

Attack on Tan Son Nhut 50th Anniversary Dec 4 - 6, 2016



By: Capt. W.C. Henry



I know this is late for a timely 50th anniversary, but 2016 was a year of several connections with other veterans of the Dec. 1966 Attack on TSN, which I would like to record before the 50th anniversary of the Tet 1968 attack gets our full and well-deserved attention.

There are different kinds of anniversaries. Some, we celebrate. Some, we memorialize and mourn. Some, we simply note with either, or a mixture of, regret or celebration, or quiet reflection because they are too complicated to assign a single emotion.

May, 1966 to May, 1967, I served in Vietnam, as an 6250th Air Police, then 377th Security Police, Squadron, a captain assigned to air base defense as a primary duty, and law enforcement as a constant duty.

After about two months of security flight shift duty, supervising one or the other of the shifts of defense forces, I became the base security operations officer for the remainder of my tour under Major Roger Fox, the overall Squadron Operations Officer.

I was responsible for the training and supervision of the 580-or so armed Air Policemen, 76 sentry dog teams, roving vehicle patrols, observation tower spotters, communications, armory, firing range and related security operations, and liaison and coordination with Vietnamese on-base police and security forces, and communications with off-base US Army and Vietnamese military and paramilitary units.

On base, we were the only formally armed defense force for the busiest airport in the world, on the hottest propaganda target in the country for

the North Vietnamese.

The officers and men of the 377th spent a lot of time and effort trying to figure out how to defend an airbase that size, with the resources at hand, and we picked the brains of many combat-trained military people who came through in inbound and outbound replacement movements, starting well before I got there and continuing all the time I was there, and I am sure afterwards.

There had been many standoff rocket and mortar attacks on air force bases in country, but before December, 1966 there had never been an enemy ground attack on a USAF base in country while defended by Air Police. Which leads to the anniversary about which I am writing this reflection.

I don't know how much this will add to prior discussions of that attack by other members of the Squadron, as I don't remember any of the officers having written recollections from their perspective.

In December, 1966, there were monumental geographic and tactical reasons why it was almost inconceivable that the NVA/VC (North Vietnamese Army/Viet Cong) could actually attack us on the ground, but it was constantly discussed and planned for. On December 4, 1966, at about 1:10 AM, following several months of almost

daily intelligence reports that tonight, or tomorrow, or at any rate sooner or later, the North Vietnamese and/or the Viet Cong were going to attack us, I was sitting on my bed dressed and reading, waiting for the calculated nightly window of opportunity for a ground attack to pass, around 2:00 AM.

We had calculated that that was about as late as an attacker on foot could hit us, do any damage and then try to get away into the surrounding civilian territory.

My daily schedule was to get into bed around 2:00, sleep for 4 hours, and get up for the day shift. And the mortars and rockets started landing in the base.

I grabbed my flak vest, helmet, M-16 and .38 revolver and ammo belts, and made portable radio contact with Central Security Control (comm center for all air police operations and my primary office), grabbed my backup officer and ran to our jeep to head for the flightline where CSC was located.

My total focus was on the incoming garbled radio calls from frantic air police posts around the airbase, trying to report the locations of the incoming rockets and mortars, while CSC tried to triangulate where they were coming from to coordinate with the Army's Countermortar 155's and the off-base army ground units.



Tommy Poole

Somewhere in the garbled confusion of radio messages, ones of the sentry dog handlers (probably Tommy Poole,

as I believe) got off the word that he had enemy forces on his post, well inside the base perimeter, and he had come under fire and released his attack-trained dog.

By the time I got to CSC, probably 10 minutes after the first rounds came in, it was clear that we had enemy ground troops on base, headed toward our aircraft parking zones, the bomb dump, the main flightline and by extension the entire base housing and personnel areas. 580 men to control almost 35 square miles of area, much of which North of the main runway was jungle, grassland and sentry dog country.

One of our three-man jeep patrols, Alpha SAT-1, led by Tech Sgt Henson I had known and respected in my last Stateside base, had been hit by an RPG (Rocket-Propelled Grenade) North of the runway and its crew had taken cover to defend itself from the enemy small arms fire and was pinned down.



