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THE DEFENSE OF TAN SON NHUT AIR BASE, 31 JANUARY 1968:
A STUDY IN THE NATURE OF AIR BASE SECURITY

A Thesis

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree Master of Arts in the
Graduate School of The Ohio State University

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ABSTRACT

The U.S. Air Force (USAF) employs various safeguards to protect its resources and personnel from ground attacks. Perhaps the most obvious are physical barriers: fences and checkpoints, barbed-wire entanglements, cement barricades, hardened aircraft shelters, and so forth. The USAF also maintains its own Security Forces, also known as Security Police, to protect USAF assets from limited ground attacks. Significantly, the USAF and other U.S. military institutions have approached air base security in much the same way they approach aircraft development, as a vast engineering project. In other words, the U.S. military traditionally views air base defense as a technical problem—one focused on the number and placement of fences, barriers, and Security Police personnel.

Nevertheless, a careful analysis of actual attacks on USAF bases suggests that the central issue of providing security to U.S. air bases is essentially a human problem. *U.S. Air Force base security ultimately depends on dedicated local defense teams—Security Police—posted at the point of greatest danger, trained to shoot to kill and with the authority to do so.*

This thesis analyzes the nature of USAF base security on several levels, but its principal illustration is a study of air base security during the Vietnam War, when Security Police successfully defended Tan Son Nhut air base on 31 January 1968. The report's four sections investigate air base security in progressively decreasing spans of time and space. Each level of analysis explores a single example in depth, and each example is a logical extension of the one before it. The report suggests that a lack of continuity in the U.S. air base security efforts undermined effective security methods, and that the U.S. entered the Vietnam War with an unrealistic concept of USAF base security. During the Vietnam War, the Pacific Air Forces and U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam approached air base security as a technical problem and implemented Security Police directives, manpower standards, training programs, and authority accordingly.

Nevertheless, the Security Police at Tan Son Nhut correctly identified air base security as a human problem, and *only* attention to the human problems of air base defense prevented the base from being overrun on 31 January 1968.

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SECTION 1

INTRODUCTION

The United States military recently predicted that future adversaries will be unable to challenge the U.S. Air Force (USAF) in the air, and subsidized an independent study to explore alternative methods whereby foes might challenge U.S. air superiority. Civilian researchers, in a federally funded research and development division of the RAND Corporation, investigated "asymmetrical warfare" against the USAF.¹ The think-tank's report, aptly titled *Countering U.S. Aerospace Power*, confirmed the military's suspicions that "future adversaries are likely to look for alternative means to counter U.S. airpower."² One such alternative is attacking the USAF on the ground.

The USAF employs various safeguards to protect its resources and personnel from ground attacks. Perhaps the most obvious are physical barriers: fences and checkpoints, barbed-wire entanglements, cement barricades, hardened aircraft shelters, and so forth. The USAF also maintains its own Security Forces, also known as Security Police, to protect USAF assets from limited ground attacks. Significantly, the USAF and other U.S. military institutions have approached air base security in much the same way they approach aircraft development, "as a vast engineering project whose details could, in every important respect be calculated as precisely as the stress loadings... or tensile strength."³ In other words, the U.S. military has traditionally viewed air base defense as

¹ Project AIR FORCE, a division of the RAND Corporation, is the USAF federally funded research and development center (FFRDC) for studies and analysis. It provides the USAF with independent analysis of policy alternatives affecting the development, employment, combat readiness and support of current and future aerospace forces.

² Alan Vick, *Snakes in the Eagles Nest: A History of Ground Attacks on Air Bases*, Santa Monica, California: RAND, 1995.

³ Lieutenant Colonel Barry D. Watts, U.S. Air Force, *Foundations of U.S. Air Doctrine: The Problem of Friction in War*, Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama: Air University Press, 1984.

a technical problem—one focused on the number and placement of fences, barriers, and Security Police personnel.

Nevertheless, a careful analysis of actual attacks on USAF bases suggests that the central issue of providing security to U.S. air bases is essentially a human problem. *U.S. Air Force base security ultimately depends on dedicated local defense teams—Security Police—posted at the point of greatest danger, trained to shoot to kill and with the authority to do so.*⁴

This thesis analyzes the nature of USAF base security on several levels, but its principal illustration is a study of air base security during the Vietnam War, when Security Police successfully defended Tan Son Nhut air base on 31 January 1968. Each section demonstrates the advantages of a human approach to air base security; but the primary case study suggests that ultimately attention to the human problems of air base defense prevented Tan Son Nhut from being overrun.

RATIONALE

This thesis develops its primary illustration for three reasons: The defense of Tan Son Nhut was arguably one of the most important battles in the Vietnam War. To date, there is no detailed, published account of the encounter. Finally, the engagement is a limiting case in air base security and its study provides strong evidence supporting the overarching thesis of this report.

A Pacific Air Forces (PACAF) Special Report on the Vietnam War's 1967-1968 winter-spring campaign proclaimed, "what *could well have been* one of the most significant battles of the war was fought at Tan Son Nhut on 31 January 1968."⁵ The wording of the PACAF report suggests the defense of Tan Son Nhut was *not* of great significance. Despite the careless idiom, the report correctly observed that, "the enemy had gathered a force of sufficient size... to overrun and occupy, at least temporarily, the

⁴ This thesis was adapted, with permission, from a historical overview and analysis of terrorism by John F. Guilmartin, in which the author claims, "analysis of [suicide bombings] suggests that we have persistently misidentified the central issue of providing security to potential target installations as a technical rather than a human problem." The article can be found in *Defense Policy in the Reagan Administration*, Washington D.C.: National Defense University Press, 1988.

air nerve center of South Vietnam.”⁶ Only the actions of Security Police prevented a calamity. But, because they did, PACAF was not obliged to draw additional attention to their near-catastrophe on that disagreeable medium, the ground. General William C. Westmoreland, commanding officer of U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (USMACV) personally commended the Security Police at Tan Son Nhut, stating:

Their defense of Tan Son Nhut air base and eventual defeat of the attacking enemy forces 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.⁷

Nonetheless, the defense of static bases was not a part of USMACV’s offensive strategy—there is little splendor in siege warfare—and received scant further attention from that command. In short, because the engagement was neither a catastrophic defeat nor a resounding victory, the Security Police had no strong advocates in the U.S. Air Force and U.S. Military Assistance Command, and thus dropped through the historiographical cracks.

For the same reasons, it appears, historians also neglect the defensive engagement; there is no published history devoted to the defense of Tan Son Nhut. The best existing account of the resistance can be found in the pages of Keith W. Nolan’s historically based book, *The Battle for Saigon: Tet 1968*. Nolan’s vivid and well written account of the actions in and around the South Vietnamese capital during the 1968 Communist offensive is commonly available and includes a short account of the events at Tan Son Nhut. But Nolan’s treatment is cursory; specifically, it lacks the documentation and background necessary for a comprehensive understanding of the Security Police defense. Combat after-action reports and subordinate-unit histories offer valuable, accurate, exceptionally disjointed, and quite dry descriptions of the event. These are difficult to decipher and remain buried in several volumes of the official Combat Support Group history.

⁵ Emphasis added. Pacific Air Forces, *Air Response to the Tet Offensive, Project CHECO Special Report*, Hickam AFB Hawaii: Headquarters, Pacific Air Forces, 12 August 1968, page 13.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Letter of commendation, from USMACV Commander, General William C. Westmoreland, U.S. Army, to the Seventh Air Force Commander, Lieutenant General William W. Momyer, U.S. Air Force, March 1968. The letter is cited in the *Security Police Squadron History*, page 14, in the *History of 377th Combat Support Group, 1 January – 31 March 1968, Vol. II: Squadron Histories and After Action Reports*, Tan Son Nhut, Vietnam: 377th Combat Support Group, 1968.

Moreover, some elements of these official histories remain classified. The existing accounts of the defense are either spectacularly dramatic but lacking substance, or substantial but lacking any speck of drama.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the 31 January defense can be considered a limiting case in air base security, and its detailed study strongly suggests that the central issue of providing security to USAF bases is a human problem rather than a technical one. The defense of Tan Son Nhut is the most significant example of successful air base security in the history of the USAF.⁸ Because it is also the most extreme case of air base security in practice, its study does much to expose the quintessential nature of air base security in theory. Recently declassified information—some declassified specifically for this study—illustrates that both PACAF and USMACV attempted to find a technical fix to the problem of air base security, while the policemen at Tan Son Nhut, conversely, approached air base security as a human problem. The Security Police took extraordinary measures to ensure their men, to the greatest degree possible, were posted at the point of maximum threat, trained to shoot to kill, and had the authority to do so. Only their actions enabled them to prevail on 31 January 1968.

Nonetheless, there is an inherent weakness in structuring an argument around a single case study. It is impossible to prove that the nature of one successful defense is a universal. But, as a limiting case study, the 31 January 1968 defense of Tan Son Nhut illustrates most clearly those characteristics common to air base security. Insights drawn from the limiting case *reasonably* apply to air base security on other dates, at other bases, and in other wars. In addition, background information for the primary case study and related incidents strengthen the validity of the report's overarching argument.

TERMINOLOGY

Ascertaining and demonstrating the nature of air base security are not metaphysical undertakings. They can be attacked by rather simple methods, once the terminology and

⁸ Lieutenant Colonel Roger P. Fox, U.S. Air Force, *Air Base Defense in the Republic of Vietnam*. Lieutenant Colonel Fox served as a Security Police officer at Tan Son Nhut during the Vietnam War. Later, he was assigned to the USAF Office of History and, while there, he wrote the official history of air base security during the Vietnam War, *Air Base Defense in the Republic of Vietnam*.

scope of the task are understood. Clearly, the exact meaning of the term "security" is of major consequence and should be defined. Furthermore, this report's exploration of the nature of air base security is based on two postulates, the first asserting that air base security has traditionally been viewed as a technical problem and the second that air base security is, in reality, a human problem. As such, the terms "technical problem" and "human problem" also have great importance and their exact meanings must also be clarified.

Before proceeding, the concept of security must be fully defined. Security forces in the USAF have a dual mandate: base defense and law enforcement. For example, during the Vietnam War, the mission of the Security Police Squadron at Tan Son Nhut was to:

Protect weapons systems, vital facilities, equipment and personnel of Tan Son Nhut Air Base, from sabotage, espionage, subversion and ground attack as envisioned by 207 [installation security system] series directives. Maintain military law and order, and accomplish correction, administrative security clearances and industrial security functions as detailed in the 125 and 205 [administrative and industrial security] series directives.⁹

While both base defense and law enforcement are important aspects of total air base security, this thesis is primarily concerned with external threats to USAF installations. Thus, within the context of this report, security refers to protection of the gamut of resources located on a given USAF base from sabotage, espionage, subversion, and ground attack. For clarification, espionage in this sense refers only to *overt* surveillance of a USAF base.¹⁰ It is also important to notice the stated mission of the Security Police Squadron was not limited to USAF resources, but included *all* resources located on the air base.

The idea of technical and human problems must also be addressed. A technical problem is one related to practical subjects, organized on mechanical or scientific

⁹ Combat Support Group Mission/Organizational Chart Book. *Security Police Squadron History*, page 1.

¹⁰ The Viet Cong/North Vietnamese Army espionage apparatus had three distinct systems. One made use of local cadre to observe Allied installations and report information through the district, provincial, and regional military hierarchy. Another specialized in recruiting South Vietnamese who held sensitive positions on Allied installations. The third used civilian informants living in villages and hamlets near target bases. Security Police were responsible for protecting Tan Son Nhut from *one* aspect of *one* system—preventing Communist cadre from observing Allied installations—which often involved small

principles. In the game of baseball, calculating the moment a fastball will cross home plate (if released from a pitcher's hand at a given time, angle, and velocity) is an example of a purely technical problem. Although more complex, determining the ballistic characteristics of a curveball is another example from the same game. This type of problem can be successfully approached in a mechanical or scientific manner. This report will clearly demonstrate that both the PACAF and USMACV traditionally viewed air base security as a technical problem, and both pursued technical approaches when attempting to solve it—responses based on the number and placement of fences, barriers, and manned posts or technological developments in alternative defensive apparatus.

A human problem is really quite different. Learning to *throw* a curveball is an example of a human problem...so is reading a hitter and knowing when to use it. A human problem, then, is one constantly changing and unpredictable. This is a problem that can only be solved through a human approach, a response representative of the perceptiveness and adaptability of human nature (and perhaps that extra something that can't quite be explained, but is understood by everyone who can throw a curveball). General S.L.A. Marshall introduced similar concepts to the mainstream of the U.S. military in *Men Against Fire*, which detailed his observations as the chief U.S. Army historian for World War II. General Marshall cited hundreds of post-action interviews in attempt to reveal the importance of "the human element" in combat. The Security Police at Tan Son Nhut knew air base security was a human problem and could only be solved by dedicated security forces trained, in the words of General S.L.A. Marshall, to "think through their situation and steel themselves for action according to the situation."¹¹

METHOD

This report is most concerned with the *tactical* aspects of air base security. Elements of the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army assaulted Tan Son Nhut on 31 January 1968 as a relatively small-scale, tactical action designed to serve a large-scale, strategic

units approaching or breaching the base perimeter. The USAF Office of Special Investigations (OSI) handles other forms of espionage directed against Air Force installations

¹¹ Marshall, S.L.A. (Samuel Lyman Atwood), U.S. Army, *Men Against Fire: The Problem of Battle Command in Future War*, Washington D.C.: Combat Forces Press, 1947, page 40.

objective in the Communists' 1967-1968 winter-spring general offensive. By launching the offensive, the Communists hoped "to demonstrate to the US the hopelessness of the war, and to convince it also that the time for negotiations had come."¹² Their main strategic objective was a "decisive victory," or a victory "that stems not merely from military success, but more from the psychological and diplomatic consequences which decide the issue."¹³ On 31 January 1968, the force assaulting Tan Son Nhut did not achieve their tactical goals; the Security Police defending it did achieve theirs. The strategic consequences are quite debatable.¹⁴ In any case, the tactical results at Tan Son Nhut have enormous utility in determining the nature of air base security in its own right, which is the purpose of this report. The strategic effects are less useful in this sense and are not covered in depth within this work.

As previously stated, this report explores the nature of air base security on several levels. The report's four sections investigate air base security in progressively decreasing spans of time and space. To keep the project within manageable bounds, each level of analysis explores a single example in depth, and each example is a logical extension of the one before it. For example, the first section presents an overview of U.S. air base security efforts in general. The second focuses on air base security only during the Vietnam War. The third concentrates on air base security specifically at Tan Son Nhut air base. The final section comes to a point on the events of 31 January 1968.

¹² Captain Ronnie E. Ford, U.S. Army, *Tet 1968: Understanding the Surprise*, Essex, England: F. Cass, 1995, page 3.

¹³ Ibid, page 11. Perhaps the most eloquent description of "decisive victory" is found in Truong Nhu Tang's *A Vietcong Memoir: An Inside Account of the Vietnam War and Its Aftermath*, San Diego, California: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985, page 87. The former Viet Cong party member wrote:

This three pronged strategy was to characterize our approach throughout the war. Every military clash, every demonstration, every propaganda appeal was seen as part of an integrated whole; each had consequences far beyond its immediately apparent results. It was a framework that allowed us to view battles as psychological events and to undertake negotiations in order to strengthen our military position. The Americans seemed never to appreciate fully this strategic perspective, which among ourselves we most often simply called *Danh va dam, dam va danh* ("fighting and talking, talking and fighting"). It was, after all, a traditional Vietnamese approach to warfare, a technique refined over centuries of confrontation with invaders more powerful than ourselves.

¹⁴ Although the Communist forces were repulsed and suffered horrendous losses during the tactical action on 31 January 1968, it *could* be argued the assault was part of a strategic victory. Correspondingly, it *could* be argued that the Security Police at Tan Son Nhut were part of a strategic failure.

Evidence presented in the report suggests: A lack of continuity in the U.S. air base security efforts undermined effective security methods, and the U.S. entered the Vietnam War with an unrealistic concept of USAF base security. During the Vietnam War, PACAF and USMACV approached air base security as a technical problem and implemented Security Police directives, manpower standards, training programs, and authority accordingly. Nevertheless, the Security Police at Tan Son Nhut correctly identified air base security as a human problem, and their actions prevented the base from being overrun on 31 January 1968.

SECTION 2

BACKGROUND: SOMEBODY HAS TO DO IT

By tradition, the U.S. military has given the ground-security of its air bases little priority or prestige. Although the earliest airpower theorists warned about the exceptional vulnerability of aircraft on the ground, even a brief historical overview demonstrates that the U.S. military has characteristically attempted to find the most cost-efficient solution to air base security—not the most combat-effective solution.¹ The U.S. military's superficial commitment to air base security, only when it was absolutely necessary, resulted in a lack of continuity and undermined effective security programs.

A summary of air base security from its origins in the First World War through the advisory phase of the Vietnam War attests to instances in which the United States developed robust security systems for U.S. airfields and shows how and why those systems were eliminated or superseded by less appropriate concepts of air base security. The overview also clarifies how the United States entered the Vietnam War without an appropriate security concept for the security of USAF bases.

WORLD WAR I

During the First World War, small numbers of reconnaissance, artillery-spotting, and pursuit aircraft operated from improvised airfields behind a massive complex of trenches. Conventional forces rarely advanced more than a few hundred meters, and there were virtually no unconventional forces operating behind the lines.² Except to other airmen,

¹ Perhaps the best example is Italian Army General Giulio Douhet's observation that "it is easier and more effective to destroy the enemy's aerial power by destroying his nests and eggs on the ground than to hunt his flying birds in the air." Giulio Douhet, *The Command of the Air*, Washington D.C.: Office of Air Force History, 1983 (originally published in 1921), pages 53-54.

