

Attack on Tân Sơn Nhứt Air Base 4 December 1966 377th Security Police Squadron

© 1999, by Olbert H. Hiett, 1st TSgt
USAF Retired (1944-1974)
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SVN 1967-1968

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Attack on Tân Sơn Nhứt Air Base, Republic of Vietnam, by the 14th Viet Cong Battalion on 4 December, 1966. Det- by MSgt First Sergeant Olbert H. Hiett, (Ret),

1. Photo: Olbert H. Hiett,

Vietnam Duty tours:

1966-1967; 1968-1969; 1970-1971.

633rd APS, Pleiku Air Base, RVN; TDY:
377th Air Police Sq, Tân Sơn Nhứt AB,
822nd Combat Security Police Sq,
Phan Rang AB; Attached:
35th TFW/SP Wing, Phan Rang AB;
366th Security Police Sq, Đà Nẵng AB;
483rd Security Police Sq, Nha Trang;
Detachment, Nha Trang AB, RVN.

TSgt Hiett awarded:

Bronze Star w/Valor, TSN 26 Jan 1969



On 4 December, 1966 I was on TDY (Temporary Duty) to the 377th APS, Tân Sơn Nhứt Air Base, Republic of Vietnam. I was attending classes

conducted by specialist from the Rock Island Research Laboratory on the Colt .223 caliber (5.56mm) M16 Rifle. I was NCOIC, of Air Police Training at Pleiku Air Base, RVN. At that time I was training 263 Air Police and 133 Air Police Augmentees in the; M16 Rifle, .38 caliber revolver (Model 15, SandW), M60 machine gun (7.62mm), M-79 grenade launcher (40mm), and 50 caliber machine gun, and M-26 fragmentation hand-grenade. This training entailed; writing lesson plans, scheduling, teaching, coaching, and training assistant instructors.

I was sleeping in the Air Police barracks at 1:00 a.m. when the base came under attack by the 14th Viet Cong Battalion. I immediately grabbed my M16 rifle and 360 rounds of ammo, revolver and 50 rounds, and reported to Central Security Control (CSC) for duty. At CSC I was assigned as leader of a Quick Reaction Team (15 Air Police QRT). We were assigned

a light ton truck and dispatched to a location on the Air Base south perimeter; south of the hangers, flight line, revetments and runways which were under attack by the Viet Cong.

We reached our assigned location at 1:15 a.m.. I looked at my watch. We stopped the truck on the road; unloaded, lined up on the south side of the road where there were some cover. The road was higher than the level ground and was slanted on the south side towards a slight ditch with a little bank on the east-side, and on the west-side. I believe there were two SSgts on my QRT. I had not had an opportunity to get the names of my team members. We could hear shots and explosions in the flight line area. Every team member was armed with an M16 rifle, and we had no other weapons, except my revolver.

The perimeter fence was approximately 100 yards south of the road and our position. Elephant grass on the south side was about waist high, and on the north side it was about ankle high to waist high, and there was a ditch across the north side. I was wearing green fatigues and my five stripes (TSgt) were very visible so, as I sat on the bank of the south side of the road and west of our truck, I took off my fatigue jacket and turned the sleeves inside-out. I was sitting with my back to the South and wearing a white T-shirt. As I was putting my jacket back on, one of the Air Police ask me.

"What are you doing?" I replied, "What does it look like I'm doing--I'm putting these stripes out of sight." At this time a mortar round (82mm) exploded approximately 100 yards on the north side of the road. I thought for just a second, and I yelled, take cover.

Simultaneously, the Viet Cong started to drop mortar shells on the Rd west to east. They fired an RPG-2 rocket that hit our truck. It exploded like a napalm bomb. The VC opened-up on our south side from 15 to 20 yards (90 to 100 enemy) with SKS-rifles (7.62mm), AK-47 Assault machine guns (7.62mm), Light machine guns with tripods (7.62mm), and hand grenades. I immediately lost 11 of my 15-man Quick Reaction Team (QRT). Two were killed, and nine were wounded. Just 4 of us were left to defend our position.

A2C John M. Cole, of Philadelphia, PA who arrived in Vietnam just the day before, was killed beside me on my left. A2C Oliver J. Riddle, of Coraopolis, PA died about 10 yards on my left. The two Air Police on my left immediately opened fire and silenced the machine gun directly in front of their position, killing the gunners who were only approximately 15 yards away. Hand grenades were landing on the road. There were rifle and automatic weapons fire from our left-flank to our right-flank; I could hear their actions on their weapons closing on empty chambers giving us a chance to return fire.