George Beich

One of our sentry dog handlers, George M. Beich, Jr. was shot and killed on post, and his supervisor (Tommy Shahan, I think) who had come to check him on post had been hit by an RPG and his truck disabled though he survived wounded.

CSC was a tense but focused hubbub of incoming radio calls with controllers trying to map the locations of reported movements of enemy and friendlies on the big Plexiglas map, rolling out our responsive forces and teams,



Tommy Shahan

trying to sort out the jumble of messages breaking one over the other as multitudes of posts tried to call in their frantic messages and calls for help over two radio channels, and notifying several counterpart agencies.

A pattern was developing of enemy foot troops approaching the main runway, leading to the flightline, from the North, and my supervising officer, Maj. Roger Fox, told me to grab 40 air policemen from the truckloads of reinforcements reporting to CSC, and move on foot into the aircraft parking areas to reinforce our guards there, and the MLR (Main Line of Resistance) line of sandbag bunkers manned by defensive air policemen.



Mike Lemley

Outside CSC, I grabbed some NCOs and ordered them to form up a group of 40 men (including, I now know, Mike Lemley) to follow me across the ramp to the aircraft area and MLR, and we set off running toward that area. Halfway across the huge concrete ramp, all Hell broke loose, with

green and red tracer rounds flying in all directions, stray bullets whizzing past and hitting the concrete, and I suddenly found myself running alone, all the troops behind me having quickly realized we were running directly into heavy gunfire with no place to take cover.

I turned to follow them when an air force staff car with a single star plate on the front came by from the flightline gate headed toward the gunfire, apparently unaware of the danger. I ran along side and pounded on the roof until the driver stopped (in seconds), rolled down the window and I yelled at him that there was heavy gunfire erupting straight ahead of him. He turned and raced back toward CSC and I followed.



Curie, Alvin W.

Maj. Fox, at CSC, had by then concluded that it was too late to reinforce the MLR and aircraft areas on foot because the gunfire was too heavy for foot troops to run out to reinforce. By then the 3-man M-60 bunker at one of the main taxiways (Curie, Walker and Valentine, I believe) had apparently broken the main thrust of the enemy attack on the flightline by killing 13 NVA regulars who had attacked the MLR in a group.

Major Fox ordered me to try to reach the Alpha area North of the runway, to assess the condition of defenses out there, and if possible to call in necessary reinforcement for that area. My #2, Capt. Fred Hover, and I set out by jeep around the West end of the main



Hover, Fred

runway and across the parallel area North of it, which at the time was being graded for a new second runway, toward the Alpha C-130 area and bomb dump.

About halfway across that area, at least one Conex box container in the bomb dump, apparently loaded with naval magnesium illumination flares, blew up from an enemy satchel charge about 100 yards away as we drove past it.

The roar and flash of light and heat nearly deafened both of us, and for a bit we could not hear the radio transmissions or make much sense of anything. We met a couple of dog handlers who had cleared their posts but were aware that they really had to be on their toes (none of them asked out of the job assignments, and went back into the dark with their dogs, alert to the max).

We could not find Alpha SAT-1, which may have been evacuated by then, but radio transmissions were so garbled we could not be sure we were communicating or receiving very well.

We were, by then, aware that one of our QRT's (Quick Reaction Teams) supposedly of 13-15 men with an NCO supervisor dispatched from the squadron armory to a predesignated defense post on the West Perimeter Road, had been ambushed and was under enemy fire, so Capt. Hover and I headed West through the bomb dump to the West perimeter road toward the sounds of an obvious major

firefight along the perimeter road. On the way, we could hear the air police controllers at CSC being interrupted and interfered with by some authoritative male voice who did not sound familiar to us.

We had rules that during a major operation no one was permitted in that room unless authorized air police staff.

I suspected someone had gotten in and was throwing his weight around, causing problems for the controllers who had a massive and complex job on their hands stopping an attack on nearly 21,000 American lives and several thousand Vietnamese ones.

I got on the radio, identified myself to the controllers, and gave them a direct order to clean any unauthorized personnel out of CSC. One of them acknowledged, and radio transmissions immediately improved.

I later learned that a one-star general, not in our chain of command, had blustered his way into CSC and was trying to order everyone around without authority.