² The irregular forces of British Colonel T.E. Lawrence in the Middle East, and German General Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck in Africa are notable exceptions.

the isolated aircraft and grass landing strips were meager targets. Over the course of the war neither conventional ground forces nor guerrillas disturbed the security of airfields.

Since "their duties were entirely different from those of the infantry," the U.S. Army Air Service maintained that its airmen

should receive only that portion of infantry training which would permit them to move in a military manner from place to place... in the event of a domestic emergency... enlisted men of the intelligence usually found in Air Service organizations could quickly be instructed and equipped to perform their part creditably.³

Nevertheless, every airman was first and foremost a member of the U.S. Army, and infantry training continued, but air base security measures never progressed beyond an interior guard system.

The expanding role of military aviation after the war greatly increased the importance and size of air bases, making them more lucrative and more vulnerable targets. When the U.S. Army Air Forces was created in June of 1941, much to the dismay of its air-minded commanders, the U.S. Army instructed the new branch to begin training Air Corps personnel for ground-security of their bases.

WORLD WAR II

During the Second World War the existing air base security concept dictated that, if enemy forces attacked an airfield, the airmen at that location would defend the field until reinforcements arrived to repel and counter the assault. The loss of airfields in Europe to German airborne and airdropped troops and attacks on airfields in the Pacific by small Japanese ground units thoroughly convinced leaders in both Great Britain and the United States that significant forces must be dedicated to the local security of airfields. British Prime Minister Winston S. Churchill summarized the Allied approach to local defense in a memorandum stating:

Every man... ought to be armed with something—a rifle, a tommy-gun, a pistol, a pike, or a mace... Every airfield should be a stronghold of fighting air-groundmen, and not the abode of uniformed civilians in the prime of life protected by detachments of soldiers... In two or three hours

³ Lieutenant Colonel James E. Fechet, U.S. Army Air Service, Chief of Training and Operations, as quoted in *Air Base Defense*, pages 1 and 2.

the [combat] troops will arrive; meanwhile every post should resist and must be maintained.⁴

At that time, every airman still possessed a rudimentary knowledge of infantry weapons. Thus, it was determined that even aircraft technicians were capable of taking up arms in defense of their airfield.

Yet, as formidable as a mechanic with a mace may appear, air base security required more than arming large numbers of airmen. The realities of air base security necessitated the development of committed local security teams, specially trained and equipped for air base security. Accordingly, the air services of both Great Britain and the United States recognized the need for specialized air base security units.⁵ The first U.S. Air Base Security Battalions—units specifically designated to defend airfields against local ground attacks, trained in small unit tactics, and equipped with armored cars, machine guns, recoilless rifles, and other infantry weapons—formed during the summer of 1942.⁶ (See Appendix A for basic information on the military organization of ground units.)

Nevertheless, as the threat to U.S. airfields diminished, the perceived need for dedicated airfield security forces dwindled. The Allies gradually gained widening control of the air and ground in Europe. Likewise, U.S. forces neutralized Japanese naval airpower and seized the offensive in the Pacific. As early as 1943, U.S. airfield security units began to be deactivated. The U.S. Army Air Forces closed out all Air Base Security Battalions by the end of 1945.⁷ Shortly after the war, the newly formed U.S. Air Force delegated the task of local defense to the Air Police, an equivalent of the U.S. Army's Military Police.

⁴ Winston S. Churchill, *The Second World War, Volume III*, Boston, Massachusetts: Houghton Mifflin, 1985, pages 692-693.

⁵ For the purpose of airfield defense, the British Royal Air Force established the Royal Air Force Regiment in early 1942, and the U.S. Army Air Forces established Air Base Security Battalions the same year.

⁶ Interestingly, the formation of U.S. Army Air Forces security battalions may have been "influenced by racial as well as military considerations." In February 1942, General George C. Marshall, U.S. Army, apportioned 53,299 blacks to the U.S. Army Air Forces for local security of necessary air bases. *Air Base Defense*, page 3.

⁷ The Royal Air Force, in contrast, maintains its RAF regiment as a dedicated air base defense force—with organic air defense and field squadrons—to this day.

KOREAN WAR

During the Korean War period, the efforts of the newly formed Air Police units were largely directed toward preventing thievery, pilferage, and trespassing. The outbreak of the war in 1950 caused a renewed need for local security forces. Protecting rear areas from major Communist thrusts was clearly a U.S. Army function, but it was generally accepted that the local security of air bases was a U.S. Air Force responsibility.⁸ At times, over 30,000 North Korean guerillas operated in United Nations territory. The number of Air Police nearly quadrupled in the first eighteen months of the war, and the USAF crash-procured armored cars, machineguns, recoilless rifles, and other infantry-type weapons during the same period.⁹ Yet, despite the potential for damaging attacks against allied airfields, North Korean guerillas operating in United Nations territory almost completely ignored the lucrative targets.¹⁰ When clandestine attacks against air bases did not materialize in Korea, Air Police units stationed there found themselves preoccupied with interior guard duties, securing equipment at unloading points or in transit, and otherwise guarding U.S. property from pilferage.

Still, much was re-learned about the disposition of USAF base security during the Korean War. According to the Far East Air Forces summary report of the war, "effective security against sabotage and a workable ground defense system was [sic] never fully developed on most Air Force installations in Korea."¹¹ Nevertheless, the Air Police took major steps to improve security capabilities, the USAF issued the first official guidance on air base security in 1953, and perhaps most importantly, the USAF recognized,

⁸ At that time, "the most lucid statement of prevailing Air Force base defense rationale... held that ground defense must inescapably remain an organic [Air Force] function." *Air Base Defense*, page 6.

⁹ Air Police manning increased from 10,000 to 39,000 personnel between June 1950 and December 1951.

¹⁰ There are only two recorded attacks by guerillas on airfields in United Nations territory: In August of 1950, North Korean guerillas unsuccessfully attempted to infiltrate Pohang Airfield; the airfield was ultimately evacuated one day after North Korean forces captured the port of Pohang. For three months, from September 1950 to November 1950, guerilla harassment prevented the opening of a USAF airstrip at Kunsan. At several other locations, guerillas fired small arms at aircraft in transition (taking off and landing), but no aircraft were damaged or lost.

¹¹ Far East Air Forces, *Report on the Korean War*, volume II, pages 123-33, as cited in *Air Base Defense*.

"training programs in the zone of the interior must be geared to the immediate needs of the field organizations under combat conditions."¹²

But at the war's conclusion, inconsistencies between the perceived and actual threat eroded the credibility of improvements in air base security. In post-war defense appropriations sessions, the Air Police drew critical congressional attention. Pilot-commanders, unversed in base security, could not convincingly explain why the U.S. Air Force needed so many more policemen than the U.S. Army, Navy, and Marine Corps. One official USAF history summarized:¹³

By 1953 the Air Force had created a foundation in doctrine, manpower, equipment, and training for building a refined, organic, local ground defense capability. However, this program fell victim to the ambivalent experience of the Korean War, reduced resources, a new national strategy, and revised intelligence estimates.

Again, the U.S. military lost sight of the lessons of war.

MASSIVE RETALIATION

Major shifts in U.S. national defense policy and a public avowal to "massive retaliation" during the mid-1950s wrought inevitable changes to air base security concepts. The U.S. embarked on a course of hard-line containment diplomacy backed by the threat of total nuclear war, leaving no room for limited war scenarios. Under this policy, the first priority of the U.S. Air Force was the prosecution of a massive nuclear response to any attack by the Soviet Union; the first priority of the U.S. Army was surviving the first round of nuclear exchanges to take the offensive. Intelligence estimates suggested the most ominous ground threat to USAF installations was a coordinated strike by highly trained Soviet agents attempting to disable U.S. nuclear response capabilities.

A 1957 USAF study concluded that the protection of critical weapons systems, equipment, material and facilities could best be achieved under the auspices of the

¹² Air Force Regulation No. 355-4, *Local Ground Defense of Air Force Installations*, the first official Air Force document on base defense was implemented in the spring of 1953, defining local ground defense as all measures taken by the local Air Force installation commander to deny hostile forces access to the area encompassing all buildings, equipment, facilities, landing fields, dispersal areas, and adjacent terrain.

¹³ *Air Base Defense*, page 7.

existing Internal Installation Security program.¹⁴ USAF planners believed this program could protect nuclear assets from clandestine teams of Soviet agents, and ordered that "base defense plans [would] prescribe procedures to be employed in support of sabotage alert plans."¹⁵ The Internal Installation Security program was presently renamed the Installation Security System and replaced existing air base security directives. Thus:

The term "local ground defense" became "reinforced security." This shift in [Air Force] base defense policy revoked the concept of limited ground combat capability for defense against an overt external threat. In its stead, the Air Force adopted a concept calling for an expanded interior guard system to counter a covert threat from within.¹⁶

Although appealing to those still focused on large-scale nuclear war, the interior guard concept of air base defense was not suited for a new administration, another major change in national policy, and U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia.

FLEXIBLE RESPONSE

Another reorientation of national defense policy in the early 1960s, coined "flexible response," threatened to call for U.S. air bases in hostile environments. In his inaugural address, President John F. Kennedy vowed to "support any friend, oppose any foe" to assure the survival of liberty. As part of this commitment, the President encouraged the U.S. military to pursue tactics for limited war. In 1961 President Kennedy authorized the buildup of a U.S. Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) in the Republic of Vietnam, including the first long-term deployment of Air Force personnel. Stressing the purely advisory role of U.S. aid, the new administration nevertheless urged the military to pursue counterinsurgency capabilities. Although counterinsurgency techniques did indeed become a major focus for both the U.S. Army and the U.S. Air Force, they were not applied to air base security.

During the advisory period of U.S. involvement in South Vietnam, from 1961-1964, the U.S. military emphasized offensive operations. The U.S. Army concentrated their

¹⁴ The appraisal was made in a staff study conducted by the USAF Provost Marshal on the local ground defense of air bases, in May 1957, as cited in *Air Base Defense*, page 8.

¹⁵ Air Force Regulation No. 205-5, *Installation Security System*, June 1956.

¹⁶ Following Air Staff approval, Air Force Regulation No. 205-5, *Installation Security System*, replaced Air Force Regulation No. 355-4, *Local Ground Defense of Air Force Installations*.

advice on offensive techniques and, in the process, developed their own counter-insurgency "search and destroy" tactics. Only through the annihilation of insurgent forces, advised the MAAG, could a counter-insurgency succeed. Likewise, the U.S. Air Force limited its advice and counter-insurgency program primarily to offensive air operations. Still preoccupied with internal security, the USAF did not attempt to develop an organic local defense capability for limited war situations or even advise their South Vietnamese counterparts on potential improvements in indigenous air base security forces.¹⁷ Yet, the U.S. Government, withholding all U.S. forces from active base security assignments for political reasons, vested the security of advisory units to the unreliable South Vietnamese security forces.

Conflicting personal loyalties and political rivalries between ranking officers of the South Vietnamese Army and South Vietnamese Air Force caused many of the problems with indigenous security efforts. The most vivid example occurred in September 1964, when elements of the South Vietnamese Air Force threatened to bomb elements of the South Vietnamese Army leading an attempted coup against the government in Saigon. The unfortunate incident undermined any real cooperation between the services for the duration of the Vietnam War.¹⁸ Furthermore, for fear of another military coup, there was a pronounced reluctance to give any one South Vietnamese military unit in the vicinity of Saigon too many men or combine multiple units under a unified security commander.

In 1962, the U.S. advisory group was re-designated U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (USMACV), and Pacific Air Forces (PACAF) directed the Air Police to ensure that all USAF internal security measures were being enforced at operating bases in Southeast Asia. Less than 250 Air Police were then deployed to South

¹⁷ General Curtis E. LeMay, Air Force Chief of Staff, "accordingly approved a plan accenting counterinsurgency. The Air Staff took steps to devise special equipment, tactics, and skills; to orient and train personnel; and to improve operational intelligence collection. This program did not actively consider the impact of insurgency warfare on air base defense. It overlooked the need to prepare indigenous forces to defend their own air bases, and to develop an organic USAF counterinsurgency ground defense capability. Insofar as air base security was concerned, the Air Staff remained preoccupied with the cold war threat." *Air Base Defense*, pages 11 and 12.

¹⁸ To fully understand the gravity of the threat, one must incorporate the Vietnamese concept of loyalty. In the Vietnamese culture, family and personal loyalties supercede all other forms, be they religious, institutional, or national. The incident thrust intense personal loyalties of men in the South Vietnamese Army and South Vietnamese Air Force against each other; in some form, the ramifications probably lasted for generations.

Vietnam. The Air Police requested a staff assistance visit from headquarters, to clarify their orders. In "a model of circumspection," the visitors' report suggested that Air Police

rely on standard Air Force procedures to detect and neutralize sabotage. It discouraged the use of ground force defense methods that entailed unfamiliar weapons and created support problems. And, while conceding that a large-scale enemy assault might require active USAF defense measures, the report warned that stocking more than a single basic load of small-arms ammunition might invite a VC/NVA attack.

Nevertheless,

by the end of 1963, U.S. personnel on the scene had a keener insight into air base defense realities and became increasingly critical... For perhaps the first time, the USAF security doctrine stressing a cold war threat came under fire. [Air Police] field commanders asserted that this concept 'must be revised and more flexible rules and standards devised for the protection of USAF personnel and equipment in limited war areas.'¹⁹

Reform proposals were launched in January 1964, but neither USMACV nor PACAF acted on them.²⁰ The joint Vietnamese Army-Vietnamese Air Force local security forces consistently failed to detect or react to Viet Cong assaults against air bases housing USAF tenant units.

During the summer of 1964, the U.S. launched its first air strikes into North Vietnam. In November, the Communists struck back. Vietnamese Communist guerrilla troops (Viet Cong) launched a mortar barrage on a U.S. operating base just northeast of Saigon.²¹ The sixty to eighty rounds that fell onto the air base destroyed five U.S. B-57 aircraft, damaged fifteen others, killed four U.S. personnel, and wounded thirty more. Hitherto, assaults on U.S. personnel and property had been incidental to operations directed against the South Vietnamese units accompanied by U.S. advisors. The barrage marked the first time Communist forces specifically targeted U.S. forces.

¹⁹ *Air Base Defense*, pages 13 and 14.

²⁰ Launched by field commanders the reform proposals did not advance beyond Pacific Air Forces.

²¹ The attack occurred at Bien Hoa air base.

SECTION 3

IN SOUTH VIETNAM: SITUATION NORMAL...

On 31 January 1968, less than 750 policemen defended Tan Son Nhut air base from more than 2,500 Viet Cong guerillas and North Vietnamese regular soldiers. It was the largest assault on a U.S. air base during the Vietnam War. Nevertheless, the most formidable opponents overcome by the policemen at Tan Son Nhut were not instruments of Communist insurgency, but manifestations of inappropriate employment and unresponsive military superiors. These enemies—in the form of unrealistic directives, unsuitable resources and training, inept support, and a universal lack of authority—attacked every day at every air base in Southeast Asia.

During the Vietnam War, a dual chain-of-command and conflicting policies regarding air base security forced the Security Police into an untenable position. A closer look at the daily challenges faced by policemen in South Vietnam confirms that both Pacific Air Forces and U.S. Military Assistance Command both approached air base security as a technical problem. Furthermore, PACAF implemented Security Police directives, manpower standards, and training programs that relied on the technical approach to air base security. When issuing rules-of-engagement, USMACV did the same.

ESCALATION

On 7 March 1965, the first U.S. combat troops landed in the Republic of Vietnam. Their mission was, "to provide local close-in security" at air bases and military posts housing U.S. tenant forces.¹ According to USMACV, security of the installations demanded

¹ *The Washington Post*, quoting Secretary of State Dean Rusk, as cited in *Air Base Defense*, page 20.

a zone enclosing each base and site contiguous to its boundaries... defended continuously to a depth and degree of saturation that will serve to prevent enemy penetration or employment of artillery or mortars. The defense capabilities must be responsive to the needs of the USAF commander on base.²

This was the initial justification for U.S. ground participation in the Vietnam War. But the promise of "close-in security" was the first victim of the artifact so closely associated with the war itself: gradual escalation of force.

Once the combat-troops were ashore, "the concept of air base defense of late February 1965... [gradually] evolved into the tactical offensive of June."³ In a one-volume history of the war, Lieutenant General Phillip B. Davidson gave his account of the transition. The former USMACV chief of intelligence stated that the decision to make "more active use" of U.S. combat-troops in April of 1965

represented the first major switch in the strategy governing the use of United States ground combat forces. No longer were ground forces to be pinned down on base security missions. Now, [USMACV] could use them aggressively against the Viet Cong. But if the mission of base security was gone, what was the new mission to be?⁴

The renowned insider certainly makes nice use of a rhetorical device, but he fails to address related base security issues. If the USMACV mission of base security was gone, where did it go? *And who was going to do it?* Ultimately, the burden fell heavily on the Air Police.

SECURITY ARRANGEMENTS

Although the United States landed its first ground-combat troops on South Vietnamese soil for the *express purpose* of defending U.S. posts and air bases, by late-1965 it was obvious the U.S. Army was out of the security game.⁵ In a December 1965

² USMACV "Shopping List" for the Secretary of Defense, July 1964, as cited in *Air Base Defense*, page 21.

