APPENDIX D: LEADERSHIP STUDY: TACTICAL EXPERTISE

Last Updated: 8 August 2015

Security Police Defense of Tan Son Nhut and Bien Hoa Air Bases, January 1968

ATTACK ORDER, 30 January 1968

From: The Presidium of the National Liberation Front Central Committee
To: - Cadres and Soldiers of the People's Liberation Armed Forces
- Compatriots

After successive victories in recent months, the situation in-country as well as in the world becomes very favorable for the liberation of our Country and People. The American aggressors are being defeated and the Puppet Government is being on the way to disintegration. Our Revolutionary Forces are grown up and become stronger than ever. The North (VN), a large rear of the South (VN), is more and more strong and is striking the American invaders with dead-blows.

Friendly Nations on [sic] over the world (including progressive American people) unanimously and positively support us.

The presidium orders all Liberation Armed Forces, Political Struggle Force, members of all Liberation Associations and other Patriotic Forces and the whole Nation to unanimously stand up in order to:

- Destroy the enemy vital force as much as possible, defeat US and Allied troops, and liquidate Puppet government troops.
- Break down all Puppet Government Administrative organizations and severely punish Vietnamese traitors and tyrants.
- Establish Revolutionary Administration and make every effort to defend it, decidedly punish and break up all enemy counterattack forces under any circumstances.
- Carry out policies in the essential line of action promulgated by the Front.

Compatriots, Cadres, and Soldiers
Move forward bravely
We will certainly win.

The Tet offensive of January, 1968, began with limited to no intelligence available to the forces defending the installations in South Vietnam near major cities. Outside Saigon, the 377th Security Police Squadron (377 SPS) on Tan Son Nhut Air Base and the 3rd Security Police Squadron (3 SPS) at Bien Hoa Air Base were in normal alert condition until 1732 on 30 January 1968, when orders came down from the commander, 7th Air Force, putting Air Force units into "Alert Condition Red," a posture providing the commander with the option for using all security police and augmentees to provide the maximum security possible over a short period of time. According to the 377 SPS combat operations after action report, "[t]he intelligence situation for the days immediately preceeding [sic] the attack remained relatively unchanged from the normal."

The descriptions below of the actions at each base vary in their styles; for Tan Son Nhut, the information is derived from the unit after-action report, demonstrating the dynamism of the action that called for leadership at the tactical level by numerous members of the Security Police squadron. For Bien Hoa, the focus is on the recollections of one member of the Security Police squadron, emphasizing the human impact leadership can have on an individual.

Tan Son Nhut Air Base

On Tan Son Nhut, only the 377 SPS and the supporting Army Task Force (TF) 35 were placed into Alert Condition Red, with the rest of the base in Condition Yellow. When Alert Condition Red was implemented, three platoons of US Army personnel (TF 35) were alerted and placed on five-minute standby status as augmentation reserve forces for the 377 SPS, under the operational control of the commander, 377 SPS.

At 0300 on 31 January 1968, the joint defense operations center (JDOC) received notification that the US Embassy in Saigon and the Saigon radio station were under attack. At 0320, the guard in Tower 16 at the east-southeast corner of the base reported observing small arms fire from off base directed at the petroleum/oil/lubrication (POL) site on the installation. Security Police were dispatched and members of the quick reaction force (QRF) and TF 35 responded to predesignated rendezvous points. Reports of small arms, grenade, and mortar fire began to increase dramatically from various points around the base.

At 0340, the Security Police at the 051 bunker on the west side of the base reported being hit by mortar or rocket fire and the rounds were landing on base. At 0344, they reported the west perimeter fence was breached near the 051 gate. The 051 bunker was manned by five personnel: Sergeants Louis Fischer, William Cyr, Charles Hebron, Roger Mills, and Alonzo Coggins. Sergeant Fischer, in charge of the personnel at the bunker, directed its defense until enemy fire killed him, along with Sergeants Cyr, Hebron, and Mills. Sergeant Coggins survived, but was severely wounded. The assault on the west side of the base, centered around the 051 bunker, was the main thrust of the attack on Tan Son Nhut.