Apparently when he heard my radio transmission he just left, and I never heard any more about it, but I suspect it was the same general I had stopped on the flightline, who had gotten carried away by the excitement and forgot the proper chain of command.

When Capt. Hover and I got to the corner of the SATCOM (Satellite Communication) site on the West perimeter road, we found a number of air policemen deployed on the base side of the raised laterite (red clay) road, who told us they had been in a repeating firefight with enemy ground troops firing at them into the airbase from the base minefield and areas just inside and just outside the minefield.

There were actually three layers of minefield, an old French one, then a Vietnamese one, then an American one, around the perimeter, and apparently the NVA had carefully picked

their way through them over a period of time, removing the mines and leaving a cleared path into the base through the heavy undergrowth.



John M. Cole

We were unaware, at that time, that we had already taken two air police fatalities at the site, Airmen John Cole and Oliver Riddle, who had rolled out of their bunks to load up at the armory to respond on a QRT led by T.Sgt. Olbert Hielt, who had taken them to a pre-designated defensive point on the perimeter road, to secure the area of the wide and deep Utah drainage ditch, which was a known weak point in the base design.



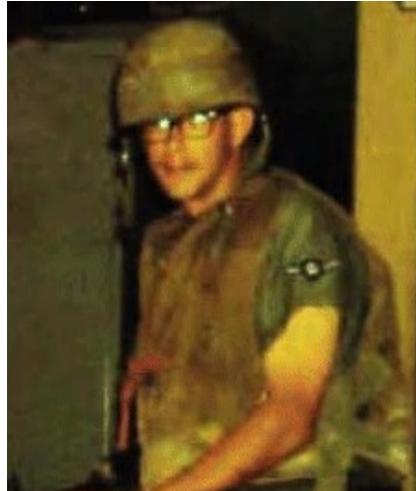
Oliver J. Riddle

When Olbert's team stopped at the designed post, they were ambushed with RPG and small arms fire from the supporting NVA in the minefield area, killing Cole and Riddle, forcing the



Olbert Hielt

QRT survivors to take cover on the East (base) side of the road to return fire. Then, when survivors from the initial NVA attack platoons inside the airbase tried to escape back out the way they way they had come in, through the UTAH ditch and surrounding area, they found the Hielt team blocking the escape path and opened fire on them from their rear.



Trimble, Bill

This year, 2016, I met and have talked with Bill Trimble, who was on that team, but even with his input I have never been sure how many times Olbert's team had to change sides of the road to return fire from the NVA inside the base, or back to the other side to return fire from the support NVA groups in the minefield. It was an un-

tenable position which went on for a while before and after Capt. Hover and I got there. There were several more exchanges of small arms fire, from inside and outside, and somewhere in there apparently Maj. Fox came into the scene from the South with some reinforcements (Olbert's team had taken injuries to most of the members of his team and it is uncertain what his communications were, but someone had gotten word to The Fox that we were pinned down).

I am pretty sure now that Mike Lemley whom I have been talking with was part of the team of reinforcements, and involved in that series of firefights the rest of the night.

Sgt. Olbert many years later told the story of two Master Sgts. who arrived at this series of firefights in a jeep, who bailed out when their jeep came under fire and ran away while their jeep was riddled with bullets from the enemy.

In all due respect to Sgt. Hielt, I think in the confusion, and after nearly 50 years, he missed a fact there as he was TDY and not familiar with our squadron organization.

Capt. Hover and I arrived in our jeep during a lull in the fighting, were walking to join the team in the ditch when the gunfire broke out again, and took cover with the others through several trips back and forth across the road while firefights went back and forth, until quite some time later when we left in the same undamaged jeep.

There was no jeep shot to bits by enemy gunfire and I have accounted for Olbert's 1.5 ton truck, the sentry dog supervisor's Dodge Power Wagon and A-SAT 1's jeep as the only three vehicles which got shot up.

I am sorry I never had an opportunity to see Sgt. Hielt to discuss his article with him, but it is a minor point I correct here only to make the record that two Air Police captains went through much of that battle with Hielt and did our bit.