³ Lieutenant General Phillip B. Davidson, U.S. Army, *Vietnam At War: The History, 1946-1975*, Novato, California: Presidio Press, 1988, page 350.

⁴ *Ibid.*, page 345.

⁵ The U.S. Marine Corps (USMC), in contrast, gave air base security a high priority. Accordingly, the one major air base in USMC area of operations was a "notable exception" in terms of air base security. According to the official USAF historical account, *The United States Air Force in Southeast Asia: 1961-1973*, "only at Da Nang [air base]... was a satisfactory defense posture established... where the dual

letter discussing air base defense the USMACV Commander, General William C. Westmoreland, wrote:

In order to provide a high level of security to these installations, it would be necessary to deploy all US infantry elements in a defensive role. Obviously, this cannot be done and at the same time go over to the offensive and destroy the VC... Therefore, I desire that all service units and *all forces of whatever service* who [sic] find themselves operating without infantry protection... will be organized, trained, and exercised to perform the defensive and security functions which I have just outlined [patrolling, establishments of outposts, and forming reaction forces]. This means we will be asking our troops to do more than their primary duties. I am confident that they can do both without significant decrease in their effectiveness on their primary mission.⁶

With the letter, USMACV officially rejected a defensive role adjacent to U.S. air bases.

While perhaps naive, General Westmoreland's instructions are not inexplicable. There were no specially designated "defense forces" in the U.S. Army; ground-combat troops simply provided ground security for themselves and the support units upon which they depended. The service charged its police force with law enforcement, as *additional* security by the Military Police was unnecessary. General Westmoreland merely attempted to extend U.S. Army standard operating procedure to all units in USMACV.

The USMACV notion of unit security conflicted sharply with the PACAF concept of base security. Aircrews were incapable of providing ground security for themselves or the support units upon which they depended. Thus PACAF charged its police force with law enforcement and the provision of the USAF's *only* security against ground attack.⁷ In light of U.S. Air Force standard operating procedures, General Westmoreland's demand was similar to ordering an infantry division to "be organized, trained, and exercised to perform" in the air.

responsibility of the Marine commander for both area and local defense resulted in the only truly unified base defense operation within South Vietnam," page 259.

⁶ Emphasis added. Letter, on the subject of tactical employment of U.S. forces and defensive action, from the USMACV Commander, General William C. Westmoreland, U.S. Army, to all major commands, December 1965. Declassified from appendices of *USAF Limited War Security-Defense Force*, APO San Francisco, California: USAF Inspector General, 25 January 1966, for the purposes of this study.

⁷ In theory, non-combat technicians from other units could temporarily augment the defense force. But, for all practical purposes, the USAF Air Police/Security Police were responsible for air base security.

As such, PACAF's interpretation of the USMACV directive discouraged any change in the basic air base security concept that the service's security responsibilities ended at the legal boundaries of the air base. Thus PACAF also refused any external security role outside its bases:

The upshot was to leave in limbo the security of air base approaches... Under this anomalous but enduring arrangement, our bases were for the most part unprotected by any external defense force, so that the [Viet Cong/North Vietnamese Army] were largely free to mount attacks at times and locations of their choice.⁸

When disseminating General Westmoreland's instructions, the USAF component commander, Lieutenant General Joseph H. More, underscored the need for "all feasible *internal* security for self defense," but, while encouraging his subordinate base commanders to coordinate with *other* units establishing "perimeter[s] over and beyond... that represented by Air Police forces," he did not include any implementation instructions for USAF patrols, outposts or extra external defense measures.⁹ Instead of taking suitable actions to prepare their security forces for war in Southeast Asia, the USAF renamed them—Security Police instead of Air Police.

The Security Police in the South Vietnam served two masters fighting two completely different wars. As ground forces, Security Police units received their operational orders and rules of engagement from USMACV. As airmen, they received their doctrinal and organizational orders from PACAF. (See Figure 1, on page 21.) USMACV was engaged in a full-blown, offensive, conventional war against main-unit insurgency forces in South Vietnam. PACAF was conducting a graduated air offensive against North Vietnam and fighting a war of nuclear deterrence against the Soviet Union.

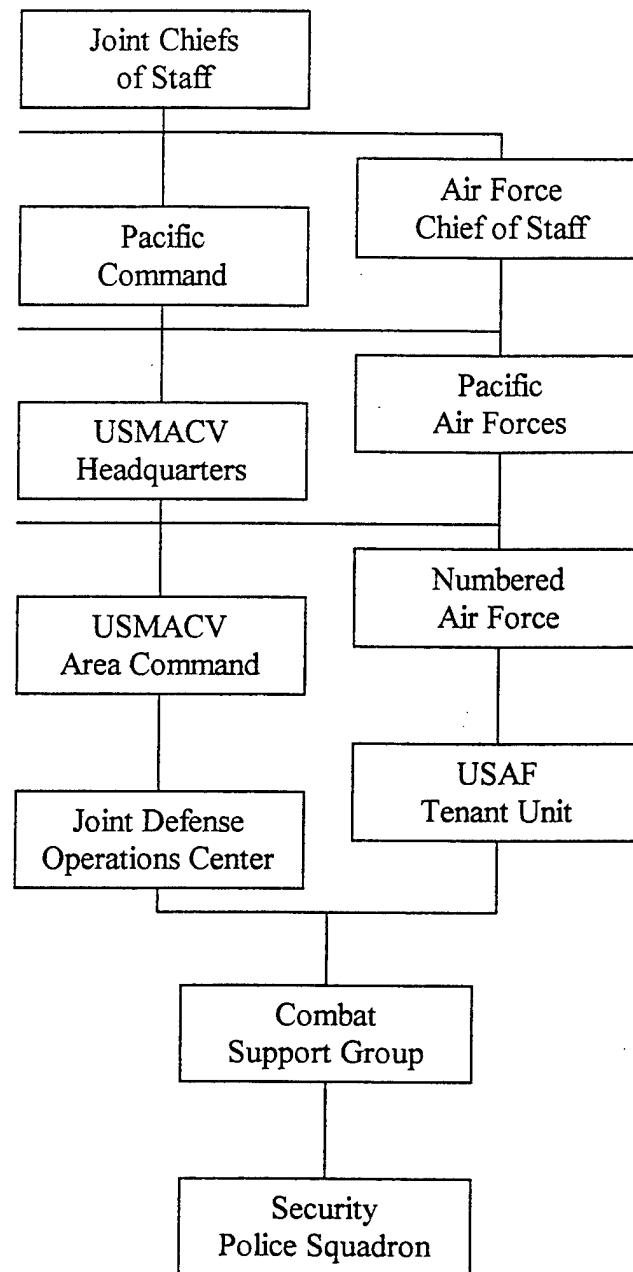
No one was interested in fighting siege warfare for air bases, except the Security Police. Interest was not an option for these men; it was their mission to "protect [USAF] weapons systems, vital facilities, equipment and personnel... from sabotage, espionage, subversion, and ground attack."¹⁰ And they were besieged.

⁸ *Air Base Defense*, page 28.

⁹ Emphasis Added. Letter, regarding the defense of Republic of Vietnam air bases, from the commander of the Second Air Division, Lieutenant General Joseph H. More, U.S. Air Force, to his subordinate commanders, on 21 January 1966.

¹⁰ *Security Police Squadron History*, page 1.

FIGURE 1
SECURITY POLICE CHAIN-OF-COMMAND



The U.S. Air Force and the Vietnamese Air Force shared six major air bases in the Republic of Vietnam.¹¹ At each, a combined security relationship was necessary. As previously mentioned, attempts by the Vietnamese Armed Forces to provide air base security were predisposed to fail. It was not surprising to the Security Police on the scene when they did. As early as 1965, USAF policemen recommended that air base security units from the Vietnamese Army and the Vietnamese Air Force "be disregarded... because 'experience has proven they can not be depended upon.'"¹²

The presence of various tenant organizations, military headquarters, and/or key political facilities at many air bases in the Republic of Vietnam further complicated security issues. Each organization maintained its own security force. All had to be accounted for in the overarching base security program. To help resolve complications, control and liaison elements of main security units formed Installation Coordinating Centers (ICCs) or Joint Defense Operations Centers (JDOCs) at many air bases.

Although they provided convenient points to discuss integrated base security and kindred problems, "never in any sense did ICCs or JDOCs become instruments of combined command."¹³ Each organization maintained its own security command post and operated more or less independently of the others.

DIRECTIVES

When published in June 1964, Air Force Regulation No. 207-1, *The USAF Aerospace Systems Security Program* and its companion, Air Force Manual No. 207-1, *Doctrine and Requirements for Security of Air Force Weapons Systems*, superceded all previous instructions on air base security. The stated objective of the Aerospace Systems Security Program was "to produce direct and indirect influences that will dissuade and/or deter an enemy from initiating clandestine operations against the USAF...by implementing security programs that will effectively counteract all forms of ground threat." The program—like its predecessor, the Installation Security System—was designed to protect

¹¹ The six combined-use bases were Bien Hoa, Binh Thuy, Da Nang, Nah Trang, Pleiku, and Tan Son Nhut.

¹² Early examples include Vietnamese Armed Forces failures at Bien Hoa on 1 November 1964 and 24 August 1965, at Nha Trang on 27 June 1965, at Pleiku on 16 February and 22 April 1966, and at Tan Son Nhut on 13 April 1966. *Air Base Defense*, page 122.

the USAF nuclear response capability from first-strike attacks by clandestine Soviet agents. To achieve the “ultimate USAF objective of deterring enemy clandestine operations,” the U.S. Air Force regulation directed that:

realistic graduations of security capabilities will be assembled in direct support of USAF operational resources... [and] while maintaining capabilities designed primarily to counteract enemy clandestine operation, the program also will counteract all other forms of ground threat that may be encountered.¹⁴

Air Force Regulation No. 207-1, *The USAF Aerospace Systems Security Program*, essentially renamed and reformatted the existing concept of internal security and did nothing to address air base security in limited war scenarios. Nevertheless, the document remained the USAF’s highest guidance on air base security for most of the Vietnam War. (See Appendix B for additional information on USAF-Level Security Directives.)

Air Force Manual No. 207-1, *Doctrine and Requirements for Security of Air Force Weapons Systems*, detailed the organization, equipment, manpower authorizations, training, and evaluation of Security Police units. It also outlined “specific requirements” for Security Police operations worldwide, stating:

Aerospace security operations must conform to the basic doctrinal criteria and specific requirements contained in AFM [Air Force Manual] 207-1... During normal conditions aerospace security operations must provide capabilities for detection, alarm, armed response, discrimination, and emergency expansion to counteract hostile and other threatening ground action against aerospace operational resources. The security priority of the resources supported will determine the degree of assurance that will be provided in each of these areas of capability.¹⁵

Tables of organization for Security Police squadrons operating in the Southeast Asia differed little from units operating in the continental United States.¹⁶ (See Figure 2 on page 24.)

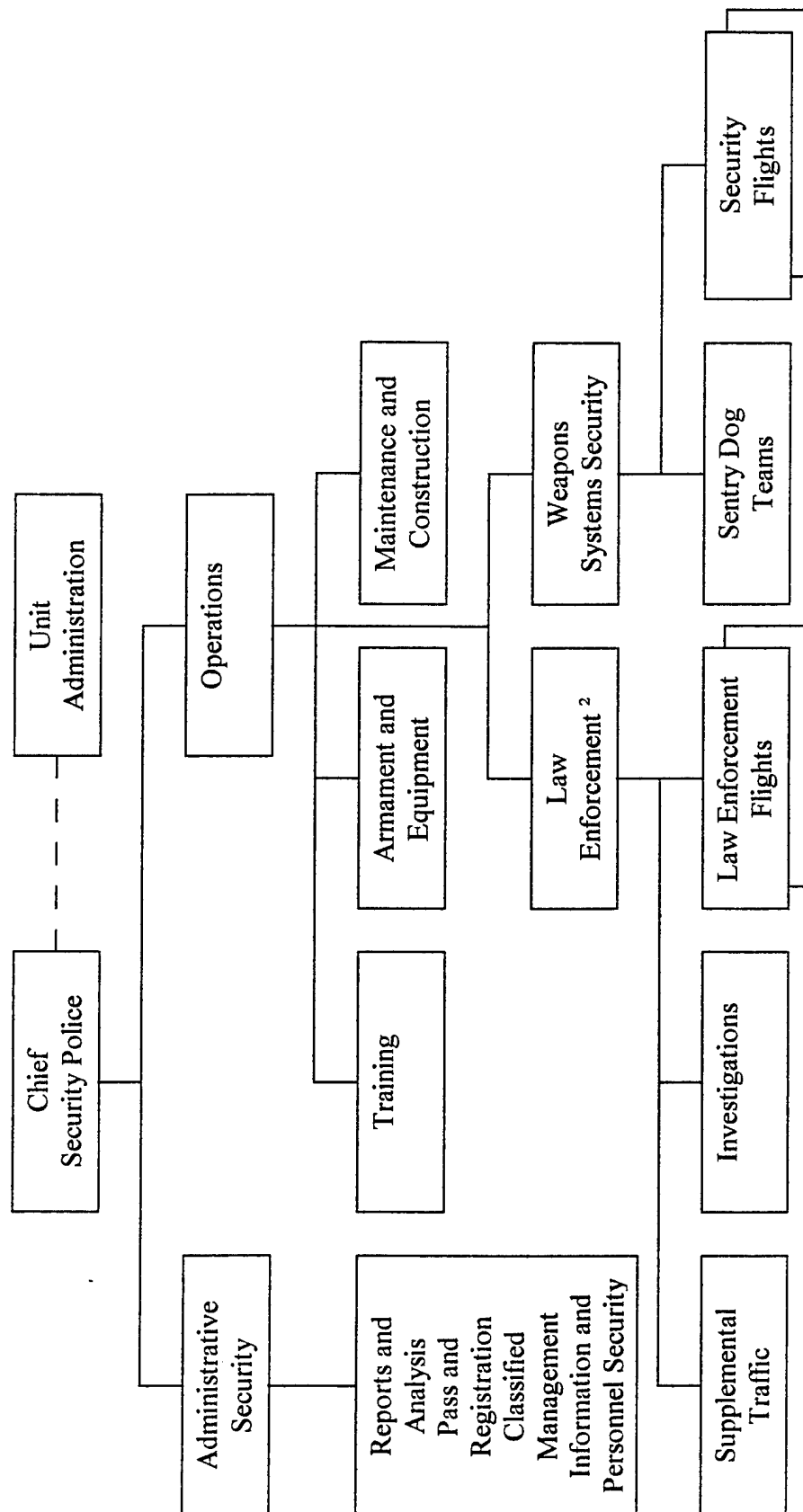
¹³ *Air Base Defense*, page 162.

¹⁴ Air Force Regulation No. 207-1, *The Aerospace Systems Security Program*, June 1964.

¹⁵ Air Force Manual No. 207-1, *Doctrine and Requirements for Security of Air Force Weapons Systems*, June 1964.

¹⁶ The only notable organizational differences in units deployed to Southeast Asia was the addition of a maintenance and construction section—there was no need in the United States—and the absence of a corrections section—there were no U.S. Air Force corrections facilities in the Republic of Vietnam.

FIGURE 2
SECURITY POLICE SQUADRON ORGANIZATIONAL CHART¹



¹ The USAF authorized Intelligence Sections after the 1967-1968 winter-spring offensive, and the Security Police added them accordingly.

² The Law Enforcement Section also included Customs at applicable air bases.

For obvious reasons, the Security Police in the Republic of Vietnam shifted as many men as possible into the Security and Law Enforcement sections. In addition, each squadron had an Administrative Security section, an Armament and Equipment section, a Maintenance and Construction section, and a Training section.

Security Police squadrons were not tactical organizations. For example security flights had no established elements analogous to the four-to-six man fire teams found in rifle companies. Whether on the base perimeter, as part of a roving sentry-dog patrol, or at a close-in fire position, Security Police seldom operated as mutually supportive, tactical units. Quick Reaction Teams were a notable exception. These *ad hoc* formations of thirteen policemen acted as standby reinforcements and could buttress other positions if necessary. But, in accordance with U.S. Air Force instructions, standard security flights "deployed as individuals much as peacetime interior guards along based perimeters, without unit integrity."¹⁷

MEN

During the Vietnam War, the USAF failed to address the unique needs—driven by geographical considerations, political constraints, and enemy tactics—of air base security forces in Southeast Asia. Chief among these needs was manpower. Security Police manpower authorizations during the Vietnam War remained bound to U.S. nuclear assets. The number and type of resources at a given base dictated the police manpower authorized for that base. For example, the USAF authorized one policeman for the close-protection of every B-52 aircraft.¹⁸

U.S. military limits on the total number of U.S. personnel deployed to Southeast Asia, or headspace ceilings, further constrained manpower authorizations. In 1966, USMACV included seven U.S. Army physical-security companies and five U.S. Army base-defense units in force requests. When the Joint Chiefs of Staff curtailed the huge request, they applied the physical-security manpower spaces as add-on rifle companies and eliminated those for base-defense units because the manpower "would be better employed in an

¹⁷ Lieutenant Colonel Theodore C. Williams, Jr., U.S. Army, *The US Air Force Ground Defense System*, Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania: U.S. Army War College, 2 December 1968.