051 Bunker, Tan Son Nhut Air Base, January 1968

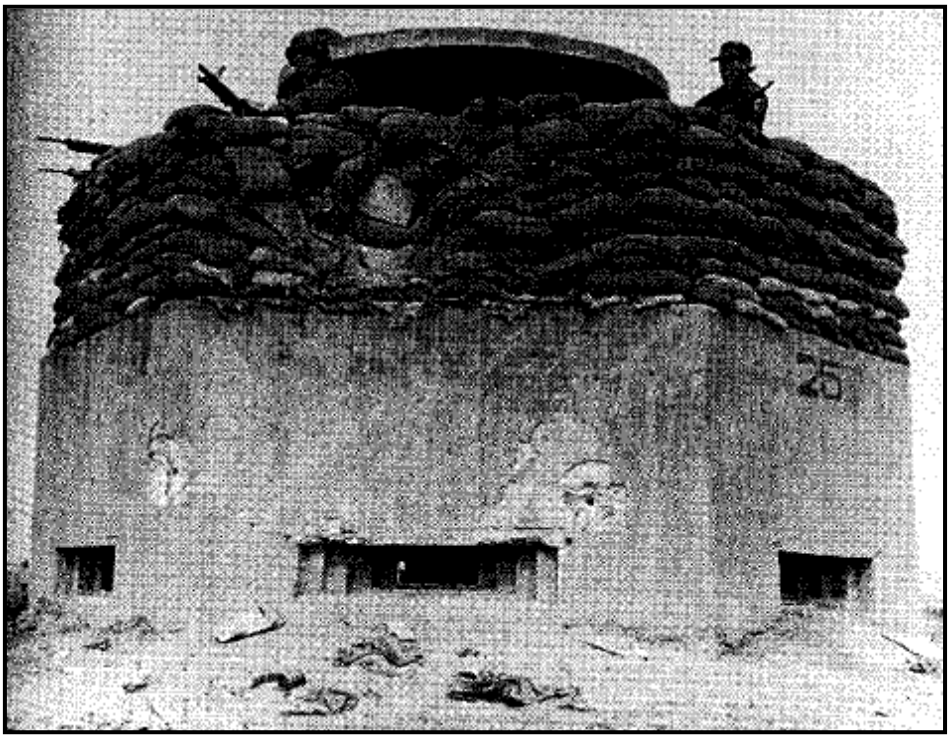
At 0529, enemy troops were sighted by Tower 1 Security Police near the Alpha/Echo sector line, to the northeast of the 051 bunker. Security Police deployed to a main line of resistance (MLR) from east to west to act as a blocking force, as the enemy had penetrated approximately 600 meters into the base in an area approximately 300 meters wide. Intense defensive resistance by the Security Police, along with TF 35 personnel and forces of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN). stopped the attack, and by 0603, some enemy forces were observed withdrawing through a break in the perimeter fence south of the 051 gate.

At 0630, The US Army's C Troop, 3rd Squadron, 4th Cavalry, from Cu Chi arrived in the area after fighting its way down the highway to the base. This counterattack by friendly forces outside the base allowed the defenders on Tan Son Nhut to mount their own counterattack, which began at 0635.

Small arms fire continued around the perimeter of the base until 0730, with posts in the north, east, and south sectors reporting small arms and automatic weapons fire. At 0725, the defensive lines on base received heavy concentrations of fire to cover an attempted enemy assault on the friendly counterattack line. This enemy fire was used chiefly to cover the withdrawal of their wounded and the part of the main force still inside the perimeter. Fighting continued around the base for several more hours. Several attempts to recapture the 051 gate during this time were unsuccessful, but at 1210, 377 SPS personnel assaulted again and neutralized the enemy fire from there, recapturing the bunker. This was the last area of the base held by the enemy. At 1217, the base perimeter was resecured. Hostile fire continued from off base for several hours afterwards.