The VC poured their fire on our position; bullets cracked by both sides of my head, like slapping your hands together, bullets cut the grass on the small knoll that protected me and the Air Policeman on my right. I told him to watch our right-flank, and I would watch our left. Bullets knocked dirt and gravel down my collar as I maneuvered behind the knoll. At one point I thought they were going to over-run our position--I flipped on my back with my M16 in my left-hand and my revolver in my right-hand. I thought that we would not

survive, and I wanted to get as many of them as I could as they ran over us. They did not come.

The firing stopped and 2 ambulances arrived from the east side and picked up our wounded. The VC did not fire while this was being accomplished. One person with the ambulances, I believe was Major Fox, the 377th APS Commander, asked me if I was all right before they left, and I told him that I was okay. They left with the wounded and the four of us stayed, and the shooting started again. Some of the wounded threw me their ammunition as they were being loaded in the ambulances.

We had no communications with CSC, and during a lull in the fighting, two MSgts drove up in a jeep with windshield down and combat gear. They stopped within 6 to 10 feet of me and ask, "Where is the enemy?" I responded in a low voice, right there in front of us. They asked again, "Where?" I yelled--"Right there, 15 yards in front of you!" The driver immediately rolled out of the jeep on the left side, and the other Sergeant rolled out on the right side, just before the Viet Cong opened fire on their jeep. The VC shot out the tires, lights, windshield (on the hood), and just about everything on the jeep. Bullets sounded like hail hitting on a tin roof. The two MSgts crawled away on the road west the way they had approached our position.

Shortly after two C-47 aircraft with mini-guns made passes strafing the area between our position and the perimeter fence. This action drove the Viet Cong almost on top of us, and again the firing was heavy. I thought the C-47's were going to get on top of our position too. Next, 25 to 30 Air Police arrived. We formed a line and advanced through the tall grass towards the outer fence, numerous dead VC and weapons were on the ground. In about 10 or 15 minutes; the other Air Police left, and the original four of us remained to hold the position. It was though they thought the area was secure.

The VC returned. We didn't know until investigation revealed that we had unloaded at the VC battalion entry/exit point; they had cut two holes in the perimeter fence, and set up their rear-guard near the road to cover the attacking force's withdrawal. They had set up in the tall grass at the side of the road where we unloaded directly in front of their reinforced (90 to 100) man platoon. I discovered after the battle was over that day; they had claymore mines set up that covered our area where we unloaded. The wiring of the mines had not been completed. They had not connected the wires to the detonators on the mines; the wires were laying in the grass.

A South Vietnam Army 6X6 2i ton truck with twin 20mm guns mounted on a steel-bed with gunner, driver and a third man pulled up beside me and stopped. The VC opened fire; all three of the RVN soldiers jumped off and ran. The VC riddled the truck with bullets, and hand-grenades bounced off the truck and exploded in the road beside me and the others.

A second truck approached equipped the same as the other truck, with twin 20mm guns. The RVN soldiers jumped off and ran without firing a shot, and before the truck stopped. The truck was riddled with bullets as the other one was. I was not familiar with the operation of the 20mm guns. I wanted to get behind those guns but I didn't think that I could get the guns firing before the VC shot my legs from under me. I would have been exposed at very close range.

Those killed at very close range (12 to 15 yards) and hit in the head by M16 rounds (5.56mm), their heads exploded, and chunks of brain matter were scattered six to ten feet from their bodies. I looked at pictures some had on their person; women and children. I don't think I have ever seen a dead soldier that I didn't feel sorry for. I sat alone, cried, and during a lull in the firing, one of the RVN soldiers crawled from across the road (north side) up to me; he could speak English. I told him that I couldn't operate the 20mm guns. He then told me that they had a .30 cal. 0 cal. A-4 machine gun with plenty of ammunition under the 20mm guns. I had a lot of experience with the A-4.