¹⁸ *Air Base Defense*, page 82.

offensive attitude as part of a larger force and not tied down permanently to a base area.”¹⁹ The Joint Chiefs restated the U.S. military policy that,

requirements for... security must be met by improved passive defense measures, by assignment of appropriate security tasks, and through the provision of a minimum [of Military Police/Air Police] physical elements as augmentations to tenant unit guards.²⁰

A 12-month limitation on non-voluntary assignments regulated the rotation of Security Police personnel into and out of South Vietnam.²¹ More often than not, policemen selected for a twelve-month rotation to Southeast Asia requested travel dates as late in the assignment month as possible; whereas those rotating back to the United States frequently asked for travel dates early in the month. The lapse often led to “a marked variation in the numbers of assigned and present-for-duty personnel.”²² When an airman rotated from Southeast Asia back to the United States, his former

unit carried him on its strength until completion of the customary 30-day leave and expiration of his CONUS [Continental United States] reporting date. Therefore for reporting purposes, the assigned strength... might be 100 percent, while in reality the personnel physically present might be only 70 percent, and those available for regular duty just 60 percent.²³

Further complicating the issue, lurching rotation cycles developed at many air bases—as a result of the crash buildup of defense forces in 1965 and the *en bloc* nature of manpower authorizations—in which a majority of Security Police personnel rotated to and from the base during an eight week period. Thus, defenses were annually crippled by mass departure and influx of personnel.

¹⁹ Message regarding the security of installations in the Republic of Vietnam, from USMACV Commander, General William C. Westmoreland, U.S. Army, to PACAF Commander-in-Chief, General Hunter Harris, Jr., U.S. Air Force, February 1967, as cited in *Air Base Defense*, pages 83 and 84.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ This type of personnel rotation policy was not unique to the security forces career field. Marshall L. Michel III addresses the same situation among aircrews in *Clashes: Air Combat over North Vietnam 1965-1972*, *Clashes: Air Combat over North Vietnam, 1965-1972*, Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 1997, stating, “[t]he Air Force made a decision early to spread combat experience wide rather than deep, and aircrew assignments to Southeast Asia were driven by a single policy—no aircrew should fly a non-voluntary second tour until every pilot had flown a first tour,” page 163.

²² The last ten percent loss in production strength was a fairly constant factor due to in/out administrative processing, unit indoctrination and training, and in-country leave for veterans of six or more months. *Air Base Defense*, page 85.

²³ Ibid.

A convenient panacea for shortages in dedicated security forces was augmentation by servicemen assigned to non-combat organizations. Although embraced by both PACAF and USMACV, augmentation was not loved by the Security Police. In theory, augmentees aided short-handed Security Police units during enemy assaults; in practice, the truck-drivers and cooks and all other manner of non-combatant troops were an immense training burden to the Security Police and usually confused security efforts, on many occasions endangering themselves and dedicated defense forces. The augmentees knew "even less than security policemen about ground combat methods."²⁴

At the beginning of the Vietnam War, most Security Police personnel sent to South Vietnam were fully qualified. But rotation policy soon depleted the pool of skilled airmen and the number of "apprentices" and "helpers" sent to Vietnam increased accordingly.²⁵ In addition, even those deemed fully qualified were qualified only for an internal security mission, not for the small-unit combat the Security Police ultimately faced in South Vietnam.

As the number of partially qualified personnel in Southeast Asia increased, the need for "on-the-job training" also increased. Security Police commanders in South Vietnam lamented as the number of partially qualified personnel mounted and the burden of extensive training further degraded security operations.²⁶ Furthermore, some aspects of the USAF's do-it-yourself training program had no relation to security operations in the Republic of Vietnam; nevertheless, because it was

a significant factor in selection for promotion it [could not] be neglected... [and, overworked security policemen were] forced to devote what free time [was] available to memorizing materiel on such subjects as industrial security, safeguarding classified documents, and game conservation.²⁷

²⁴ Ibid., page 89.

²⁵ Fully qualified security policemen carried an Air Force specialty code of 81150, security police apprentices 81130, and helpers 81010. These codes are recorded in the Training and Education Command report, *Individual Personnel Training in Support of SEA*, as cited by Lieutenant Colonel Fox, page 86.

²⁶ For example, Lieutenant Colonel Roger W. Stinchcomb, Jr., remarked, "with the extensive requirement for [on the job training] in the combat theater it is quite evident that security-wise we are not adequately prepared for war," in his end of tour report. Ibid., page 87.

²⁷ The 7th Air Force director of security police, Colonel Jack L. Hughes, gave this account in his End Of Tour Report, in April 1972. Colonel Hughes also pointed out, in addition to "the adverse impact on the mission, there are indications that the obvious irrationality of these [On the Job Training] requirements contributes to the low retention rate" among first term security policemen, "who normally work 10 hour shifts and who frequently do not receive a day off for as long as 2 months." Ibid.

In addition to indoctrinating new Security Police arrivals and pursuing their own self-help training, the policemen needed to provide some level of fundamental air base security instruction to their various augmentees.

In August 1965, the U.S. Air Force re-opened its Police Combat Preparedness Course at Lackland Air Force Base, Texas. The course was the USAF's first attempt to teach ground-combat skills in over eight years. The USAF intended the course to prepare policemen for duty in Southeast Asia, but numerous restrictions kept it from ever providing realistic training.

Land set aside for tactical exercises was too small and fenced with restrictions. Lean budgets and low priorities ruled out the buying of critical items in needed numbers—chiefly weapons, ammunition, and tactical vehicles. And the safety checks cut back weapons training.²⁸

In the end, the course's 5 days of instruction borrowed heavily from internal security courses offered in basic Air Police training and did little to address air base security concerns specific to operations in Southeast Asia.²⁹ A 1967 independent study on air base security, requested by USMACV and funded the U.S. military, reported that Security Police

essentially [had] no training in the types of infantry tactics useful in base defense before they [arrived] in Southeast Asia, and there [was] no standard program set up to provide this type of combat training... when they [arrived]."³⁰

At some bases, Security Police leadership was dismal, as senior police officers in ceremonial units or highly specialized assignments, lacking experience and training in force protection, were sent to South Vietnam as commanders.³¹ One "hapless officer"

²⁸ *Air Base Defense*, page 91.

²⁹ For example, the student spent ten of his total 40 hours on the O'Neil method of unarmed defense. After the assaults in early 1968, the course was extended from five to nine days, but its effectiveness changed little. Perhaps the greatest indication of the course's overstated value was the formation of more-or-less formal training schools by Air Police units deployed to air bases in Southeast Asia. The in-house training continued for the duration of the Vietnam War.

³⁰ Under the auspices of the Department of Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency, the Lockheed Missiles and Space Company conducted the study. The resulting report, *Integrated Air Base Defense Program*, was published in January, 1968.

³¹ Again, the problems associated with inexperienced and insufficiently trained officers arriving for duty in Vietnam were not unique to the security police career field. In *Clashes*, Marshall Michel describes a similar situation among air combat units, in which pilots of large transport or bomber aircraft destined for fighter units in Vietnam received minimal training covering "only certain basic skills—air refueling,

was taken from an entirely different career field and given no substantial training before he was installed as a Security Police operations officer. In his end-of-tour report, the officer stated, even though the base and he had "survived so far," he still believed "the assignment was a mistake... [and he did not think] Vietnam [was] the place for anyone in a position of authority to start from scratch in a new career field."³²

EQUIPMENT

An abhorrent lack of physical security facilities—fences, barriers, lighting, minefields, towers, bunkers, and roads—plagued air bases in Southeast Asia. Those that existed did so only because of the exertions of policemen in "self-help" programs or hastily-formed maintenance and construction sections. Overcrowding and poorly formulated base layouts undermined unity of effort, and South Vietnam's geography undermined physical defense equipment's effectiveness. A shortage of light systems and electricity to run them curtailed perimeter lighting.³³ Rapid overgrowth of ground cover neutralized fencing, nullified local defense forces' fields of observation and fire, and hid the Viet Cong.³⁴ Furthermore, potential guerrilla sanctuaries abutted most air bases—dense jungle at some and urbanized sprawls at others.

Due to the nature of their mission, the Security Police received most of their individual equipment via the U.S. Army. Most policemen in South Vietnam carried the M-16 rifle, while dog-handlers carried a modified version of the weapon, the CAR-15,

tactical formation, dive bombing, and very basic air combat maneuvering... [and] commonly had to complete additional training after arriving at their combat units," page 164.

³² Major Wayne C. Collins, *End-of-Tour Report*, January 1969. The Security Police operations officer, also stated that,

[he] came to Vietnam as a security police officer with no idea of what a security police officer was supposed to do. [he] was taken from another career field, given no training and shipped to one of the most important bases in Southeast Asia where [he] was responsible for the protection of over 5000 lives and millions of dollars in vital equipment.

³³ At an enormous cost, hand-held flares and illumination rounds supplemented lighting at all bases and constituted the primary source at some. Security Police improvisations provided further illumination; one such device used defective aircraft flares set in concave steel shipping containers to provide one-time, high-intensity lighting.

³⁴ The account of excessive vegetation in *Air Base Defense*, page 58, reported that, around and within U.S. air bases, plant life flourished in overwhelming and unwanted profusion. Several varieties of grasses and weeds created a critical problem for base defense. Especially widespread is tranh grass which reaches a height of 1 to 2 meters, easily tall

with an improved sling and collapsible stock to allow for control of both the rifle and the dog.³⁵ Each man typically carried a total of 260 cartridges in twenty-round magazines, as well as a number of hand-grenades. Security Police in the vicinity of high value resources often carried a 12-gauge shotgun, but jamming problems and short range eventually resulted in the near complete replacement with M-16 rifles. Heavier M-60 machineguns were standard equipment for reaction forces and key fixed positions. Some policemen were equipped with grenade launchers; but most engagements with enemy forces were at short ranges and lent themselves to hand-grenades.

The consistently high quality of the Army weapons furnished to air base defense forces formed one of the few bright stars in the support area... there were procurement, maintenance, and training troubles. But the weapons themselves posed no real performance problems.³⁶

One very real problem, during an assault, was *concentrating* weapons at the point of incursion. Much delay occurred at the armory where each man, according to regulations, had to sign for his equipment by serial number. Furthermore, most base perimeters stretched for miles, and vehicles were in short supply.

Of all the equipment problems faced by the Security Police, procurement and maintenance of vehicles, essential for security patrols and reaction forces, proved most critical.³⁷ The USAF did not consider the general dearth of paved roads in South Vietnam when formulating its base security equation. An 1965 Air Staff summary during that year concluded the "vehicle situation is best exemplified in that vehicles are being rented from local civilian leasing contractors. For example... [military jeeps] are rented," because the commercial vehicles were "not tough enough to withstand the road conditions."³⁸ Security Police received *only* commercial vehicles through the summer of 1965. After that, military jeeps designated for Security Police units arrived slowly and in

enough to hide a man or even imperil a helicopter landing... Obviously, the height and density of such vegetation afforded ideal concealment for ambush and infiltration.

³⁵ The most significant modifications included an improved sling, shorter barrel, telescoping stock and reworked handguard.

³⁶ There were problems with the M-16 rifles early in the Vietnam War, but later models improved. *Air Base Defense*, page 96.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, page 145.

³⁸ U.S. Air Force, *Survey of Physical Security and Base Defense Actions Concerning South-east Asia Bases*, APO San Francisco, California: USAF Inspector General, 1 October 1965.

small numbers. Throughout the war, Security Police transportation consisted primarily of commercial vehicles, and no heavy military vehicles arrived until after 1968.

Security Police also used commercial components for their radio network. Like their stateside counterparts, policemen in South Vietnam relied on two-channel Motorola transceivers. The off-the-shelf, commercial radios were poorly weatherized, had too short a range, often required two hands to operate, were susceptible to jamming, and could not transmit or receive on the tactical radio frequencies used by USAF aircraft and U.S. and friendly ground units. Although functional for internal security measures at bases in friendly territory, the radio network was less than adequate for security operations in a hostile environment. During assaults, Security Police often found their "radio frequency... completely saturated with damage reports, artillery impact reports, VIP transmissions, and transmissions by other agencies sharing the security frequency."³⁹ Well-established air bases in Europe and the United States maintained secure landline telephone systems to backup radio communications. Bases in South Vietnam did not. When deemed necessary in 1966, the USAF initiated a Communications-Electronics Implementation Plan to install landlines for Security Police in South Vietnam; three years later, only one was actually installed.⁴⁰

SUPPORT

In any war, good tactical intelligence feeds effective security operations; during the Vietnam War, the Security Police received little. The USAF "should have given this help, but it was absorbed in producing intelligence for air combat operations," thus

even though the USAF intelligence system employed an estimated 60,000 people, it could not furnish the routine support needed by air base defense... security police sought to bridge the intelligence gap, and in so doing slighted their primary mission.⁴¹

³⁹ Letter, outlining the resume of a Viet Cong attack against Tan Son Nhut, from the Seventh Air Force Director of Security and Law Enforcement to the Seventh Air Force Chief of Staff, in April, 1966, as cited in *Air Base Defense*.

⁴⁰ *Air Base Defense*, page 153.

⁴¹ There were two impressive exceptions. During the rash of rocket attacks against Tan Son Nhut following the January 1968 assault, Seventh Air Force reconnaissance conducted an all-out search for Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army launch sites, shooting 140, 876 feet of film. Photo interpreters identified 176

Most Security Police intelligence consisted of local indicators—a gathering during a certain phase of the moon or the absence of South Vietnamese laborers reporting for the mid-night shift—perhaps signifying an assault, an impending barrage, or nothing at all. As early as 1965, police commanders began trading information with local informants, the USAF Office of Special Investigations, and U.S. and Vietnamese Army units regarding the local threat. The formation of authorized intelligence sections within police squadrons after the 1967-1968 winter-spring offensive was essentially a self-help program, merely attempting to formalize the hundreds of unconventional intelligence sources already utilized by the Security Police.⁴²

Fire support was moderately better than intelligence support. At many bases, during the high-threat early morning hours, U.S. Army helicopter gunships occasionally sat on alert. Some sort of Vietnamese Air Force or U.S. Air Force fixed-wing gunship or flareship made itself available for fire or illumination support to most bases on most nights. At major installations, U.S. soldiers maintained a counter-mortar artillery capability. On two occasions, USAF air strikes were authorized against positively identified Communist mortar positions and weapons caches. But, to a great degree, Security Police had fire support only when no one else requested it, or perhaps for a month or two following an especially destructive Communist assault.

AUTHORITY

Even if the Security Police observed enemy action and moved to preempt an assault, they could not necessarily engage the enemy. According to one official history of the Vietnam War, *The United States Air Force in Southeast Asia*, “the need to obtain prior South Vietnamese clearance for ground and air units to engage enemy forces *actively assaulting* allied installations contributed to the failure.”⁴³

launch sites and numerous bunkers and storage areas. A similar operation during the May offensive proved just as effective. *Air Base Defense*.

⁴² Not surprisingly, no additional manpower spaces were approved for the new intelligence sections.

⁴³ Emphasis added. Carl Berger, ed., *The United States Air Force in Southeast Asia: An Illustrated Account*, Washington D.C.: U.S. Air Force Office of History, 1984, page 263.

The suppression of enemy mortar positions also required approval from higher headquarters. To ensure no friendly troops were in the area to be brought under fire, the district's Centralized Firing Authority cleared all artillery and aerial suppressive fire.

"Though never questioning the right to self-defense," USMACV rules of engagement usually required that each fire mission receive prior political and military approval from [Vietnamese] authorities having control over the target area. Many times these officials omitted, delayed, or refused fire-clearance requests—arousing anger and frustration among U.S. forces.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ *Air Base Defense*, page 166.

SECTION 4

AT TAN SON NHUT: THE FRONT LINES

The 31 January 1968 defense of Tan Son Nhut is the single most vivid demonstration of the nature of air base security in the Republic of Vietnam, but it was not the first such demonstration. During the advisory phase of the Vietnam War, "acts of terrorism and/or sabotage continuously threatened" Tan Son Nhut.¹ Most authorities on air base security, including the USAF policemen, believed that continued improvements in internal defense by tenant U.S. forces would curb this initial threat. Indeed, the Installation Security System was designed to counter similar types of clandestine attacks by Soviet agents operating behind the lines, in U.S. territory. Nevertheless, to the Security Police at Tan Son Nhut, it was clear that the Republic of Vietnam was *not* U.S. territory, and in a "war with no front lines," the enemy was *not* limited to terrorism and sabotage. Subsequent attacks at Tan Son Nhut illustrated the dangers of a technical approach to air base security.

Ironically, policemen at Tan Son Nhut clearly identified air base security as a human problem by the beginning of 1965.² This section provides two additional glimpses into the nature of air base security at Tan Son Nhut. In both examples, the human approach advocated by Security Police is contrasted to the technical approach taken by the USAF and USMACV. At every available opportunity the policemen articulated their need for

¹ These terrorist attacks and/or sabotage continued well into 1965. On 12 July 1965 a fragmentation grenade exploded near an Army barracks on Tan Son Nhut. The person or group responsible was not identified and the case was turned over to the Office of Special Investigations. On 4 October 1965 an unidentified Vietnamese threw a hand grenade into a pickup truck in front of the officers quarters at Tan Son Nhut; there were four U.S. Air Force officers in the vehicle, and fortunately the grenade failed to detonate. Again, the "culprit" escaped apprehension. During the same six-month period, an Air Police patrolman found two explosive packages in a bar adjacent to the base entrance; an Explosive Ordinance Disposal team successfully removed the packages.

more men, better training, and more authority. Both the USAF and USMACV largely ignored the requests for more manpower and better training, focusing instead on the possibility of technological breakthroughs and the "scientific" application of technical equipment.