Apparently, Maj. Fox with better communications got out a request to the 120th Aviation Company, an Army HU-1 outfit stationed on TSN, to come to our aid, and two armed UH-1 gunships made at least one pass from North to South down the minefield, and one of the NVA's made the mistake of standing up to shoot at them.

With an incredible blast of gunfire from their mini-Vulcan guns, and a spread of 2.75" rockets, they made the minefield completely quiet and no longer a threat.

That let us get reinforcements in enough to keep it quiet on the perimeter, and start a series of sweeps of lines of troops through the inner side of the base through the rest of the night, during which we managed to find and neutralize some of the pockets of attack survivors.

By the way, the AC-47 gunships that Sgt. Hiatt talked about in his article were held by rules of engagement to at least a mile from the airbase, as their cone of fire could have killed us all they came in any closer, but I will never forget the pinpoint accuracy of the 120th's Hueys in making our lives a lot safer.

The next morning, still Dec. 4th, after sunrise, a group of us had three NVA pinned down in heavy undergrowth near the West Gate (0-51 to later members). About 20' from me, one of our guys took an AK-47 round to the center of the chest and went down heavily.

One of the other air policemen and I got to him about the same time, and we had to hold him down as he was shocked but able to try to sit up and get in the line of fire, as the firefight continued with stuff flying all around us.

We got the man's shirt open and found a small hole about mid-center near the heart, starting to foam pink which meant a lung shot. We had virtually no field First Aid equipment, so I cleaned the area around the hole with

an alcohol swab (no idea where it came from but there it was) and slapped my laminated base ID card over the hole to keep the dirt and crud out, and we taped it down.

A few minutes later a surreal scene occurred when a blue base ambulance drove up and stopped on the road a few feet away, and all the gunfire stopped like somebody flipped a switch on both sides.

Two medics got out with a stretcher and walked over to us like it was downtown. They checked the man, we lifted him onto the stretcher, and they walked him back to load him on the ambulance. As they drove away, the gunfire resumed and continued until we had killed two of the NVA, and the third one held up his AK-47 and surrendered.

When we stopped firing, he came limping to us, using his AK-47 as a crutch, as his right foot was dangling by a strip of skin, having been nearly shot off by our bullets. We had to turn him over to the Vietnamese Quan Kahn (air police) and I have always wondered what became of him, because they were not very gentle with our captives.

There has been a story that one of the other two NVA also surrendered to us, that we handed him over unharmed to the VNAF police and that one of them summarily shot him in the head and killed him. Didn't happen, like a lot of other stories which came out of that battle as memories and stories improved over the years.

Our squadron took a lot of injury casualties that night and during the next two nights and days until we completely secured the airbase. Someone said we fully resumed base air operations on the 25th anniversary of Pearl Harbor, but I think they were flying full air operations by the day after it started.

We had a lot of guys in the base hospital, and about two weeks later I heard they were bussing a bunch of

our guys from the Base Hospital to the flightline to medivac them out to go home. I went to the flightline to watch them load onto a C-141.

The man who had been shot the 4th, whom the other air policemen (Bill Trimble) and I had gone to help patch him up, walked so help me God, from the bus to the airplane and sat down. He was still stunned but moving on his own, and I took a photo of him with my 35 mm camera.

For years I had several hundred TSN photos, but completely lost track of all the guys we sent home on medivacs and did not know who he was. I remember writing the letter home for John Cole, and other officers had to write to the families of George Bevich and Oliver Riddle.

I finished my year tour and returned to the States, and my family, and for many years did not do anything to pass on the stories of my year in Vietnam.

My wife was so stressed by the strain of worry about losing me, I think, and my sons too young, and too many people quite uninterested in hearing my stories about a years-worth of similarly momentous events from a year in a combat zone.

But I am convinced that the experiences I had, and those which my family experienced while I was gone and in considerable danger I suppose, had a profound effect on how the rest of our lives have played out.

Several years ago I became more interested in looking back at those times, those experiences, and in particular at those guys who went through the experiences of Vietnam with me.

With some websites built by former members of the 377th SPS, I made a lot of contacts from the squadron, some closer than others, have shared many of my photos with some of them, and I kept sending out the photo of the wounded airman trying to find out if anyone knew his name (out of

the lists of wounded guys I found from the webmaster I had no way to determine which was which so many years later).