We crawled around the left rear wheels of the truck, and up over the wheels to the bed of the truck. There must have been more than a 1,000 rounds of ammo for the A-4. I loaded the gun and opened fire on the VC position; firing from right to left and left to right. I shot everything that moved. The RVN soldier was shouting and pointing out targets; I shot every thing he pointed at. It appeared the VC were trying to make it to the holes in the wire, their entry/exit point. The A-4 jammed several times from rounds in the belt that had been hit. I pulled the action back, ejecting the fouled round, and the gun continued to fire. We don't know how many dead and wounded the VC took with them through the holes in the fence. It appears they were safe when they got outside the wire; but they kept coming back to cover the withdrawal of their assault force on base.

It was almost daylight now and we were getting no resistance from the south side of the road. At daylight we got off the truck and were fired on from the north side of the road; we were also being reinforced by other Air Police, when another Air Policeman was wounded beside me and the shot came from very close.

The two Air Police on my QRT, and on my east side and I opened fire on the area the shot came from. Three VC emerged; 2 crouched with their hands up, 1 crawling with one hand up, he had a foot that was almost shot off at the ankle, only skin held his foot on. I told everyone to hold their fire; that we needed the prisoners. They came on in; an RVN soldier ran up and killed one with a pistol, shot him in the head. I jumped in, and told other Air Police to take the other two prisoners away immediately and protect them. These were the only prisoners taken in the action.

The attacking forces on base were trying to make their way through our line to their entry/exit point. At Approximately 9: 30 a.m., hostilities had ceased and my original three members of my QRT that were not wounded were being relieved along with all other Air Police that had to be fed and posted on their regular shifts. I was asked again to volunteer, and stay with the dead VC and point them out to the graves detail; locate all the weapons left in the area, and point out all the unexploded ordnance to the Explosive Ordnance Detail (EOD).

What I am about to write about may seem ghastly, and it truly is, but it was my job as a weapons Training NCOIC in a horrible and hostile environment. I checked the VC bodies; cut equipment off them, checked the weapons each of them were armed with, checked the wear on their clothing. Some of the stocks on their weapons were wore thin on the sides

from being dragged on the ground while crawling. Their feet and hands were very callused. These were very experienced Viet Cong. I noticed that they didn't carry any rations. Their base was probably in the Saigon area. Some were young, while others appeared to be in their late 30's. prayed for them, and us.

We know now that a lot of the assault forces were trapped on the base and hiding in the area, trying to get out at the entry/exit point. I didn't know at that time how vulnerable I was. At approximately 11:00 a.m. I was relieved and ask to attend the after action briefing.

One of the things that I stressed was; we were out-gunned. Another was; we were in a perfect position to use fragmentation hand-grenades. We could have bombarded the VC reinforced platoon; ended our situation quickly, and inflicted greater casualties on the enemy. We also needed an M60 (7.62mm) machine gun; and we had no communications.

On the evening of 4 December, 1966 at just about dark, the 377th Air Police again made contact with the Viet Cong that were trapped on base, and in the entry/exit area. I rushed to the area where contact was made; armed with 16 M-26 hand-grenades, my M16 rifle, and revolver to assist Air Police, and Air Police K-9 dog handlers already engaging the Viet Cong. I would rush from one area to another where contact was made with the VC for back-up, and the fight would already be over with all VC killed. One dog was lost; he jumped in a bunch of bushes on two Viet Cong, they killed him with a knife before they were shot dead by Air Police.

On 5 December, 1966 I returned to the 633rd APS, Pleiku Air Base, RVN and immediately went to our church on the hill. If I live to be 200 years old, I don't believe I will ever again come as close to death as I did from 1:15 a.m. to 11:00 a.m. on 4 December, 1966 at Tan Son Nhut Air Base, Vietnam. No event in my life remains so vividly. I went through several stages; from being frightened, and concerned about disappointing my wife and four child--even if I didn't survive, to being very angry and determined to prevail. Airman Cole, and Airman Riddle, gave everything that they had--their lives.

In October, 1997 in Pensacola, Florida while attending the Vietnam Security Police Association reunion, I met Mr. Ted Janiak, of DeMotte, Indiana. Ted is one of the 9 Air Policemen on my Quick Reaction Team that were wounded on 4 December, 1966. Ted is the only one of them that I have met, or seen since that day. All 9 were awarded the Purple Heart decoration. Airman Cole, and Airman Riddle's Purple Hearts were awarded posthumously.

To say the least, I was delighted to meet Ted Janiak. God bless all of you Ted--I salute all fourteen of you.

Olbert H. Hiatt,
1st Sergeant Security Police,
USAF Retired (1944-1974)
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