TAN SON NHUT

In many respects Tan Son Nhut air base was unique among those in South Vietnam. The air base not only supported a combat mission but also housed the headquarters of U.S. Military Assistance Command, the headquarters of the U.S. Seventh Air Force, and the indoctrination centers for both the Vietnamese Army and the Vietnamese Air Force. It was Saigon's international airport, and often served as the residence of the Vietnamese premier or vice president. The base Joint Defense Operations Center enabled some coordination of the various organizations' security operations. (See Figure 3 on page 36.)

The air base's political sensitivity and proximity to Saigon further aggravated host-tenant relationships. At Tan Son Nhut, according to the USMACV Deputy Commander, "the only U.S. personnel participating in *any* security/defense effort were security police" because

Tan Son Nhut should not be protected by US troops against this mass attack threat. [Vietnamese] troops must be able to defend their own capitol [sic]. Tan Son Nhut is in sufficient proximity to Saigon that it should be defended by [Vietnamese] troops.³

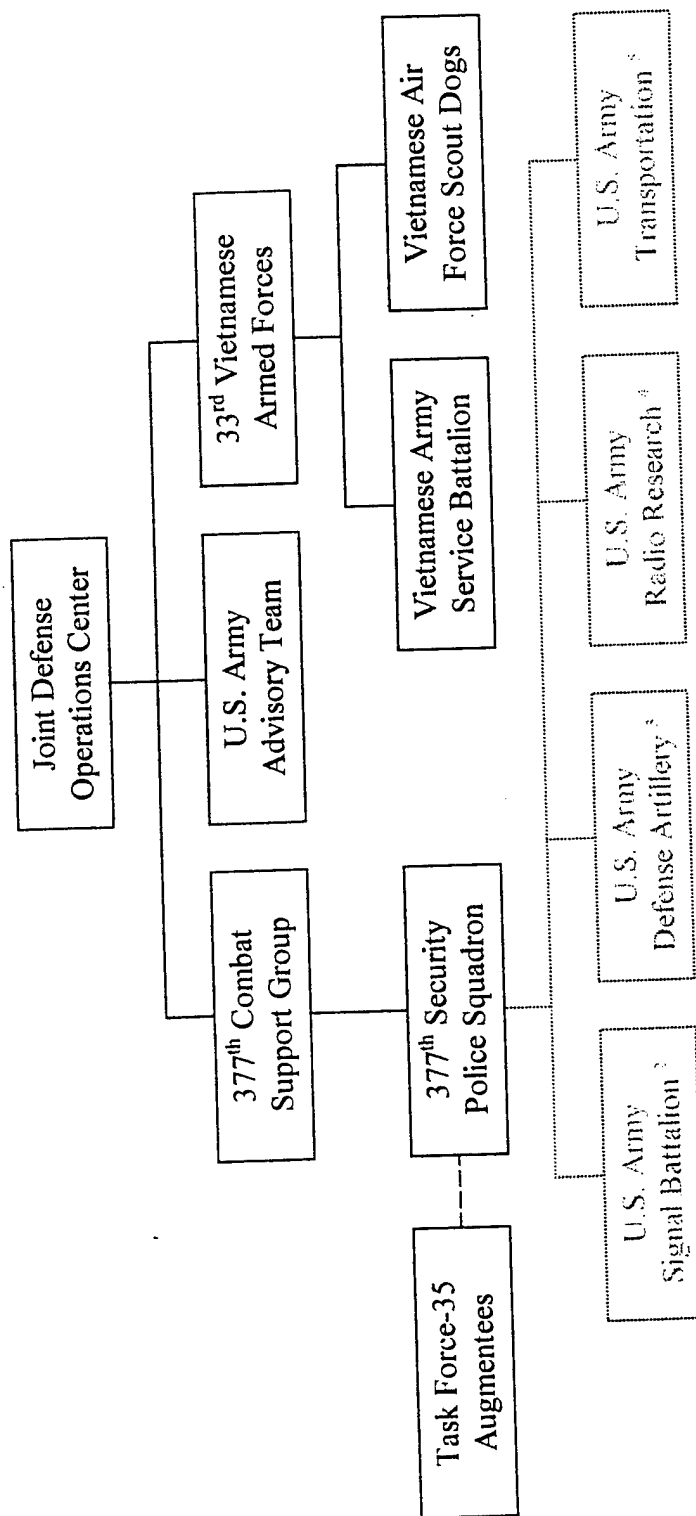
The air base Joint Defense Operations Center was incorporated into the Vietnamese Capitol Military District and U.S. Capitol Military Assistance Command.

In many other respects, Tan Son Nhut was typical. The air base's Security Police Squadron was average sized, about 1,000 men; about two-thirds of those worked as base security forces. Most of the policemen rotated into and out of Tan Son Nhut in November or December.

² Major Raymond J. Hines, Director of Security and Law Enforcement for the Second Air Division, *End-of-Tour Report*, February 1965.

³ Emphasis added. Memorandum for Record, on External Defense in Depth, by the Director of Security and Law Enforcement, Colonel Charles E. Kenworthy, dated September 1965, as cited in *Air Base Defense*.

FIGURE 3
TAN SON NHUT COMBINED DEFENSE¹



¹ Through 1968 in solid lines, post-1968 in dashed lines.

² Task Force 1 - 1A 69th Signal Battalion.

³ Task Force 2 - 56th Air Defense Artillery.

⁴ Task Force 3 - 59th Radio Research Group.

⁵ Task Force 4 - 110th Transportation Group.

When the new men arrived, the Security Police Squadron conducted limited training based on their experience; the "in-country training started off telling [new men] to forget everything [they] learned at the Lackland school."⁴ Perhaps because of its importance, Tan Son Nhut was blessed with experienced leadership throughout the Vietnam War.

Physical defenses were average as well. A joint USAF and USMACV inspection of the air base in late 1964 revealed

the base perimeter fence—none too sturdy when new—was in an advanced state of deterioration. There were improvised gates and numerous holes which permitted uncontrolled access by civilians and military dependants. Three-quarters of its length was overgrown by foliage so dense that a company size unit could have infiltrated undetected. Minefields laid in 1957 along some sections were not chartered or maintained and livestock grazed in allegedly mined areas.⁵

Equipment was in short supply, but support was better than average. Given the limited allocations for vehicles, Tan Son Nhut's policemen occasionally found it necessary to improvise. The Security Police focused on identifying "stolen" or "misused" government vehicles. If drivers could not produce the proper authorization paperwork the vehicles were impounded; if the vehicles were not claimed and proper paperwork presented within three days, they were added to the "base motor pool."⁶ Little could be done about communications problems. Two U.S. Army helicopter gunships sat on alert at Tan Son Nhut. The base's proximity to Saigon aided in coordination with U.S. Air Force Office of Special Investigations intelligence operations.

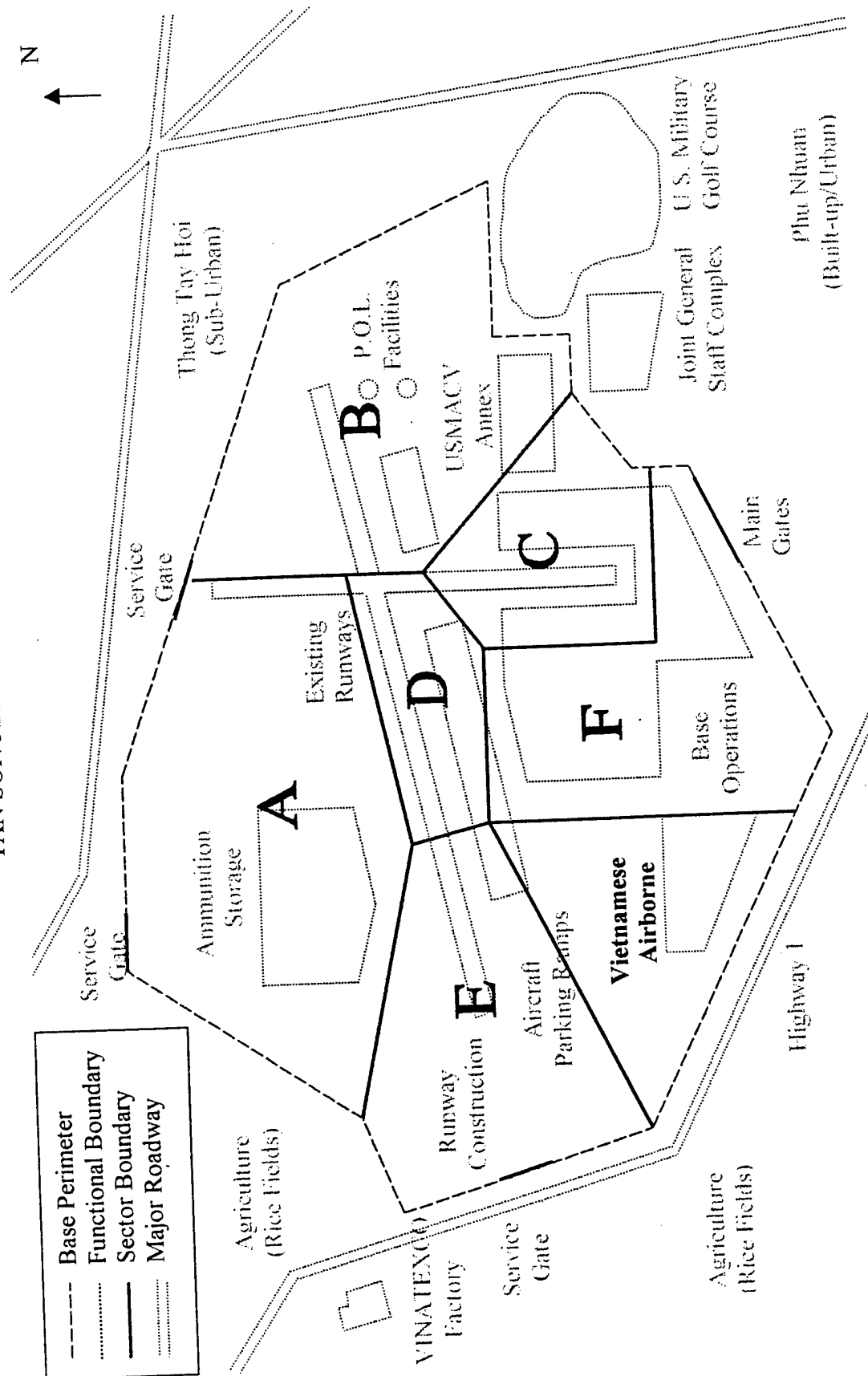
The Security Police divided the base into seven security sectors, six manned by the policemen and one by South Vietnamese Airborne troops. (See Figure 4 on page 38.) Each sector had various static perimeter positions, roving sentry-dog patrols, and a 3-man, immediate response Security Alert Team. The Security Police Central Security Control maintained other Security Alert Teams and a 12-man Reserve Security Alert Team for an additional immediate response capability. The policemen also organized 13-man Quick Reaction Teams, which could rapidly form and deploy.

⁴ Message regarding *Tet* 1968, from Frank Bracken to Benjamin Hettinga, July 2001.

⁵ *Survey of Physical Security and Base Defense Actions Concerning Southeast Asia Bases.*

⁶ *Air Base Defense*, page 148.

FIGURE 4
TAN SON NHUT AIR BASE



MORTAR BARRAGES

In late 1964 Viet Cong mortar shells fell on U.S. airmen for the first time.⁷ It would not be the last. In this new "standoff" tactic Communist forces fired mortars or recoilless rifles from some distance, inflicting substantial damage on combined-use air bases while evading defensive fire from the targeted air base. Taking advantage of the well-practiced art of camouflage and the uncontrolled countryside, the Communists struck at the time and place of their choosing.⁸ Thus, at little risk to themselves, small enemy forces inflicted heavy damage on U.S. personnel and combat resources. Given its psychological value, it was only a matter of time until the Viet Cong targeted Tan Son Nhut.

One month after the first mortar attack on a U.S. occupied air base, General Westmoreland asked the Joint Chiefs of Staff to approve deployment of eight countermortar radar sets and three ground surveillance radar sets to the Republic of Vietnam.⁹ The USMACV Commander was more than willing to commit U.S. technology to air base security.

But, in a December 1965 letter to all major commands, General Westmoreland clearly limited the U.S. human resources and training to be devoted to air base security.

⁷ On 1 November 1964, Viet Cong forces attacked Bien Hoa air base with six 81-mm mortars, killing four U.S. military personnel and injuring 30 others. This marked the first time U.S. forces had been specifically targeted by the Viet Cong.

⁸ The Vietnamese Communist forces had mastered the art of camouflage against the French, long before the United States entered the struggle. One account states, "in view of French mastery of the air, the Viet-Minh [Communist] troops had made a veritable fetish out of camouflage," and vividly continues:

The greatest pains would be taken even in safe rear areas to camouflage anything which could offer the French a suitable target. This constant emphasis on perfect camouflage, carried out relentlessly even when at rest, made the Communist soldier as well as the civilian population unbeatable masters at the game. The palm-leaf helmet of the Communist soldier with its constantly-worn camouflage net on it was the major trade-mark of the regular. In addition, every regular Viet-Minh soldier on the march carried a large wiremesh disk on his back and head, adorned with the foliage of the terrain through which he was passing. As soon as the terrain changed, it was the responsibility of each soldier to change the camouflage of the man ahead of him as the surroundings changed."

Bernard Fall, *Street without Joy: Insurgency in Vietnam 1946-1963*, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Stackpole Company, 1961, page 65.

⁹ USMACV Memorandum regarding Countermortar Radars, from the Assistant Chief of Staff/Operations to the USMACV Deputy Commander on 29 December 1964, as cited by Lieutenant Colonel Fox, page 104.

Reminiscent of the unrealistic "fighting air-groundmen" memorandum of the Second World War, the General Westmoreland pronounced:¹⁰

All of our soldiers and marines have had basic infantry training. Many Air Force and Navy men also have considerable talent and skill in this respect. In fact, the average American has demonstrated that he is instinctively an effective fighter with small arms [sic]... Obviously, therefore, we must call upon all of our troops to perform not only a defensive role around their installations, but also they must take certain additional measures which we all know to be essential in achieving real security. I have in mind the necessity for patrolling, for outposts and for reaction forces.

He continued, accordingly, to announce that all units were responsible for any needed organization, training, and exercising of local defense forces. These instructions undermined the development of a *dedicated* U.S. local defense force. In the same letter, General Westmoreland voiced his confidence that soldiers and airmen could perform both primary duties and additional security duties without significant detriment to primary mission effectiveness.

Following the first Viet Cong mortar attacks, the USAF also "expressed considerable concern about an attack on Tan Son Nhut" and "made considerable efforts to prepare for it."¹¹ These preparations largely consisted of USAF technical efforts to develop its own countermortar capability (the Joint Chiefs of Staff ultimately decided a second system was redundant and the task was best left to the U.S. Army, with U.S. Air Force technical assistance upon request).¹²

In December 1964, the Pacific Air Force Commander presented a package on air base security to the Commander-in-Chief of the Pacific. The package envisioned an extensive local defense force consisting of Vietnamese armed forces augmented by U.S. Army and/or U.S. Marine Corps units. The Commander-in-Chief, Pacific and USMACV completely quashed the Pacific Air Force concept. Nevertheless the package, "articulated, for the first time, the air base defense policy resolutely pursued by the USAF

¹⁰ Letter, from USMACV Commander to all major commands, 10 December 1965. Excerpts declassified from the appendices of *USAF Limited War Security-Defense Force*, APO San Francisco, California: USAF Inspector General, 25 January 1966, for the purposes of this study.

¹¹ *Attack Against Tan Son Nhut*.

¹² USAF briefing slides, May 1966. The request for organic Counter Mortar Capability was pending Air Staff approval in January 1966, but the Joint Chiefs of Staff delegated the responsibility explicitly to the U.S. Army.

throughout the war. That is, USAF security responsibility ended at the perimeter, and within that perimeter it was restricted to USAF resources."¹³ Specifically regarding security at Tan Son Nhut, the USAF maintained:

While internal base defenses were being continually reviewed and dry runs conducted to reveal weaknesses, it was understood that internal defenses could not prevent a mortar attack. Overall responsibility for the protection of Tan Son Nhut was vested in the Vietnamese Air Force... the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) and both regional and popular forces. Every effort was being made to get the responsible ARVN forces to aggressively control the perimeter area of the base out to the limits of mortar fire.¹⁴

In January 1965 the U.S. Air Force Chief of Staff instructed the Commander of the Pacific Air Force to "continue to press" for the employment of U.S. Army and U.S. Marine Corps forces for air base security in the Republic of Vietnam.¹⁵

Throughout this period, the Security Police at continued to request more men with better training. In February 1965, the Director of Security at Tan Son Nhut completed his assignment and filed his End-of-Tour Report. He was most pleased that Air Police manpower authorizations for internal security at Tan Son Nhut had improved (the number of Air Police/Security Police in the Republic of Vietnam would continue to increase until early-1967, see Appendix C).¹⁶ But regarding training, he expressed his dissatisfaction. The Security Police at Tan Son Nhut had to train new arrivals in such rudimentary skills as the use of individual weapons, including the M-16. He noted in his report:¹⁷

Training at the rate envisioned by Hq USAF [Headquarters, U.S. Air Force] is a practical impossibility... The ultimate solution to this problem is to ensure that all such training is the basic policy [and] that only fully qualified personnel are assigned here. This includes qualification in the appropriate weapon.

¹³ *Air Base Defense*, page 19.

