

PLEIKU TET 1968

by James Batson
633rd SPS, Pleiku , 67-68
12th SPS, Phù Cát,
70-72

I arrived in-country on 21 December 1967, at Phù Cát. The priority of aerial movement put in-bound Permanent Change of Station (PCS) arrivals close to the bottom - after outbound R&R, Out-bound tdY troops. While sleeping in an uncomfortable terminal seat, a Phù Cát (CRB) air-cop told me I had to vacate the area: PRESIDENT JOHNSON WAS ARRIVING (and they didn't want the air terminal being smelled up by a bunch of grubby grunts). I found 6 feet of sand on the beach and slept.

On Christmas day, I got a C-130 ride to Pleiku and thought they'd laid on a parade for me. It was the Bob Hope show, due to arrive thirty minutes after I touched down. By this time, four days of an *unreal war* gave me (James Batson) second thoughts about my plans to resign a regular commission and returning to my former job with the Long Beach Police Department (California).

Pleiku was one of our Vietnamese bases which we shared with the VNAF. Our job was securing it with one of the smaller Security police squadrons. We were in the usual 3-shifts arrangement, manning old French machine gun towers around the perimeter, protecting a variety of sub-sonic aircraft and within a holler of Camp Holloway, the Army's big chopper base. The mood was fairly contented. Pleiku was one of the few installations where you could actually sleep under a blanket at night, due I suppose, to the altitude. It was located in the Central Highlands.

Our Commander, Major Bofenkamp (now deceased), appointed me as the assistant Operations Officer. In light of the fact that I had nothing to do, I opted to just work nights, reporting to CSC at the end of the normal duty day and working with CMSgt Bob Humphreys.

Other than an accident destroying the armory and the armorers with it, nothing much took place of note in Pleiku. The first combat fatality of the Office of Special Investigations (OSI) had taken place some months before. Two agents, choosing to live in Pleiku Village, were targeted by either NVA or operatives or local terrorists, and a B-40 rocket went through the front door killing one of them. Rumors had it that the agent had picked up on information that indicated some kind of military build-up forthcoming. The other agent relocated to the Air Base and spent much time without us in CSC. But nothing much happened. Frequent calls to Saigon helped little. But the signs were there. For one, the extraordinarily high increase in *funeral processions* in Saigon. We found out later that they were being used to stage weapons throughout the city for their attacks on Cholon and at Tân Sơn Nhứt Air Base.

Then the intelligence reports showed increased security levels throughout MACV. But telecons with the larger bases at Biên Hòa, Đà Nẵng, and Tân Sơn Nhứt indicated that it was considered business as usual and the intelligence traffic was just *'someone crying wolf'*. Regardless of what the headquarters people believed, we took it seriously. At this time, our operations officer left on his R & R and I took over the Ops Branch. We decided to prepare for the worst. Major Bofenkamp briefed our Group Commander (we weren't a wing), who gave us the go-ahead to do whatever we thought was necessary.

I believe the reason so little action was taken against Pleiku was because we were bristling with defenses in depth. We altered the flight schedule immediately to divide us in two, on twelve hours shifts with no days off. We called on the Army to assign tanks to us and they gave us six (some of which were lost with their crews in Pleiku Village). We identified every squadron and staff agency as augmentees and put them into sections of the base perimeter, including; the cantonment areas, and let them compete for the best protected, best organized, and strongest defense sectors on base.

We threw the manual out. Humphreys and I went to a nearby fire base and, used area ordnance maps, identified grid coordinates for artillery and mortar fire to bring down on ourselves if necessary (one mortar flare empty came down through the NCO Club, setting off rocket attack alarms base-wide on our first test of the system). The tanks were turned over to the on-duty flight chief to coordinate with their officer-in-charge for deployment in different locations and were to move regularly to avoid being targeted by the enemy. Communications Squadron linked all perimeter sectors to each other and Base Civil Engineers won the award for *Best Sector*, having tunnels, a command post, and whatever else they managed to erect ((having all of the equipment and manpower to do so).

Having issued out every weapon on the base and being tasked with the special training necessary, we put together a ten-hours emergency training session to include use of the M-79 grenade launcher, the M60 machine gun, throwing grenades, basic combat medical care, fields of fire, use of the radio, and a lot of practice filling sand bags. The base personnel responded wholeheartedly. We far surpassed the standard percentage of augmentee levels expected by HQ USAF. We had everybody involved in this effort.