In April, 2016, at the first 377th SPS reunion I have ever attended, I made actual one-on-one contact with the other air policeman who had gone to the aid of the wounded man with me, during that firefight on Dec. 4, 1966.



Bill Trimble is alive and well, living about 150 miles from me, and beyond all the odds nearly fifty years later, he remembered enough information about the injured man that, by August, 2016, we had found Lyle Davis, now

living in Florida, who recovered well from a clean through-and-through AK-47 round, came back to the States, and all three of us ended living full and useful lives and feel rewarded at finding each other again, fifty years later.

But something harder to articulate is the effect that experience had, as deep and personal as it was to us, at the time, that it affected our relationships with those we had left at home, and whom were so unable to relate to what we had experienced, to the extent that some home relationships never recovered.

I started these notes on Dec. 5, 2016, fifty years from the middle of that so-called Battle for Tan Son Nhut, an anniversary which falls into the category of anniversaries which are too complex and confusing to either celebrate or mourn. But it feels like it may help in some way to put them down in writing, for whatever value they may have, now or later.

The 1966 attack taught us how seriously under-equipped we were even for a three-platoon ground attack by trained NVA sappers, let alone the kind of attack that came in January, 1968.

We had open jeeps and trucks, no armored vehicles, no hand grenades at first (some of our NCO's did what Air Police do best and "acquired" some), no slap flares at first (same AP solution), and only our .38s, M-16s and M-60's (we knew, even then, how inadequate it was to ask our men to stand up behind a pedestal-mounted M-60 under fire, but it was what we had).

We had barely enough sentry dogs, and early observation tower equipment, and got some aerial illumination from VNAF flare ships but needed more night-fighting equipment.

Our people fought well and bravely under attack, but we would have been totally overwhelmed by the kind of attack the Tet 68 defenders had to cope with.

So, to all the guys who went through the 1966 attack, my respects and wishes that you have come through it OK, and my greatest respect for the subsequent defenders of TSN, whose accomplishments I can only compliment as beyond the understanding of those who weren't there.

Chuck Henry
Former Captain, 377th SPS

**VETERANS OF TAN SON NHUT
377TH SECURITY POLICE SQ
AIR FORCE OUTSTANDING
UNIT AWARD W/ COMBAT VALOR**

4 - 5 DEC 1966
1 APR 1969 - 31 MAR 71
17 JAN 1972 - 28 MAR 1973



 **377TH SECURITY POLICE SQ.** 
PROVEN IN COMBAT

**For further information, go to the
377th SPS Awards webpage at URL:**

<http://www.377sps.org/awards/index.html>

**To see all the attacks on TSN,
please visit the webpage below:**

<http://www.377sps.org/vcnva/index.html>

6220th AIR POLICE Sq.

6250th AIR POLICE Sq.

377th AIR POLICE Sq.

377th SECURITY POLICE Sq.

TAN SON NHUT, AIR BASE, RVN





On December 4, 1966, this ditch line was the entry point for the enemy to come on to Tan Son Nhut.





Men of the 377th Security Police conducting a sweep of Tan Son Nhut on the west end.





Men of the 377th Security Police conducting a sweep of Tan Son Nhut on the west end.





CMSgt Maxie Bush burning the overgrown vegetation to smoke out the enemy.



CMSgt. Maxie Bush plays firebug. Burning grass results in really healthy regrowth, by the way.



An unknown TSgt is giving a situation report to Capt W.C. Henry in the field.





Believed to be the pickup truck supporting TSgt Olbert Hiett on the west end





Explosive ordinance disposal recovers all the enemy weapons of destruction.





Additional weapons of destruction recovered from the enemy on post.





Additional weapons of destruction recovered from the enemy on post.





For his actions during the battle for Tan Son Nhut, Capt W.C. Henry receives the Bronze Star



**Lt Gen Momyer awards the Bronze Star to Capt W. C. Henry
377th Air Police Squadron, Tan Son Nhut Air Base, RVN**



The 377th Security Police Squadron conducting an awards ceremony

**377th Air Police Squadron Award Ceremony
for their participation in the "Attack On Tan
Son Nhut, Dec 4-5, 1966**