¹⁴ *Attack Against Tan Son Nhut*.

¹⁵ Letter, from Chief of Staff Air Force to Pacific Air Force Commander, regarding: Air Base Security in RVN [Republic of Vietnam], 6 January 1965, as cited in *Air Base Defense*.

¹⁶ The Director of Security reported, "the reaction of higher headquarters to requests for additional personnel to man an expanding security mission has been most gratifying and timely." Major Raymond J. Hines, Director of Security and Law Enforcement for the Second Air Division, *End-of-Tour Report*, February 1965.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

Finally, although advocating the reservation of Security Police for internal defense, the Director of Security at Tan Son Nhut strongly expressed the need for a dedicated and well-trained local defense force.¹⁸

Also in 1965, security officers from the Second Air Division, Pacific Air Force, and the Inspector General's office initiated an in depth study on air base security. The group's task was, "to determine the type and size defense organization that will provide the USAF with an in-house capability to protect and defend tactical air resources."¹⁹

In January 1966—after consulting USMACV and various units deployed to Vietnam including the Air Police at Tan Son Nhut—the study group released the most comprehensive study of air base security produced during the Vietnam War.²⁰ The study explained air base security in terms of a limited-war environment, outlined vital local defense capabilities for such environments, and suggested a system capable of achieving those capabilities. Appropriately titled *USAF Limited War Security-Defense Force*, the study began by predicting that, in limited war situations:²¹

Guerrilla action will characterize the enemy effort and with it will be the very significant threats that will challenge... security and defense efforts to the limit. The range of enemy capabilities will be extended from simple sabotage through major unit attack of regimental scope. The USAF [U.S. Air Force] security and defense capability must be able to meet this challenge.

Like the Security Police at Tan Son Nhut, the study group recommended a dedicated air base security force. Specifically, they recommended the development of USAF "defense

¹⁸ The report stated:

In the final analysis... the external protection of air bases is critical to the internal security effort. With a constant threat of overt action by the Viet Cong to attack air bases by direct fire, with or without ground attack in force, and covert penetration... the defense in depth principle must be exploited to deny to enemy [sic] the opportunity to mount any such attack or combination of attacks... using US combat troops has been considered [by the U.S. Military Assistance Command], but not favorably at this time.

¹⁹ U.S. Air Force, Limited War Security Study Group, *Study: USAF Limited War Security-Defense Force*, APO San Francisco, California: USAF Inspector General, 25 January 1966.

²⁰ In addition to their own expertise, the study group consulted U.S. Military Assistance Command, U.S. Army Special Forces units, U.S. Army conventional units, U.S. Naval-Marine units, and U.S. Air Force Air Policemen at Tan Son Nhut and other U.S. air bases in the Republic of Vietnam.

²¹ *USAF Limited War Security-Defense Force*, Part I-General Situation.

battalions" and "defense companies" led by highly trained cadre. The study suggested the following:²²

The defense company must be sufficiently flexible to perform a static perimeter defense mission, an internal security mission, and perimeter defense mission or an external defense mission... [and be] organized, manned and equipped specifically to perform a base defense mission... Personnel identified as "Cadre" should receive a formal course of infantry training from either the US Marine Corps or the US Army, preferably that offered by the US Marines. Cadre personnel completing an appropriate level of Marine infantry training would in turn be capable of organizing and training a security-defense unit. Once organized, the training of this unit would require approximately three months to reach a desirable standard of combat proficiency providing a suitable training facility is available.

The USAF never incorporated the study group's suggestions into routine air base security operations in the Republic of Vietnam.²³

The first mortar attack against Tan Son Nhut occurred during the early hours of 13 April 1966. Around dusk of the previous evening a small Viet Cong force probably began moving from the Ly Van Manh area, southeast of the airfield, to predesignated weapons positions. A half-hour after midnight, the Viet Cong opened fire on Tan Son Nhut with at least three 75mm recoilless rifles and ten 81mm and 82mm mortars. For the duration of the thirteen-minute attack:²⁴

An operating counter-mortar radar (AN/N PQ4) set located on Tan Son Nhut failed to acquire a target during the attack (although muzzle flashes were sighted by the radar crew) as the Viet Cong mortar positions were closer than the minimum acquisition range.

Various other local defense forces also sighted the muzzle flashes of the mortars. Permission to react was "requested but not obtained."

During the barrage, no less than 245 rounds hit the base. Nine military personnel were killed, and 148 wounded. Two Vietnamese Air Force aircraft were destroyed, and sixty-two U.S. Air Force aircraft were damaged. Thirty-four U.S. Air Force vehicles

²² Ibid., Part IV-The Security-Defense Organization and Part V-Training.

²³ The development of special Combat Air Police Squadrons, or "Safe-side" units, for deployment to the Republic of Vietnam is discussed in the following section of this report.

²⁴ *Attack Against Tan Son Nhut.*

were damaged or destroyed, and a fuel storage tank exploded spectacularly and burned for three days.

An official U.S. Air Force post-attack report, *Attack Against Tan Son Nhut*, accurately described the barrage but seriously misrepresented the nature of air base security at Tan Son Nhut. The report listed only technical concerns when discussing the “most significant” lessons learned by base officials.²⁵ It recommended delegating human-oriented tasks to the South Vietnamese military, but endorsed technically-oriented actions.²⁶ Furthermore, many of the endorsed actions were obviously unsound; for example, increasing the number of counter-mortar radar sets at Tan Son Nhut—proven ineffective during the attack—by two.

SAPPER RAIDS

In the summer of 1965, the Viet Cong added a new tactic to their arsenal against U.S. air bases—sapper attacks. These raids used small numbers of highly disciplined combat engineers to inflict extensive damage on U.S. installations rather than casualties. Relying on undetected infiltration of the air base, sappers attempted to destroy preselected targets with explosive charges. The sappers were “elite units,” highly motivated, extremely well-trained, and practiced:²⁷

When formed and armed in accord with the attack plan, the sapper raiding party rehearsed the operation to acquaint each man with his specific task. Full use was made of sandtables, maps, diagrams, mockups, and terrain like that of the target area and its environs.

Once again, it was only a matter of time until sappers targeted Tan Son Nhut.

²⁵ The “most significant” lessons were listed as: Ground alert aircraft response time was not adequate; Alert aircraft should be physically removed from the threat zones and changed from day to day; Sufficient radar sets to provide coverage of all sectors containing potential hostile gun positions should be provided; And, U.S. Air Force security force radio network needed refinement with at least two frequencies exclusively for security operations. Ibid.

²⁶ Technical-oriented actions included: Increasing the number of radar sets located at Tan Son Nhut by two; More stringent controls on entrance and circulation within Tan Son Nhut. Actions evading or delegating human-oriented tasks to the South Vietnamese armed forces included: Increasing the primary defense forces in the outer belt by one additional Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) battalion; Relocating base camps of ARVN general reserve units to areas on the perimeter of or within the outer belt; Increasing Joint General Staff emphasis on ambush sites; And the assignment of two additional ARVN battalions to reduce and permanently occupy the Viet Cong base in the *Ly Van Manh* area. Ibid.

²⁷ *Air Base Defense*, page 50.

During the same summer, the USAF developed a new tactic in their defensive arsenal—a streamlined acquisitions program. The Southeast Asia Operational Requirement (SEAOR) program was created to expedite the development of new and improved operational capabilities for use in the Republic of Vietnam.²⁸ Within this program, tenant units deployed to the Republic of Vietnam identified and forwarded their immediate requirement, or SEAOR, directly to the USAF development and acquisitions divisions as well as Headquarters USAF for approval. Throughout the course of the Vietnam War, five SEAORs were approved regarding air base security.²⁹ The first of these, SEAOR 22, *Installation Detection Equipment*, was formally requested—in obvious reaction to preceding Viet Cong sapper assaults on U.S. air bases—in October 1965.³⁰

U.S. Military Assistance Command and the U.S. Army also continued to approach air base security as a technical problem. In October 1966, General Westmoreland sent a personal letter to the USMACV Science Advisor, stating:³¹

There are... some problems that do not appear to be solvable readily by known methods and that require the development of new techniques and methods. Listed below are a few areas wherein we have been less than successful in obtaining solutions to specific problems.

The aforementioned list included “area intrusion devices” and “defense against mortar attacks.”³² The USMACV Commander concluded his letter with an affirmation of his faith in technology:

It is my confident prediction that you will be able to influence attainment of timely solutions to the forgoing specific problems, and to facilitate overall progress in applying our nation’s vast scientific capability to on-going efforts to improve the combat effectiveness of MACV’s ground-sea-air team.

²⁸ Air Force Regulation 57-1, *Policies, Responsibilities, and Procedures for Obtaining New and Improved Operational Capabilities*, July 1965.

²⁹ Air Base Defense Programs Office.

³⁰ The first confirmed sapper assault occurred at Da Nang air base on 1 July 1965 in conjunction with a mortar attack. During the assault six aircraft were destroyed and three damaged.

³¹ Letter, General William C. Westmoreland, Commander MACV, to Dr. William G. McMillan, MACV Science Advisor, October 1966.

³² The complete list of MACV’s “less than successful” areas, as given by General Westmoreland, follows: Target acquisition in the jungle; Area intrusion devices; Tunnel detection, clearance and destruction; Stay behind devices for monitoring previously cleared but evacuated areas; Defense against command detonated mines; And defense against mortar attacks. *Ibid.*

During the same month, the U.S. Army initiated its own study on air base security, "to configure an evolutionary ground base defense system for use throughout the spectrum of counterinsurgency/limited war engagements."³³

While the USAF and USMACV pursued technological fixes and debated what institution was responsible for local defense forces, Air Police at Tan Son Nhut continued to stress the human side of air base security. Again, they asked for more men with better training and more authority to act.

In October 1966, one Security Police sergeant concluding his tour at Tan Son Nhut dryly observed that, "police manning left much to be desired."³⁴ He continued to explain how Quick Reaction Teams had to be manned by off-duty policemen, the policemen frequently worked for up to 21 days without time off, and increased alert conditions required policemen to remain on base even when they were not on-duty. The same End-of-Tour Report also highlighted the training needs of the undermanned local defense force, stating:³⁵

Police training should be revised to eliminate inconsequential subjects, [focusing instead on] positive training not conducted...such as M-60 and shotgun firing, QRT [Quick Reaction Team] deployment and team tactics, fields of fire, flare illumination, concealment, countering enemy infiltrators, observation techniques and map reading. A training program developed accordingly would be founded on actual not anticipated conditions. In summary, Air Police personnel should be taught and become proficient with those subjects which will help them perform their mission and preserve their lives.

At no point in the course of the report did the veteran policeman state the need for greater amounts of equipment or new technologies (in fact, the sergeant rather smugly noted that the existing defensive bunkers and main line of resistance at Tan Son Nhut were constructed from local material under the auspices of the Security Police Squadron's self-help program). The End of Tour Report concluded, "At present, many people who are

³³ *Project Proposal: Evolutionary Base Defense System*, Advanced Research Projects Agency, Research and Development Field Unit—Vietnam (RDFU—V), presented to the Director of the Advanced Research Project Agency on 26 October 1966.

³⁴ Chief Master Sergeant Robert T. Hitchman, Security Operations Sergeant for Tan Son Nhut air base, *End-of-Tour Report*, 22 October 1966.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

charged with the planning aspects of base security fail to rely upon or seek the advise of experienced security officers."³⁶

A month and a half later, on 4 December 1966, sappers struck Tan Son Nhut. During the attack, Viet Cong infiltrators successfully penetrated the perimeter defenses and one sentry dog post before being detected by a second sentry dog post.³⁷ Close-in defenders and Quick Reaction Teams responded to the alarm and eventually eliminated the entire raiding party, but not before the Viet Cong fired rocket propelled grenades directly at aircraft revetments, damaging twenty aircraft. The Security Police killed twenty-eight Viet Cong and captured four others; they lost three dead and fifteen wounded. The firefight also claimed the lives of three sentry dogs, and wounded another.³⁸

IMPROVISIONS

Following the sapper attack, the Security Police at Tan Son Nhut

ran an exercise or two... and it took forty-five minutes to roust the [Quick Reaction Teams] from the barracks and to get them armed, loaded up on the trucks, and then out into the various sectors where they would be deployed in the event of an attack.³⁹

Delays at the armory were slightly relieved when the Security Police received pre-signed gun cards that could be more quickly exchanged for weapons and ammunition, but unacceptable delays continued.⁴⁰ The policemen ultimately developed a remarkable, although logistically cumbersome, system to expedite the deployment of Quick Reaction Teams: Every night the security police would borrow 1½-ton trucks from the base civil engineers, line them up on the street in the cantonment area, and place placards with team numbers on the prepositioned trucks. Every night the Quick Reaction Teams would check out their gear from the armory, place the weapons, ammunition, grenades, flares, and handheld radios in a military casket, load the casket onto the team's assigned truck and cover the casket with a tarpaulin. From that point on,

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Perimeter lighting was not installed at Tan Son Nhut until after the 4 December 1966 attack.

³⁸ *Combat After Action Report*.

³⁹ Interview, Major Carl A. Bender, as cited in *The Battle for Saigon*, page 18.

at Tan Son Nhut, weapons and munitions used by Quick Reaction Forces were stored in metal "coffins" on the vehicles used for deployment of the... personnel to the alert area. The weapons were issued while enroute, guaranteeing the availability of usable weapons, saving time, and eliminating confusion.⁴¹

The vehicles had to be guarded, and every morning the policemen had to "unload those trucks, unload those caskets, clean every weapon, and put every weapon back in the armory," but they eventually "got the response time down to twelve minutes from [the] barracks area to any point on the perimeter."⁴²

The Security Police also petitioned for more realistic rules of engagement. In coordination with the Deputy Director of USMACV Combat Operations Center, Brigadier General William O. Quirey, the policemen, "drafted and won Joint General Staff acceptance of rules of engagement authorizing Tan Son Nhut defense forces to strike enemy targets instantly [without prior approval] under certain specified conditions."⁴³ (See Appendix D for Tan Son Nhut rules-of-engagement and guard orders.) Despite efforts to extend the rules to all USAF operating bases in South Vietnam, the Joint General Staff and USMACV granted this authority Tan Son Nhut only.

⁴⁰ Major Bender quite colorfully expressed the urgency of an armed response when, according to *The Battle for Saigon*, he stated, "Well, you give these gooks a forty-five-minute head start, there's no sense in going to the ball game because it's over." Ibid.

⁴¹ *Observations on Base Defense*, page 3-39.

⁴² Interview, Major Carl A Bender as cited in *The Battle for Saigon*, page 18.

⁴³ *Air Base Defense*, page 167.

SECTION 5

ON 31 JANUARY 1968: UNCOMFORTABLY CLOSE

Vietnamese guerillas incorporated tactical air base raids into their strategic planning long before the first U.S. military aircraft landed in South Vietnam. During their war against the French, the Communists consistently raided air bases. The raids

reached strategic importance during the battle of Dien Bien Phu when a Viet-Minh commando unit infiltrated the largest French air base... by crawling for more than a mile through the sewers. [The raiders] emerged directly in the aircraft parking area and attached explosive charges to eighteen of the transport planes vitally needed to supply the French garrison in the faraway fortress.¹

In their 1967-1968 winter-spring offensive, the Communists again incorporated air base assaults as an important element of their strategic planning. The Communists intended the 31 January 1968 regiment-sized assault on Tan Son Nhut to help them achieve another "decisive victory."

An analysis of the 31 January 1968 attack suggests that no technical arrangement of fences, barriers, or personnel could have stopped the Communist assailants. The multi-battalion assault force overran or bypassed every static position in their path. Nevertheless, the Security Police at Tan Son Nhut took extraordinary measures to ensure their policemen were, to the greatest degree possible, properly employed, realistically trained, and authorized to act, and the policemen repelled an attacking force of over 2,500 Viet Cong and North Vietnamese regulars.

¹ According to Bernard Fall in *Street without Joy*, page 263, the airbase was heavily fortified, surrounded by electrified barbed wire and mine-fields and watched even by infra-red devices, in addition to crack troops and watch dogs. By and incredible feat of raw courage and stamina, the Viet-Minh raiders (who would have helplessly drowned in the sewers had there been even light rain that night) emerged directly in the aircraft parking area and attached explosive charges to eighteen of the transport planes.

SITUATION

The Communists planned to launch the main military phase of their 1967-1968 winter-spring offensive in coordination with the most sacred of all Vietnamese holidays, the Lunar New Year, or *Tet*. During the annual holiday cease-fire, the insurgents intended to build up their military forces and inflame the revolutionary fervor of the South Vietnamese population. Immediately following *Tet*, the military planned to launch a "general offensive" against major cities, spurring the population to a "general uprising" against the South Vietnamese government and the U.S. military. In November, the Communist leadership

announced that they would observe an *extended* truce period over the holiday periods. There would be a three-day cease-fire for Christmas, three days for New Year, and a seven-day truce for the *Tet* holiday... [during which the Communists intended] to move troops and supplies.²

In December, they initiated a large diversionary campaign near the North Vietnamese border, massing large numbers of troops at the Khe Sanh outpost to draw U.S. forces away from urban areas in the South. The Communists fully expected their proposed extension to be accepted "because of U.S. receptiveness to... contacts, and because the [U.S.] appeared ready to accept almost anything to get negotiations started."³

Nevertheless, U.S. intelligence efforts in South Vietnam predicted some sort of near-term "concentrated offensive effort" by the Communists, and USMACV was strongly against the extended cease-fire. Against the objections of U.S. politicians, the USMACV Commander, General Westmoreland, curtailed the annual truce to 36-hours. USMACV

did not put much faith in the ability of the [Communists] to launch a coordinated countrywide attack on the urban areas of South Vietnam, or a concept as implausible as the people of South Vietnam rising up and overthrowing the government.⁴

But USMACV "could see a real threat taking shape" near the North Vietnamese border, at Khe Sanh.⁵ Members of President Lyndon B. Johnson's administration would argue to reverse the decision, but the situation developing near the North Vietnamese border

² *Tet 1968: Understanding the Surprise*, page 101.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*, page 104.