Bien Hoa Air Base

Simultaneous with the attack on Tan Son Nhut, North Vietnamese and Viet Cong forces totaling four battalions hit Bien Hoa Air Base, northeast of Saigon. At the time, it was the busiest air base in the world, with 150 aircraft assigned and numerous transient aircraft flowing through. When the attack occurred, the key thrust of the enemy assault centered on the east side of the base around a heavy bunker built originally by the French, named Bunker Hill 10 by the 3 SPS. The following transcription of an interview with Senior Master Sergeant (SMSgt) (Retired) William "Pete" Piazza provides a clear view of the intensity of the fighting at the time. For his actions at Bunker Hill 10, Sergeant Piazza was awarded the Silver Star. During the battle, as a staff sergeant, he was in charge of an ammunition resupply team, and had been dispatched to Bunker Hill 10 to resupply the squadron operations officer, Captain Reginald Maisey, at the bunker where he and 30 other personnel were engaged in a firefight.



Bunker Hill 10, Bien Hoa Air Base, January 1968

"We brought slap flares to Captain Maisey. He had already gone through two boxes of them; if you've ever seen elephant grass, you can hardly see anything in it. At 0330, the first RPG [rocket-propelled grenade] round hit. We were all behind the bunker at the time. There was a QRT [quick reaction team], a SAT [security alert team], even the fire department was there.

"The first RPG round hit. The M-60 gun was sitting on top of the bunker. When it got hit the M-60 fell over the edge; it was just sitting on the sandbags. We all turned around and looked at each other, and somebody said, 'Look!' and pointed up. If you've ever seen the movie Superman, all we saw was a B-40 round coming right

over the top of the bunker into the elephant grass [with sparks flying out looking like a cape]. It never went off; it was a dud. Everybody just looked at each other, then somebody said, 'Hit the dirt,' then a 'Boom!'

"The next round hit the bunker and that's when the fire department personnel decided to get the hell out of there. Captain Maisey had the 145th Aviation Battalion coordinator that was supposed to be in CSC (central security control) if we needed him because we didn't have communication radios with them. We'd call CSC who in turn would call 145th aviation headquarters and then the choppers would go. Well, the coordinator was out at Bunker Hill 10 with us, so we had no way of talking with the Army. He was sitting behind the bunker with an M-16 with the XM-148 grenade launcher (which evolved into the M-203 rifle with grenade launcher), sitting there not knowing what to do with it; he's a pilot, not a rifleman. I gave him my CAR-15 [rifle] and I took the XM-148 with the M-16 attached, and took the rounds he had.

"I could see Charlie because I was on the right-hand side of the bunker. I could see the firing coming at us. There were two posts out in front of that, both were Quan Canh [Vietnamese Air Force security police] posts…. That was our first information that Charlie was coming because the guys that got out alive ran down to Bunker Hill 10 in their underwear screaming, 'VC, VC, VC!'

"We got into a situation like, when you're sitting in a theater watching a western, one guy comes out and fires from behind a building, the other guy waits till the round hits, then comes out and shoots, then ducks back behind the building. Charlie fired 13 RPGs at us, and I fired 9 or 10 rounds. My last round hit 'em, because there was a big explosion, and all I saw were three bodies and a big flash. I must have hit whatever ammunition they had with 'em. It was a lucky shot.

"Before they blew, they fired a shot that hit here [pointing to a photo of the bunker, low firing point slit]; I figured that was the one that killed Captain Maisey. He was inside, talking on the radio, and the 13th round, because I got 'em on the next round, burrowed through the bunker and caught him square in the back. Unfortunately, there wasn't enough light inside; we knew somebody had been hit and killed, but didn't know who.

"When the 145th Aviation Battalion started firing with miniguns from gunships and such, I decided to get the hell out of Dodge and went inside the bunker. I tripped over the person. We picked him up and carried him outside, but we still did not know it was Captain Maisey at the time. Matter of fact, we didn't know it was him until the sun came up. [For his efforts defending Bien Hoa Air Base from the North Vietnamese attack during Tet on 30-31 January 1968, Captain Maisey was awarded the Air Force Cross posthumously.]

