visit.



Bunker Hill-10, Bien Hoa Air Base, Tet 1968.

31 JANUARY 1968

0230 hours,

Most of us Augmentees came from different units or shops so we didn't know each other. The SP truck came around again about 2:30am to check on us and brought something to munch on and more coffee.

0300 hours,

Time passed and the coffee was not the best but helped dull the chill. Suddenly over toward the control tower there was an extremely bright flash of light and sharp crack of vibration in the air — it was 3:00am! I threw my canteen's tin coffee cup, "I know not where", and jumped into the bunker with at least one other guy right on top of me. I wiggled around to get someone's shoe out of my face, and so I could see a little bit, as there were more explosions impacting; some were mortars and some more larger rockets (records differ on these counts).

Fortunately for us, the VC's aim was for the base buildings and aircraft and not at us out in the middle of the taxi-way/runway. That quickly changed as the impacts seemed to have tapered off, and we could hear small arms fire everywhere. We were ordered to load back into the truck as it started heading over toward the F- 102 area and then on east and north toward the perimeter fence.

When the truck stopped, we were told to get off and establish a line to guard the fence. Easier said than done because I couldn't see anything, the grass was three feet or so, high and there was gunfire supported by tracers everywhere. I remember remarking to

the guy next to me that this wasn't *like the movies* where you could see everything going on. We moved to our left until we came to the road that ran down east from the F-102 area past a 6- 8-foot high old French cement bunker, "I later learned this was designated *Bunker Hill-10* and was where Capt. Masie was killed by a RPG. I do not know at what point he was KIA".

The VC were trying to capture Bunker Hill-10 and were firing mortars, rockets, RPGs, and small arms at it. There were three or four guys in the bunker, so the rest of us (15 or so) were directed across the road to the west bank of a drainage ditch running north from our position.

Two SPs, myself, and another augmentee, were directed to move forward (east) across the then dry drainage ditch such that we could cover that side of the ditch. This made us nearly parallel to Bunker Hill-10. The SPs had a M60 and were shooting east with lots of red tracer fire. I was facing more north, down along the drainage ditch, and toward but shorter than, the 101st AB area.

About 0530 hours,

We were starting to get flare support from C-47s, I think, and it allowed us to see the VC crossing the ditch between us on their way toward the aircraft ramp. When the parachute- flares went out, it was *incredibly dark*.

By watching closely, I learned the VC response to the flares from the C47 flying overhead and started timing my shots when they were exposed. "Along about this time I started wondering what my wife, parents, sisters, school-mates and others were going to say at my funeral. "How could I be a part of this big, country(USA) and be at risk of being killed in a field many miles away." I was sent back across the drainage ditch for more ammunition (M16 and M60).

Biên Hòa AB, TET 31 Jan 1968, Phantom RF4C photo reconnaissance aircraft Aerial flyover. [Click to Animate](#)

I quickly turned and clawed my way back down the side of the ditch, across and up the other bank only to find out that I had my weapon's safety off the entire time I had ran over and back. That realization still scares me about as much as anything, but fortunately I didn't accidentally pull the trigger. I just about threw up thinking what could have happened, but I didn't have time. It still



scares me (*remember I'm an aircraft electronics guy*), and while I'm not making excuses I wish there had been more time for augmentee safety training.

About 0630 hours, near twilight:

It was time for at least one more scare—coming from the west, and opposite end of the runway—a series of loud pops kept getting louder and louder and closer. The source of the *Pop-Pop-Pop* sound was obscured by streams of smoke and flashes, but when it got closer it turned out to be a RF4C photo reconnaissance aircraft taking a series of photos directly down the series of photos directly down the length of the runway. *The cavalry had finally arrived and we got documented!*

I also discovered that I had been given M-16 instead of M-60 ammo.

Pete Piazza and I have recently discussed this and apparently, the M-16 magazines were packed in wrappers and which were mistaken for M-60 bandoliers of loaded shells. We were doing okay with the M-60 ammo the SPs had, so I and the other augmentee used the M-16 ammo and we were all just careful to conserve for a while. This seemed like another area of weak training for us—double check actions that depend on others and yourself.

All at once I got a tap on my shoulder and the M60 boys were headed back across the drainage ditch. We hadn't totally stopped nor seen all of the VC coming along our side of the drainage ditch toward us from the 101st AB area. They had gotten within about 30 yards of us, and in our sight! As the four or five of us ran back to the other side, climbed up the four-foot bank and lay down, the 12-15 SPs and augmentees, that had been holding that position, made room for us. There were then about 20 of us.

We maneuvered into position on the top edge of the drainage ditch, hugging as close to the ground as possible, while watching for movement across the side of the drainage ditch near where we came from. A SP was behind me with a radio, which was being drowned out with constant chatter, when there was a sudden brilliant flash and very loud explosion. The VC had fired a B40 rocket, or something similar, that hit on the face of the ditch right in front of us. Fortunately, it had hit down near the bottom of the ditch wall and the concussion only blew the helmet off the guy next to me, but at least temporarily left several of us without hearing, except for a loud ringing in our ears.

Things really heated up and everyone started firing in the direction the rocket had come from. A SP a couple positions away had a grenade but apparently had never thrown one because he was looking for volunteers. I took it from him and was shocked at how heavy it was—aircraft mechanics don't usually throw or even touch a grenade—so I gave it back to him and asked that he keep it away from us so we didn't have any accidents. Then the guy next to me pointed to the end of his M16. The four-pronged fire suppressor at the very end of the rifle's barrel had been grazed by what looked like was probably an outgoing slug—possibly even one from my M16. I looked at it (who put me in charge) and suggested that he not fire it unless we were down to a situation that we really needed to fire. Right then we had enough men returning fire that it wasn't necessary for him to risk the rifle blowing up in his face if he fired it.



