

Biên Hòa Air Base

Tet 1968

by LTC Kent Miller

Biên Hòa 1967-1968

Victory in battle can be measured in a variety of ways. Territory captured or defended and casualty losses verses enemy losses are probably the two most frequent measures of success in battle. Using these criteria, the battle won by the 3rd SPS during TET, 1968, can only be measured as a stirring victory.

The battle took place in Biên Hòa AB, Republic of Vietnam, during the North Vietnam TET offensive, January/February 1968. *The 3rd SPS killed and captured 160 enemy while losing two of their own, for a kill/capture ratio of 80-1.*

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 a sentry dog [Diablo X313, KIA] and his handler Bob Press. The combined VC/NVA (North Vietnam Army) force fought their way on base as far as the aircraft engine buildup area, approximately 50/60 yards from the reveted F-100 aircraft with the SP's taking them under fire all the way. The enemy's initial thrust was impeded by sentry dogs and their handlers, bunkers manned by SP machine gunners and riflemen, Sabotage Alert Teams (SAT) with jeeps-mounted M60 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. Bunkers were bypassed and in some cases surrounded, but none were overrun.

One of the SP KIA's (the squadron Operations Officer [Capt. Maisey]), received a direct hit by a shoulder-fired rocket launcher (RPG), while directing the defense of an old French bunker [Bunker Hill-10] on the perimeter. The other SP lost was an Augmentee [A1C Muse, KIA] (about 50 Augmentees had been trained by the SP's to help defend the base) KIA by a grenade during the fight at the engine buildup area. Fighting continued until dawn when the flight commander formed a skirmish line and drove the enemy, not already killed or wounded, back across the base perimeter. The perimeter fence line was 10 miles in length and although the ground attack only came from the east side, sniper fire was received from other directions most notably from north perimeter which was adjacent to the city of Biên Hòa. US Army ground force did not arrive until after day break when only enemy wounded and stragglers were left on the base. No Army of South Vietnam (ARVN) personnel were present during any part of the battle. The US Army unit pursued the enemy outside the perimeter and drove them back into the jungle.

The SP Squadron had no crew-serviced weapons, the M60 machine gun being the heaviest weapons authorized. Fortunately, the Army 145 Aviation Battalion was stationed on the base and throughout the battle gave unwavering air-support to the SP's; without the 145th's support undoubtedly the squadron would have taken additional casualties. At one point during the battle the squadron borrowed a recoilless rifle team from the QC (South Vietnamese Security Police), to dislodge some enemy holdup in a shack. In addition to no crew-serviced weapons, no armored vests, no perimeter lighting, gasoline filled drums, claymore mines or searchlights to cover enemy approach routes. We had no armored vehicles, only jeeps, pickup trucks and stake trucks borrowed from the motor pool for QRT's.

Fortunately 7th AF placed the squadron on maximum alert that afternoon prior to the attack but we were not told *why*, so many of us thought this was just a prolonging of the many false intelligence reports received in the past.

After Action reports listed the enemy forces at two battalions and a reinforced CO [1600-2000 VC/NVA]. This meant the squadron was outnumbered 4 or 5 to one as our Present for Duty (PFD), including Augmentees were around 400.

The Security Police were prohibited from operating outside the perimeter. The Army was responsible for security outside the perimeter. The official scenario was that we would never be attack by more than a platoon. On previous occasions when the Squadron had conducted night ambushes or perimeter sweeps the Squadron Commander was called in and told to halt such operations as the Army had everything outside the perimeter under control. Prior to the attack, higher authorities were notified that the majority of the time no Army was securing the perimeter. The Squadron Commander was told otherwise and to keep the squadron *inside* the perimeter. The only official exception was that 50 squadron members were granted permission to attend the 173rd Airborne Brigade's week long training they gave all of their new troops. The training climaxed with a helicopter assault into the base, a night defensive perimeter and a search mission back to the base. The 173rd main base was tied into the Air Base and was also attacked during TET. The Division replaced the 173rd earlier but they only had a rifle CO and MP's at their base camp and were hard pressed to defend their area.

TET was not the squadron's first encounter with the enemy. During 1967 numerous enemy sapper teams (sabotage team), were stopped at the perimeter sometimes in brisk fire fights. In August 1967, the squadron captured their first prisoner in one of these firefights.

Numerous decorations were awarded squadron personnel as a result of the TET battle, including Air Force Cross, Silver Stars, and Bronze Stars with the Valor devise. I do not know the total number of decorations awarded as I rotated prior to any being awarded. Also, I do not know the disposition of the 10 or 12 wounded as the most critical were evacuated off base immediately after the battle.

I am aware that due to the bravery, ability and devotion to duty of the Junior Officers, NCO's and Airmen, the 3rd SPS were not out fought. Although out-gunned and out numbered they were ready and willing when called upon to do their duty. They thought they were the best and proved it.

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A check of the records for Biên Hòa on TET 1968 **by From: Kenneth Record , VSPA Historian**

LTC FOX'S BOOK (Air Base Defense In The Republic of Vietnam, 1963-1973) shows 4 dead and 26 wounded [plus 1 K-9 Sentry Dog], and that VC casualties were 139 dead and 25 POWs. Fox's information on the VC only includes those inside the base perimeter.

The CASUALTY REPORTS show 5 dead (Maisey and 4 enlisted members), 5 were wounded badly enough to require hospitalization and 20 others injured by hostile action.

The COMBAT OPERATIONS AFTER ACTION REPORT (COAA) signed by LTC Miller (It must be noted that the wing had to approve the report before it went forward to higher headquarters) indicates the following:

USAF Losses 4 KIA, 1 Heart attack [LOD], 26 WIA, 99 non-combat injuries.

VC Losses 139 KIA (body count) 25 POWs.

Other friendly forces (101st 11th ACR, ARVN) indicate the following: 24 KIA, 73 WIA, VC losses at 423 KIA and 34 POWs

Unfortunately, none of the reports indicate the AFSC of those wounded or killed. Only one actual SP was killed (Maisey) with one Augmentee [to the 3rd SPS]; I have not yet been able to ID the name of the Augmentee [A1C Edward Muse]. Additionally, Sentry Dog Handler Robert (Bob) Press' K-9 Diablo, X313, was shot dead when Press radioed first-alarm.

The 1st Quarter Historical Report (Jan-Mar 1968) states that SSgt Piazza and Capt Strones were awarded the Silver Star for actions on 31 Jan 1968.

The Squadron Historical report for the 2nd Quarter of 1968 (Apr-Jun) states that two enlisted SPs (SSgt Eddie S. Nigh and SSgt Larry H. Sawyer were **awarded the Silver Star** for action on 31 Jan 1968. This same report states that **13 SPs received the BSM/V** for their actions on 31 Jan 1968. The ranks break down this way:

1st LT --1
2nd LT--1
MSgt---3
TSgt----2
SSgt----5
A1C----1

This report is signed by 1st LT ROGOZINSKI but ultimately had to be approved by MAJ Lynn the squadron CC who took over on 1 March.

The historical reports from before, during and after the time period in question indicate a consistently understaffed squadron.

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