"I was about 24-25 years old, not the youngest guy, not the oldest guy out there. One of the things that really kept everybody together was this lieutenant colonel here (gesturing to Lt Col Kent Miller, 3 SPS commander, seated next to him) got on the radio and he started talking to us like he was right with us, and he started telling us,

‘Understand, calm down, calm down; you know what you gotta do; tell me what’s going on,’ in a calm voice. It really calmed everybody down. One of the guys told me a couple of hours later when the colonel came in and told ‘em ‘you guys do what you gotta do, I’ll be on the radio and be the communicator to make sure everybody knows what’s going on. You take care of the basics and let me do this;’ he took over the radio and he just started talking to us. I say the old man calmed us down, and he did. That really was a plus factor. A lot of officers you hear about, ‘I’m going to lead you in the charge,’ well, he led us in a way that a lot of people would not think of, and today I know several officers that follow in this gentleman’s footsteps, in that they don’t try to get out in front like Custer and yell charge. Take your time, move along cautiously, you know what’s going on, what you’ve got to do, so do your job.”

Leadership in the Security Police during Tet, 31 January 1968[1]

These very abbreviated descriptions of operations during the battles for Tan Son Nhut and Bien Hoa are necessary for full comprehension of what occurred, but are only part of what is needed to understand why the US forces were victorious. The leadership, specifically the tactical leadership by the officers, noncommissioned officers, and Airmen of the 377 and 3 SPS, proved to be the key to their success. Leaders at all levels overcame inhibiting factors to accomplish their mission.

A common theme among veterans of this set of actions was the frustration with the lack of training and equipment to accomplish the duties they were tasked to perform. There was a continuing challenge for the unit leadership to obtain the requisite equipment they believed was necessary to perform their tasks. At Tan Son Nhut, the Airmen on the MLR had chronic shortness of ammunition: “We had a severe problem with ammo resupply,” stated one member who felt the lack of ammunition on his post. At Bien Hoa, the resupply system established by the commander, Lt Col Kent Miller, and executed at the NCO level, was robust, but the equipment limitations hampered its effectiveness even so: “During the battle, some of the troops still ran out of ammunition because of a lack of magazines. The rounds were handed out, and they had to fill their magazines. You got bandoliers and had to strip them into the magazines yourself.”

As is common with many organizations, one of the most vexing problems dealt with by the unit leadership was insufficient and ineffective communication. At Tan Son Nhut, “There were big gaps in communications…the Army ran JDOC…the tower called in forces [observed at the base perimeter], that was relayed to CSC, then to JDOC, and we got the word it was friendly forces…Those ‘friendly forces’ were actually NVA [North Vietnamese Army] battalions.” For one Airman posted in an internal patrol on the base, information that an attack had commenced came abruptly: “The only thing that alerted me to the attack was the helicopter gunships going over my head, shooting those miniguns, and the casings were hitting my helmet.” At Bien Hoa, the squadron commander, having been in the position for 11 ½ months before the battle, continued to

[1] Quotations throughout are from first-person interviews with veterans of the battles at Tan Son Nhut and Bien Hoa. They volunteered their memories over the course of five days during a reunion of the Vietnam Security Police Association (http://www.vspa.com/), October, 2006. The author is indebted to them for their forthrightness and openness in discussing leadership as they observed it at that time and place.

be rankled by the lack of accurate and actionable intelligence coming from organizations tasked to provide that information. In describing the value of intelligence from 7th Air Force and Military Assistance Command-Vietnam (MACV), it was "nonexistent; nonreliable [sic] anyway."

In contrast, all members interviewed expressed praise for the leadership within their units, reserving the highest accolades for the officers and noncommissioned officers who demonstrated competence during the battle: "We were not trained properly, we did not have the right equipment, intelligence was horrible, but we had some wonderful officers and NCOs who kept it together." "The NCO leadership really kept you alive. You weren't prepared for what happened, you were in shock. The NCOs led us through that."

"Some people didn't get recognized for leadership until something happens and their leadership comes out…It's not always recognized." In positions of command and control, both officers and NCOs presented the strongest front of guidance and direction for the forces in contact with the enemy. At Tan Son Nhut, the NCOIC in CSC, Technical Sergeant (TSgt) James Bloom, provided a voice of calm and efficiency readily recognized by the forces on the line: "If it were not for him…he was the key…he knew what he was doing." On one occasion, he forcibly removed an officer from CSC who was impeding his efforts to obtain accurate information from the field. The 377 SPS operations officer, Major Carl Bender, was not known for his approachability on a daily basis, "Nobody liked him because he had no personality," but during the attack, he proved to be a rock of competence to the troops: "He was the most incredible officer…." He was severely wounded during the battle, driving himself to the aid station, stopping his jeep by running it into a pole, then directing the personnel how to put him into a stretcher.