Biên Hòa AB, TET 1968, 3rd SPS firefight across ditch, with Viet Cong and NVA along Perimeter Road.

A few times when I was firing I felt something hit my boots. I checked for damage but didn't see any blood and my boots were in one piece. It happened a couple more times and I finally figured out what it was—empty brass shells that were ejected from mine or my neighbor's weapon and bounced off my boots. Guess I hadn't fired in such close quarters before.

About 0640 hours, twilight/Dawn hours.

We were near the AP with a radio, but could hear nothing but chatter—a lot of "Break 6" calls and scared airmen. Finally, whoever was on the other end of the radio [LTC Miller?] got everyone on the network to settle down and communicate. Soon after the B40 attack on, someone got a Huey Gunship from the Army helo area up by the main base entrance, and sent him our way—we now pretty well had the enemy pinned down everywhere, but as evidenced by the rocket fired at us there were still pockets of enemy capable of doing deadly damage. However, we were finally going to get rescued.

Most of us were watching the SP guys start to sweep the field from the east end of the runway, between the 101st AB, and toward us. All at once the Huey came up from behind us, about 40 feet off the ground, firing their M-60s and launching several rockets at the location where the VC's rocket-fire at us had come from.

As happy as we were for the support, the helicopter gunships literally scared the hell out of us by firing so close overhead. Our radio operator figured we now had enough help with the field sweep continuing to get closer, and we could now take it from there.

About 0730 hours,

Several of us went back across the drainage ditch, facing east, so we could provide back up to the sweep team as they pushed the VC right in to us and in to good positions for capture, and were captured and cleared one by one. One of our folks knew (or paid attention to our training enough) that 5-6 Viet Cong were starting to surrender right in front of us. They were being told to stand with hands in the air and move out of the trench from along the ditch they were hiding in.

There was a sudden burst of gunfire (why, I'm not sure) and the VC twisted and fell back into their holes. I had my M-16 aimed at them, but didn't pull the trigger as I saw them trying to surrender.

Our sweep leader got everyone calmed down and again talked the VC into coming back out in the open. They were told to remove their clothes, what little they had, so we could confirm they didn't have any concealed explosives or weapons on them.



*Photo: Battle of Bien Hoa, Bunker Hill-10:
Wounded Viet Cong, with a severe foot wound.
oBattle of Bien Hoa, Bunker Hill-10.*

The Viet Cong or NVA were all bloody from various wounds, but the one I remember the most was a tall enemy who had his foot mostly shot off, and several other wounds. I couldn't imagine how much it must have hurt! I also looked at several places where the helo-rockets had exploded, and saw that they didn't really do a lot of damage as they had hit in some high grass area which buffered the impact and damage—but I still wouldn't want one in my lap.

Our group started to split apart, and several of us worked thru the rice and grass field, east of our night position, to where the road turned to the left and up toward the 101st Airborne area. We were in a couple feet of water most of the way, and I could just picture a cowboy movie where the guy *hides in the water while breathing through a straw until all at once he jumps up in front of the other guy and shoots him.*

Fortunately, I didn't have that happen—this wasn't a movie nor a game—but I did come across a Viet Cong body on a small rise. As others noted, it looked like he had possibly shot himself in the head, probably when it had started to get light, and like us was scared he would be captured. Who knows what they had been told would happen to them if captured.

I finally was released from duty, and walked from the Bunker up the road to near the F-102 area. When I got there, I sat down on the edge of the ramp, and in the warm sun fell asleep—exhausted. I don't know exactly how long I dozed off, but I woke to the

sound of voices and a vehicle pulling a wagon nearby—it was the captured enemy and possibly the QC, who were loading their dead. The wagon was pretty full, about 20 feet away and maybe 40 bodies or so, with numerous wounds from head-to-toe. Gruesome. I was glad it wasn't us loading our dead.

I stood there a few moments wondering what their stories were, and whether their families would ever know what had happened to them. I suddenly realized that I was totally exhausted—bone weary—and paused, staring down at my weapon. I turned and headed for the Security Police compound to turn in my weapon.



*Biên Hòa Air Base, Tet 31 Jan 1968. 40 or more NVA & VC bodies buried in mass-grave pit.
Graphic Art (© 2017, by Don Poss*

After cleaning and turning in my weapon and ammunition, I started walking back to my shop, alone...one foot in front of the other. Exhausted to the bone. I got part way back and someone with a vehicle stopped and gave me a ride to my electronics' workshop. When I walked into the shop I heard several gasps as they saw my condition, covered from head to toe with dirt and charcoal, from burnt grass, and virtually blackened.

I was ready should the 3rd SPS call again for that night, but they did not...which was fine with me.

Looking back....

For me, the Air Force was an outstanding experience. As an SP Augmentee with the 3rd

Security Police Squadron, it was an incredible and unbelievable period in my life—and three TET days in January 1968—that I'll never forget.

Coincidentally, my promotion-date to Sergeant (E4) was 1 Feb 1968. Before I left Vietnam, I went over to the SP area and talked to a Captain. I asked him if there was a list for awards or performance report documentations for SP augmentees, and he said there would be. I never heard anything after that.

I stayed in the Air Force and was accepted into the Air Force Education and Commissioning Program (AFECPC), received my engineering degree and was commissioned a Second Lieutenant. I spent 20 years in the AF, spent another remote tour on Shemya, AK, and retired as a Major. I worked another 20 Years for several defense contractors until I fully retired in 2010. So far, nearly 50 years later (January 1968), most of what happened to me that night is quite clear, as evidenced by this writing.

Barry W. Lyons (Major, Ret.)