⁵ *Ibid.*

would ultimately decide the issue. General Westmoreland's decision to limit the truce to 36-hours was upheld.

USMACV's opposition to the extended holiday cease-fire ultimately forced the Communist leadership to change their original plan and attack date, but they believed the offensive could still be salvaged. The revised order was to attack on the first day of the Lunar New Year, or 31 January. By attacking during the sacred *Tet* festival, the Communists hoped to achieve surprise and maintain the initiative.

PREPARATIONS

Anticipating the possibility of a Tet attack, the leadership of the Security Police Squadron at Tan Son Nhut implemented a practice exercise to test the base defense forces' response capabilities. The drill was appropriately referred to as *Exercise TET*. In accordance with official intelligence estimates, the drill's worst-case scenario envisioned a large stand-off attack and a coordinated ground attack. The notional enemy, also in accordance with intelligence estimates, had a strength of not more than one reinforced battalion, or approximately 500 men. Practice condition YELLOW was initiated on 27 January 1968. (See Appendix E for additional information on Security Alert Conditions.) The exercise

was designed to test the capabilities of all security forces assigned to the [Tan Son Nhut] sensitive area. The 051-Gate [in Echo Sector which covered the west side of the air base], considered the most vulnerable point of the perimeter and the anticipated enemy avenue of approach from the Cambodian border, was selected as the practice enemy point of penetration...⁶

It went relatively well. At the conclusion of the drill, the Security Police Squadron Commander, Lieutenant Colonel Billy Jack Carter, and other combined security-force commanders thoroughly critiqued the unsatisfactory aspects in the Joint Defense Operations Center.

Two nights later, on 30 January 1968, isolated guerilla units attempted to initiate the "general offensive" a day early at various locations near the North Vietnamese border.

⁶ *Combat After Action Report*, page 3, as found in the *History of the 377th Combat Support Group: 1 January - 31 March 1968, Volume II*.

Unbeknownst to the Security Police, calendars were to blame. According to the South Vietnamese calendar, the official first day of the Lunar New Year was 30 January, one day earlier than in North Vietnam, where they were using the old calendar. Because of the confusion, several Viet Cong units violated the *Tet* cease-fire prematurely.⁷

At 10:00 a.m., in light of the enemy aggression and "some gut feelings that *something* might happen," Lieutenant Colonel Carter increased the Security Police alert condition to GREY.⁸ An increased number of policemen appeared on-duty, and several Quick Reaction Teams (QRTs) established encampments at various locations throughout the base. Furthermore, according to an un-official interview, Lieutenant Colonel Carter authorized the Security Policemen on duty to immediately return fire if fired upon. Lieutenant Colonel Carter and Major Bender were, "sticking their necks out until... RED alert was declared."⁹ At 5:30 p.m., it was. At that time, the Seventh Air Force Commander, General William H. Momyer ordered all security forces under his command to assume security condition RED (Option I). Every policeman in Southeast Asia was to assume attack was imminent. Communist scouts could observe any actions taken by the Security Police at Tan Son Nhut, so the policemen

dummied up the trucks and had them sitting in the cantonment area like normal—but [the Security Police] had sneaked the QRTs out on foot.

[The reaction teams] took the blankets off their cots, and the word was, 'Roll up and sleep. If nothing happens, we'll bring you back at dawn.'¹⁰

At dusk the selected Quick Reaction Teams moved to their pre-positioned encampments.

ACTION

At 3:00 a.m., the Security Police and other security personnel at Tan Son Nhut received messages from the U.S. Embassy and the Saigon Radio Station—both were under attack. Five minutes later, notice arrived that the Vietnamese Joint General Staff compound, just outside the air base perimeter, was also under attack. Security personnel

⁷ In their attack order, the Communist leadership specified the offensive begin on the first day of *Tet*, not a specific date. The field units in close contact with leadership elements were using the new North Vietnamese calendar and attacked on the 31st. Those at the end of the command and control network were using the old South Vietnamese calendar, and struck on the 30th. *Tet 1968: Understanding the Surprise*.

⁸ Interview, Major Carl A. Bender with Keith W. Nolan as quoted in *The Battle for Saigon*, page 19.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid, 20.

in the Joint Defense Operations Center initiated alert condition RED (Option I) for the entire base.¹¹ All security commanders reported to Joint Defense Operations Center; the Security Police briefed their remaining Quick Reaction Teams and Task Force-35 augmentees on the situation and dispatched several additional teams to pre-designated rendezvous points.

Twenty minutes later, at 3:20, a USAF Security Policeman reported the first enemy fire into Tan Son Nhut. Originating from an off-base location, the small arms fire targeted the petroleum, oil, and lubricant storage facilities on the east side of the air base. Vietnamese security troops reported receiving similar fire at Gate No. 2, on the south side of the base. At the Joint Defense Operations Center the Squadron Operations Officer, Major Carl A. Bender, dispatched three Security Alert Teams in response.¹²

Hostile units, ranging from squad to battalion size, promptly applied pressure at nine points around the base perimeter.¹³ (See Figure 5 on page 54.) But, the weight of the assault fell on Tan Son Nhut's vulnerable west side, in Echo Sector.

The VINATEXCO Factory, just outside Tan Son Nhut's west perimeter fence and across Highway 1, served as the Communist staging area and headquarters. Prior to the assault, a North Vietnamese Mortar Battalion had prepared 12 mortar positions on the north, west, and east sides of the Factory. At 3:30 they began their barrage. When Echo Sector's 051-Bunker reported grenades and mortar rounds falling just short of the western base perimeter, Major Bender instructed two Security Alert Teams and the 12-man Reserve Security Alert Team to respond.¹⁴

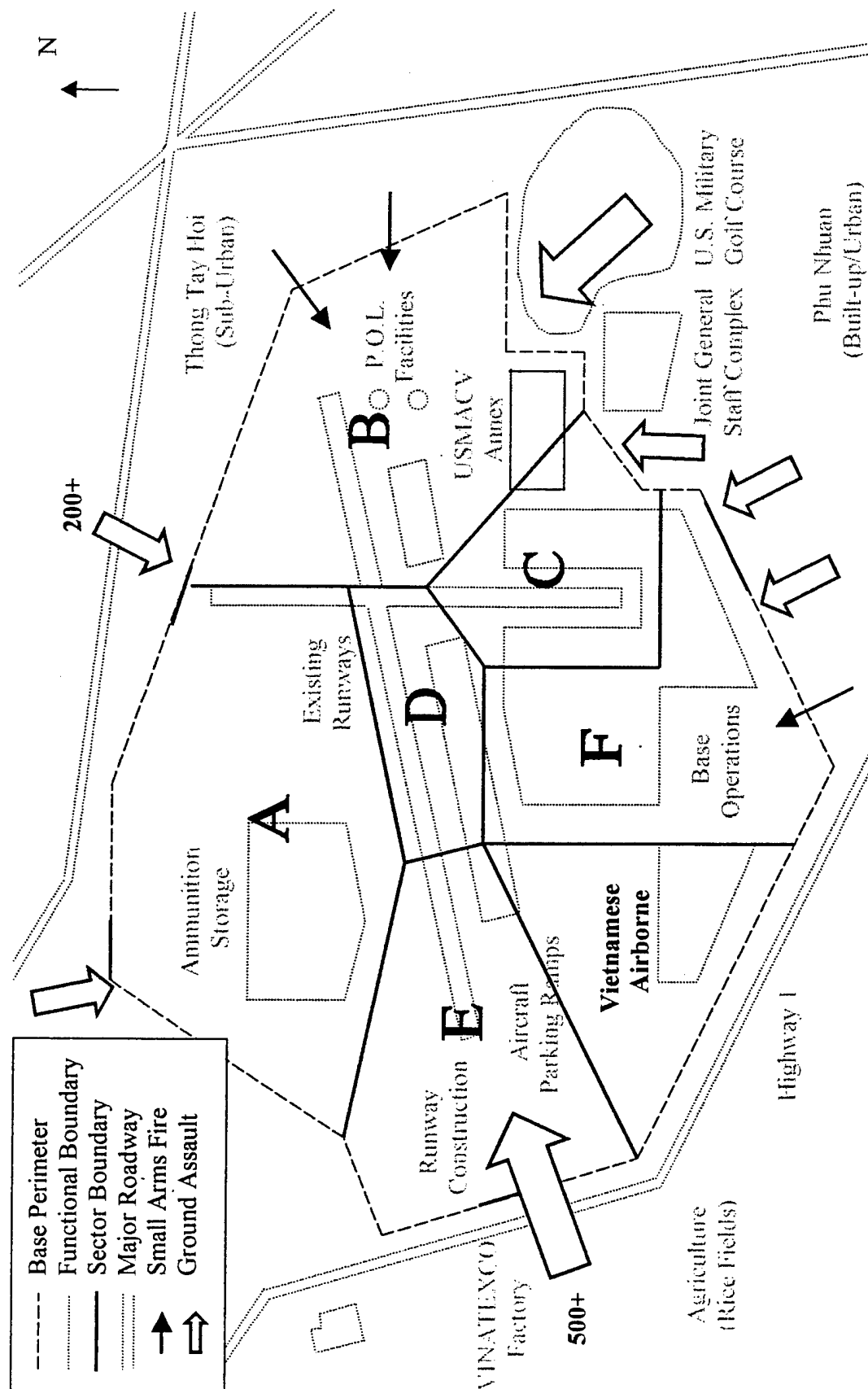
¹¹ Prior to that time, all security forces were in condition YELLOW with the exception of the Security Police Squadron which was in condition RED.

¹² Bravo SAT and an additional SAT from Central Security Control responded to the petroleum, oil, and lubricants facilities. Foxtrot SAT moved to reinforce the gate.

¹³ *Security Police Squadron History*, page 7.

¹⁴ In addition to the Echo SAT, the initial forces responding to the west side of the base included one additional SAT from Central Security Control and the Reserve Security Alert Team (RSAT).

FIGURE 5
COMMUNIST ATTACKS, 31 JANUARY 1968



Soon after, Vietnamese Army sentries encamped southwest of Tan Son Nhut “gave the alarm that several hundred men were moving west to east,” toward the base. A few minutes later, the Vietnamese sentries reported “hearing the sound of automatic weapons fire from the direction of the airfield.”¹⁵

The Vietnamese sentries overheard the first Communist troops firing onto Tan Son Nhut as they emerged from a tree line just 100-meters west of the perimeter fence. The Security Police inside the 051-Bunker saw them. One of the five USAF policemen manning the bunker “reported he observed approximately twenty-five individuals east of the first tree line... directing small arms and automatic weapons fire toward the west perimeter.”¹⁶

In accordance with USMACV policy—do not fire unless fired upon—the policemen in static positions along the western perimeter fence and in the responding Security Alert Teams returned the enemy fire. The M-60 machinegun on the roof of the 051-Bunker spewed forth a devastating grazing fire. But the communists in and around the VINATEXCO Factory adjusted their cover fire, and mortar rounds began landing on base. One round hit the 051-Bunker, forcing the Security Police from the sandbagged roof into the hardened bunker below.

As the defenders and assaulting force exchanged fire, a Lambretta scooter-taxi appeared on National Highway 1 and proceeded directly into the firefight. The scooter-taxi carried a team of Communist sappers; upon approaching the fence line,

the sapper elements dismounted the vehicle and detonated what is believed to have been a Bangalore Torpedo on the fence line. The explosion opened a section of the outer perimeter fence, and the breach was used continuously by the enemy forces for entry onto the installation. The same elements... remained with the initial assault force and penetrated the perimeter.¹⁷

Despite the scooter-taxi's suspicious appearance and route,

¹⁵ The guards were posted at the northern bunker of the 53rd Vietnamese Regional Forces Battalion Compound. *Battle Description*, page 2, as recorded in the *History of the 377th Combat Support Group: 1 January – 31 March 1968, Volume II*, Combat Operations After Action Report, Attachment 1.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Combat After Action Report*, page 6. A bangalore torpedo is a long tubular explosive charge, usually assembled from several segments and inserted under or through barbed wire defenses to blow a gap in them.

MACV Rules of Engagement had prevented the Security Policemen in the 051-Bunker from firing on the sapper unit, which had driven up to the fenceline... as the unit had not exhibited hostile intent prior to exploding its Bangalore torpedos [sic].¹⁸

Policemen in the 051-Bunker duly announced that enemy forces were infiltrating the base through a gaping hole near the service gate on the west perimeter fence. (See Figure 6 on page 57.)

Defying commonly held assumptions, the "assault battalion which hit the west end [of Tan Son Nhut] was superior to the defense forces not only in numbers but in firepower."¹⁹ Nonetheless, the Security Policemen in the 051-Bunker held their position and prevented a majority of the assaulting force from exploiting the breach in the perimeter.²⁰ As ammunition expired, fire slowed from the strongpoint. The enemy ultimately silenced the bunker with "two direct hits from RPG-2 or RPG-7 rockets, which killed four of the five Security Policemen inside," and seriously wounded the sole survivor.²¹ The assailants overran the bunker and turned the rooftop M-60 machinegun inward to cover their continuing advance.

But the heroic delaying action of the men in the 051-Bunker permitted a Quick Reaction Team and two platoons of Task Force-35 augmentees pre-positioned in Echo sector to organize themselves on a north-south line, "to preclude further enemy infiltration to the east."²² The blocking force deployed far enough west to obstruct the infiltrators' approach to Tan Son Nhut's otherwise exposed runways and vulnerable interior, including the assortment of unarmed support personnel.

¹⁸ *Security Police Squadron History*, page 8.

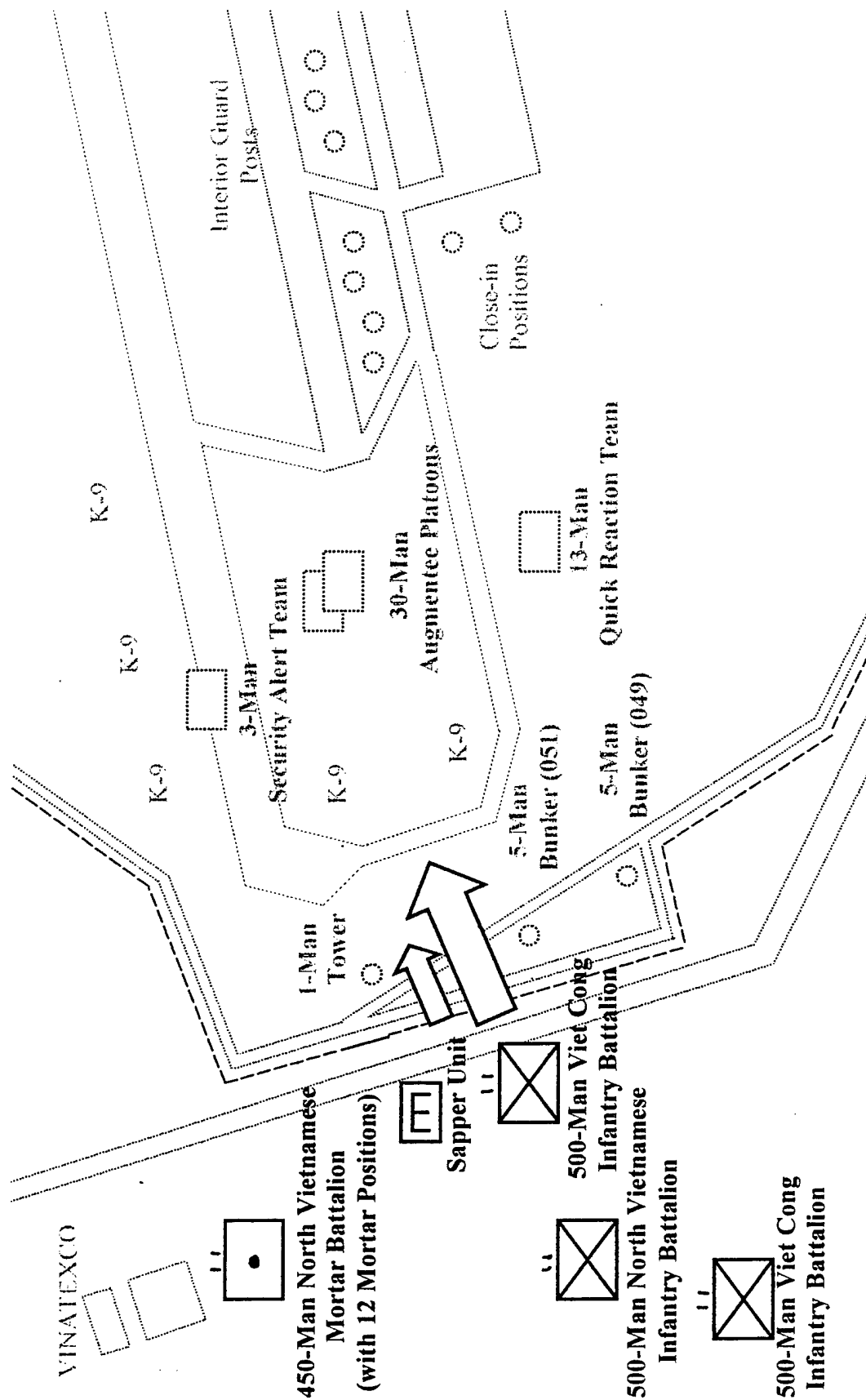
¹⁹ Emphasis added. Ibid.