The Commander established an 'air evacuation' plan to scramble and remove all aircraft and in the last flights out, leave the Security Police behind and move the personnel to safety. By now the Security Police were stretched thin. Administration ground to a halt. Many of the NCOs were helping units set up their own sectors. And Chief Humphreys Picked Staff Sergeant Verbal Keith to take his flight of 'do-it-yourselfers' and begin laying concertina wire, filling up ditches, and curiously, rig an army .50 caliber heavy machine gun onto a ton-and-a-half stake bed truck with sand bags and chain link fencing around it. We found that the only way you could stop a B-40 (RPG-7) rocket was for it to be detonated as the shape charge penetrated the

sandbags. This was accomplished by overlapping the chain link enough to insure that the rocket's war head would strike a part of the link and detonate before penetrating. The lesson was learned at some expense. The B-40s went through our tanks like butter, scrambling the crew with razor-hot shreds of armor plating. If hit, there were no survivors, The problem was, we found later, that the truck could barely move under the weight, but when a mob of civilians were pressing into the locked main gate, we pulled it up like some scene in one of those World War German Army movies, wheeled it around to face the guns at the mob (we were told by intelligence sources that this was a standard Vietnamese tactic to use innocent civilians in front of armed units to penetrate positions), and fired off a dozen rounds over their heads. They broke and ran.

Then the rocket attacks began. The Russian 122 rockets are set up and launched in minutes. Your only defense is to make it to a shelter or at least roll under your bed. It sounds like the Jolly Green Giant walking toward you wearing combat boots the size of your car. Using stakes to aim them from distant pads (line of sight targeting), they prepare them to fire in minutes, and then watch the detonations to correct for additional shots. If we could track the rockets exhaust trails, we could call in artillery to fire on the positions. But they usually fired and ran.

During this period, the instant anything set off our alert klaxon, everyone grabbed their helmets, flak vests, and M16s and made it to their sector bunkers. There were no loose ends anywhere.

When the action reports came in from the rest of the command, we realized that this wasn't any 'probe' to see what we'd do. NVA units actually penetrated Biên Hòa and Tân Sơn Nhut causing several casualties on SP defenders. Fighting in the cities claimed thousands of civilians and the 25th Army Division was being socked hard. When our kids heard of the tanks we lost in Pleiku the seriousness of the events gripped everyone. While readying for the attacks, they had played touch football with them. There would be no more football this season. In a few days it was over. Other than rocket damage, all we had to report was several panic injuries. Our K-9 Kennels received a rocket strike and the best tale to come out of that was when a bunch of guys cringing in a darkened bunker heard what they believed was one of their troops hyperventilating and lit a match to find the biggest and meanest German Shepard in there with them--and every bit as scared!

Chief Humphreys got me on the radio one day as the fighting had wound down and the village (actually it was called The City of Pleiku) was secured, and said that Vase Information Office needed a security escort to go into Pleiku City and attend a victory and awards celebration to be conducted by the South Vietnamese Army. We volunteered to be the escort and took the ten minutes drive through the emaciated buildings to a large soccer field in which there were at least two hundred dead bodies swelling up in the hot sun. None were in uniform which gave some credence to our decision not to let the civilians onto the Air Base when the fighting erupted. The wounds were terrible. Some were still wiggling. Many were burned beyond human recognition.

Then a band struck up and the mayor and some dressed up men and women took bows and paraded a group of Vietnamese army officers around these stiffs and pinned medals on them. It seemed a bit barbaric but it was their country (God, did we hear that a few thousand times). And that was about it except for what followed.

I was reassigned to HQ 7th Air Force and tasked immediately with (1) adopting the Pleiku plan throughout Vietnam; (2) place on an inspection team to insure the plan was implemented; and (3) to prepare, for Generals Momyer and Seith, a complete *after-battle* report of what Pleiku did. I finished the tour in Saigon, eventually taking over the security operations of all of the radar sites in Vietnam and Thailand. I was assigned to London in January, 1969 as Deputy Director of Security Police, HQ 3rd AF and Scotland Yard Liaison Officer.

(Author's note: Much of the information included in this article appeared in the January 1969 edition of 'The Police Chief, a publication of the International Chiefs of Police Association of Washington D.C. entitled Security Police Operations in the Limited War Environment (by the same author). It was republished in the Royal Air Force (RAF) Security Journal.)

The author, James Batson, retired in 1982 and returned to the Long Beach Police Department and served as a detective until retiring in 1990. He has published several articles including one entitled 'Inside Scotland Yard' and 'The Ulster Defense Constabulary.' He now teaches middle and high school math and science in FAir Field, California.

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