At Bien Hoa, the 3 SPS personnel reserved their highest praise for Lt Col Kent Miller, the squadron commander. His leadership during the battle was seen as steady, calming, and, appropriately, commanding. By his own admission, he actually made only "about six orders during the whole battle." He stated one of his biggest contributions was to decide on the call signs "Big Ears 1 and 2" for listening posts. In reality, his leadership was felt long before 0320, 31 Jan 68, as expressed by Sergeant Piazza: "The thing that set apart the officers we had, from the colonel to Captain Maisey, the operations officer, [and the other officers in the squadron], was that, in their hearts and minds, if you're going to do something for the troops you have to train them."

Lt Col Miller initiated a training program for his forces, known as Eagle Flight, in an effort to provide his personnel combat training. This effort was a conscious decision to improve the survivability of Security Police even though it had to circumvent the directive that Security Police were restricted to actions inside the base perimeter, with the Army maintaining the responsibility to secure the perimeter outside the wire. He obtained training from the 173rd Airborne Brigade, US Army, who were located in a base camp to the east of Bien Hoa. His all-volunteer force received intensive air assault training, culminating in their establishing a circular defense at a landing zone several kilometers from the base, then patrolling back to the base. While in violation of 7th Air

Force and MACV directives, it gave the forces training and experience that proved invaluable during Tet.

Equipment needed to perform their duties was often in short supply or nonexistent. NCOs exercised their initiative to support their forces by working trades for weaponry they otherwise could not obtain. The Security Police supply NCOIC at Tan Son Nhut procured quad-.50 caliber machine guns, considerably more firepower than was available with the standard issue M-60 machine guns, by working with contacts in nearby Army units. These weapons proved highly effective in blunting assaults during Tet.

Perhaps the most cogent statement made regarding the effectiveness of the tactical leadership among the Security Police during Tet was made by Franklin Ybarbo, an Airman during the battle at Tan Son Nhut, who said, “Regardless of how much equipment or training we had, it was enough. The battle was fought and won with nothing but small arms. The American initiative and ingenuity was enough to defeat the enemy.” The military during Vietnam was overwhelmingly a conscript force, unlike today’s all-volunteer force, but the leadership exhibited during Tet by the Security Police assigned to Tan Son Nhut and Bien Hoa is the kind today’s forces would recognize immediately as being effective; doing the right thing for personnel so they can do the mission they have been assigned. The North Vietnamese Army forces attacking the air bases were carrying their dress uniforms in their packs and had been issued new AK-47 assault rifles, with the intent that the bases would be rapidly captured and they could march in a victory parade on the flightlines. The courage and leadership at all levels of the men of the 377 and 3 SPS ensured this never happened. The estimate of NVA killed at Tan Son Nhut alone was placed at over 900, as opposed to 4 Security Policemen and 19 US Army soldiers killed. Tet was an overwhelming loss to the North Vietnamese, thanks in good measure to the men of the Security Police.

HEA[illegible]ERS
UNITED STATES MILITA[illegible]E COMMAND, VIETNAM
OFFICE [illegible]ANDER
APO SA[illegible] 96222

MACJ13 10 MAR 1968

SUBJECT: Commendation

TO: Commander
Seventh Air Force
APO 96307

1. The recent Communist Tet Offensive posed a significant challenge to the responsiveness and effectiveness of all our forces in Vietnam. The men of the 377th Security Police Squadron accepted this challenge and helped to frustrate the enemy's intentions. Their defense of Tan Son Nhut Air Base and eventual defeat of the attacking enemy force has reflected the highest traditions of the Air Force. The men of this unit can take pride in the contributions they have made to the allied efforts in Southeast Asia.

2. Please convey my congratulations to the men of the 377th Security Police Squadron for a job well done.

W. C. Westmoreland
W. C. WESTMORELAND
General, United States Army
Commanding