²⁰ On his way to the Central Security Control, Major Bender found one of the main gates abandoned by Vietnamese Army soldiers. Under fire, Major Bender organized covering fire and led an advance to the empty guard post. Security Police recovered a Browning Automatic Rifle, also abandoned by the Vietnamese defenders, and put it into action against the standoff attackers, until the gate was secured.

²¹ *Security Police Squadron History*, pages 8 and 16.

²² *Battle Description*, page 5.

FIGURE 6
COMMUNIST ASSAULT ON ECHO SECTOR, 31 JANUARY 1968



Although not as desperate as the combat in Echo Sector, a remarkable encounter also occurred just outside Tan Son Nhut's southeast perimeter. Under the cover of darkness, four hundred Viet Cong and North Vietnamese soldiers advanced past bunkers and entrapments as they made their way through the U.S. military golf course—a natural avenue of advance, easily traversed and with some cover—and toward the Headquarters of U.S. Military Assistance Command.²³ Just before 4:00 in the morning, an explosive round landed near Gate No. 10, adjacent to the USMACV annex, and “within two or three minutes heavy enemy small arms, automatic weapons fire, and RPG-2 rocket fire was being directed at the friendly positions all along the Gate-10 area.”²⁴

In response USMACV released a full U.S. Army rifle company, approximately 150 infantry soldiers, to retake the course.²⁵ The golf course changed hands several times during the morning. But through it all, the USAF policemen posted at Gate No. 10 diligently anchored the U.S. Army's advances and retreats over the greens and through the rough.

Smaller forces, ranging from 100 to 200 men, probed the base perimeter near the main gate and along the north side. But—excluding the break in the western perimeter fence—Security Police denied the attackers access to the air base.

REACTION

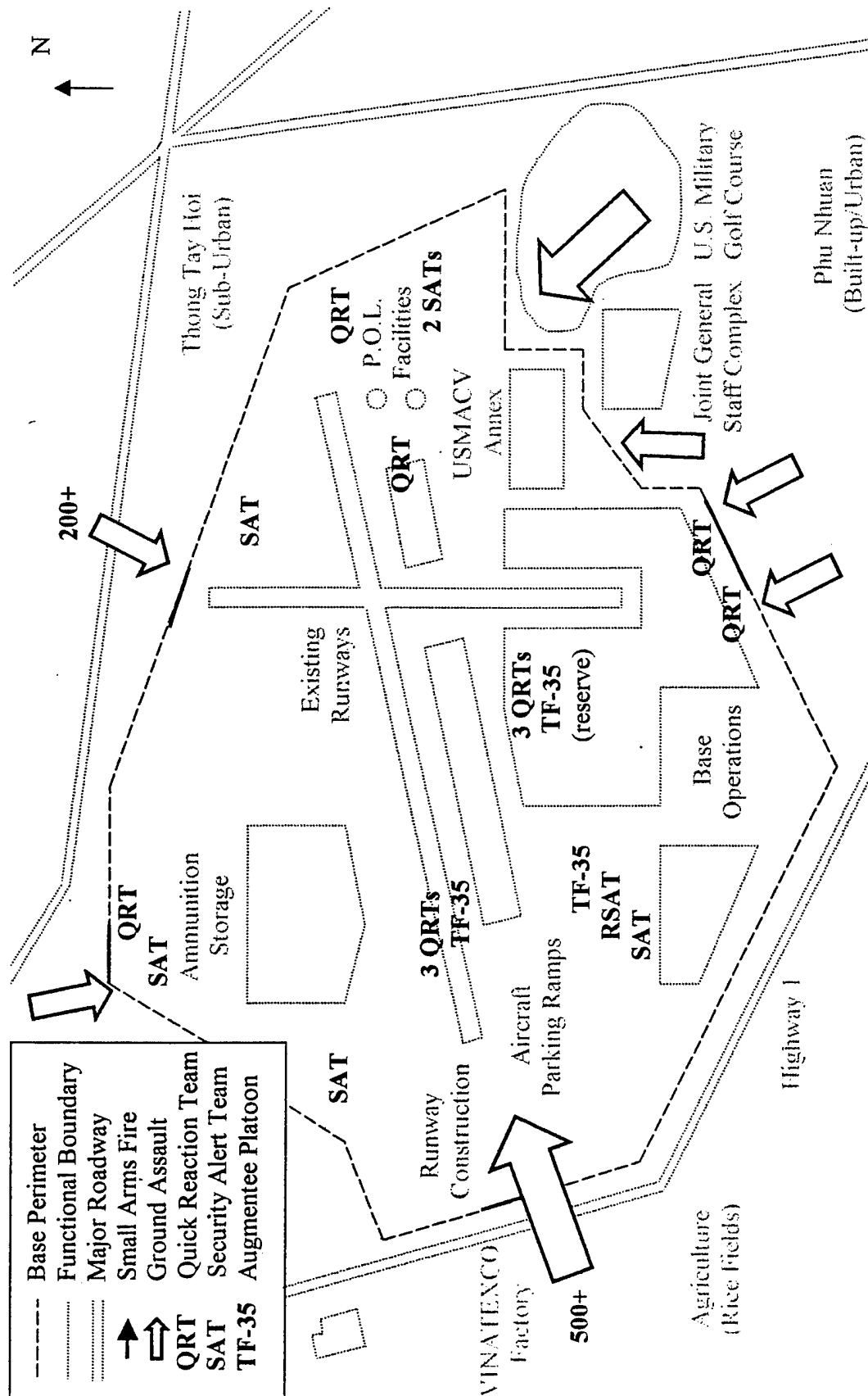
Policemen in Central Security Control continued to dispatch various Security Police elements in response to weapons fire and enemy probes at various locations outside Tan Son Nhut's 12-mile perimeter. (See Figure 7 on page 59.) One Security Alert Team and one Quick Reaction Team departed for Alpha sector; two Security Alert Teams and a Quick Reaction Team positioned themselves near the petroleum, oil, and lubricants storage facilities in Bravo sector, and another Security Alert Team headed for the northeast perimeter gate also in Bravo sector; and two Quick Reaction Teams disembarked for Foxtrot sector and the main gate area.

²³ U.S. Army Map Service, Far East, *Sai Gon (Saigon)*, Series L909 map and Security Police Squadron, after-action briefing map.

²⁴ *Battle Description*, page 3.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, page 5.

FIGURE 7
TAN SON NHUT REACTION FORCES, 31 JANUARY 1968



Central Security Control also threw two additional Quick Reaction Teams into Echo sector, to buttress the blocking line. The rash of dispatches nearly depleted the reserve of security forces, leaving the Security Police with just one 13-man Quick Reaction Team and one 30-man platoon of Task Force-35 augmentees.²⁶

South Vietnamese commanders mustered whatever forces they could find. At 4:15, the Commander of Vietnamese Army security forces committed one Vietnamese Army Airborne platoon with two U.S. advisors to Echo sector.²⁷ Around 5:00 a.m. the Deputy Commander of the Tan Son Nhut sensitive area, a Major in the Vietnamese Air Force,

arrived at [the area of penetration] with three light tanks and began firing into the enemy positions near the 051 Gate. Within fifteen minutes, two of the three tanks were destroyed by RPG-2 or RPG-7 rockets and the third was forced to withdraw to the east... [the Major] was wounded by one of the rocket explosions and evacuated.²⁸

The tanks were part of the personal security force of South Vietnamese Vice President Nguyen Cao Ky. Although no official history confirms it, interviews with at least one U.S. policeman on the scene suggest the South Vietnamese tanks, in addition to engaging the enemy, were firing into friendly positions near the 051-Gate, "just sweeping around with that .50-cal [.50-caliber machine gun] and popping off main rounds."²⁹

South Vietnamese Army patrols nearby Tan Son Nhut called in a U.S. Army helicopter gunship Light Fire Team (LFT) to one enemy staging point outside the air base perimeter.

The LFT strafed the area with MG [machine-gun] and rocket fire. A subsequent search of the area revealed five [enemy dead] at the location of the fire-fight and sixty-five [enemy dead] in the field surrounding the scene. It is believed that this unit was the reinforcing elements for the attack on the airfield.³⁰

Nevertheless, enemy replacements continued to pour through Tan Son Nhut's western perimeter fence. Security Police in Central Security Control

contacted the Joint Defense Operations Center (JDOC) for light fire team support on base, but [were] refused because the enemy forces were too

²⁶ *Battle Description*, page 5.

²⁷ The platoon was part of the Vietnamese Army's 2nd Services Battalion.

²⁸ *Battle Description*, page 5.

²⁹ Interview with Major Carl A. Bender, U.S. Air Force, as cited in *The Battle for Saigon*.

³⁰ *Battle Description*, page 5.

close to friendly positions and the choppers could not distinguish between friendly and hostile positions.³¹

Because U.S. Air Force security forces did not have radios capable of communicating with U.S. Army helicopters, Joint Defense Operations Center delayed desperately needed fire support for approximately forty-five minutes.³²

Just before 5:30 in the morning—a full two hours after the assault began—Capital Military District authorized Tan Son Nhut's 105-mm guns to fire at enemy positions outside the base perimeter. At that time,

[Tan Son Nhut] artillery received clearance to fire [High Explosive] rounds into the enemy position west of the perimeter... [Vietnamese Army] Services Battalion 81-mm mortars were also cleared to fire and engage the enemy outside the perimeter fence.³³

Both elements directed their fire at enemy staging positions west of Highway 1, finally interrupting the previously incessant flow of enemy troops into Tan Son Nhut.

Those Viet Cong and North Vietnamese assailants already inside the perimeter fence—an estimated reinforced battalion—occupied an area about 300 meters wide and reaching 600 meters into air base; but their westward thrust, into Tan Son Nhut's vital center, was over. The makeshift defensive line manned by Security Policemen and Task Force-35 augmentees effectively blocked the enemy's planned assault route. Fire from the defensive positions efficiently cut down those who persisted in the advance.

"Although outnumbered at least four to one and facing superior firepower," the Security Policemen and augmentees "maintained steady, well-disciplined fire and blunted the Viet Cong penetration."³⁴

The policemen's "three-day supply" of ammunition was exhausted in less than two hours, but the armory non-commissioned officer, Technical Sergeant Robert L. Landis, sent a team out to the ammunition dump to get an initial resupply. Sergeant Landis then requested and obtained more ammunition from other bases, and with the assault in progress, supervised armory personnel and augmentees loading magazines with some

³¹ Emphasis added. Ibid, page 4.

³² *Security Police Squadron History*, page 9.

³³ *Battle Description*, page 6.

³⁴ Furthermore, "many personnel in the squadron cited their in-country training as a major factor in enabling them as individuals and the squadron as a unit to perform as well as they did." *Security Police Squadron History*, page 9.

500,000 rounds.³⁵ Security Police Captain Carl B. DeNisio recalled that the men were “burning ammo,” but they “had weapons carriers and trucks and jeeps, and there was [sic] plenty of munitions being brought up, plenty of munitions...”³⁶

When a Security Policeman sighted enemy troops moving north inside the base perimeter, Central Security Control dispatched a Sector Security Alert Team and two Quick Reaction Teams to deploy on an east-west line, north of the main infiltration, “to block any enemy movement to the north.”³⁷ Shortly thereafter, two companies of Vietnamese Airborne Battalion troops moved in from the south and similarly formed an east-west line, blocking enemy movement in that direction. By 6:00 in the morning, the assailants “could not move to the north, they could not move to the south. They were funneled.”³⁸ (See Figure 8 on page 63.) Some Communist soldiers withdrew through the break in the perimeter fence.

During the early morning action, the senior advisor of Capital Military District informed the senior advisor at Tan Son Nhut that Major General Ware, U.S. Army, was in command of all U.S. forces in the Capital Military District. General Ware immediately placed a troop of U.S. Army armored cavalry, assigned to the 25th Infantry Division and located just north of Saigon at Cu Chi, under Tan Son Nhut’s operational control; furthermore, he informed the beleaguered defenders that the cavalry was already in route and using Tan Son Nhut’s command radio frequency.³⁹ The unit was C-troop of the 3rd Battalion, 4th Armored Cavalry Regiment (3/4 Armored Cavalry) under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Glenn Otis, the battalion commander.

³⁵ *Squadron History*, page 39.

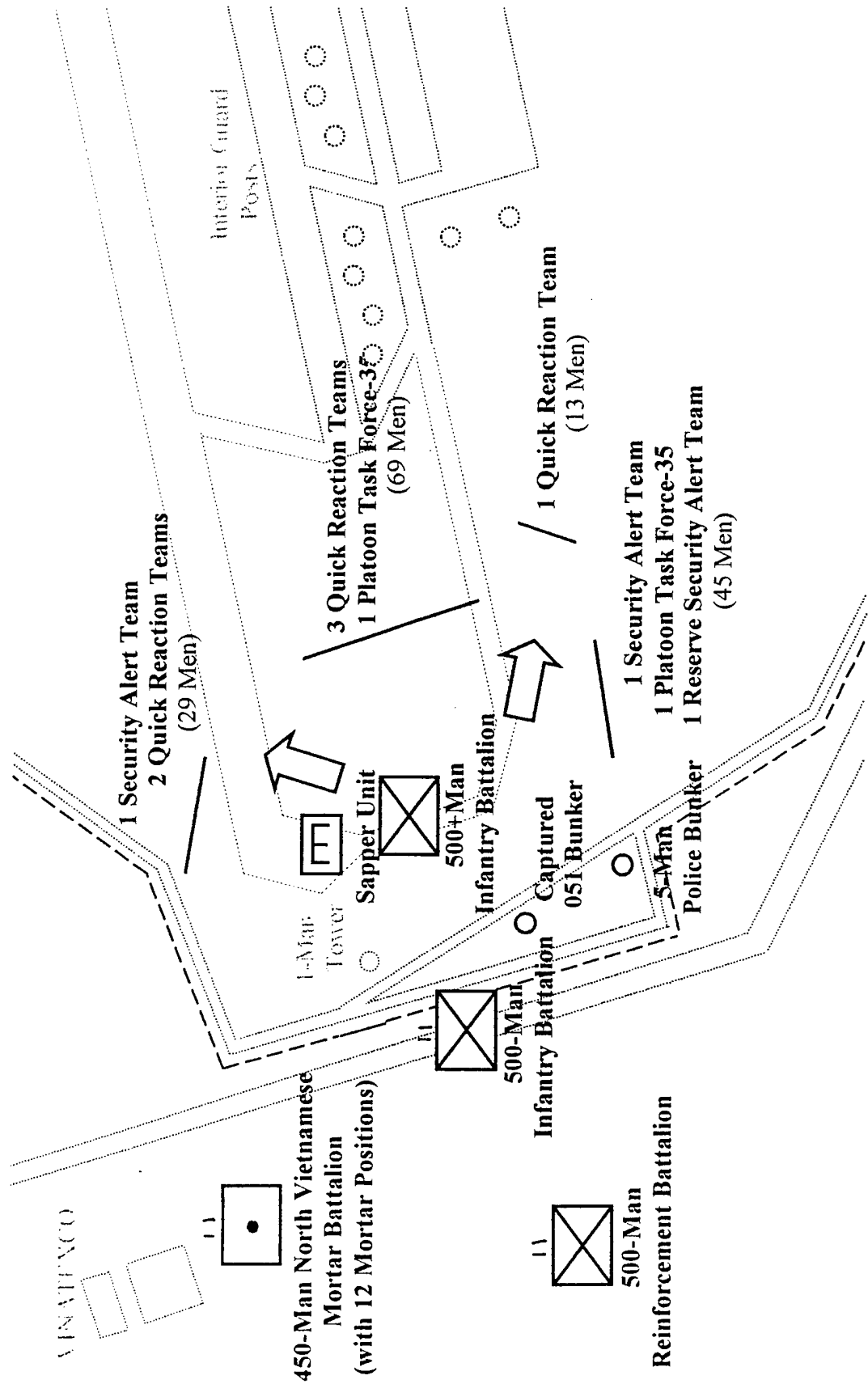
³⁶ Interview with Captain Carl B. DeNisio, U.S. Air Force, as quoted in *The Battle for Saigon: Tet 1968*, page 33.

³⁷ *Battle Description*, page 5.

³⁸ Captain DeNisio, as quoted in *The Battle for Saigon*, page 33.

³⁹ *Battle Description*, page 6.

FIGURE 8
ECHO SECTOR REACTION FORCES, 31 JANUARY 1968



COUNTERATTACKS

After fighting their way down Highway 1, C-Troop 3/4 Armored Cavalry approached from the northwest and drove into the attacking Communist forces outside the perimeter at 6:30 in the morning.⁴⁰ Communist reinforcing elements using Rocket Propelled Grenades attacked the vehicles within sight of air base. Supported by the battalion's helicopter gunships, C-Troop did "frightful damage" and a few vehicles made it as far as the perimeter fence, but the communists effectively destroyed the troop.⁴¹ "Although it suffered heavy casualties in an ambush from a row of houses just north of the gate, the troop pushed through and hit the Viet Cong in the north flank, distracting their attention from the Security Police main defense line," and Lieutenant Colonel Otis ordered a second armored cavalry troop to proceed directly down Highway-1 to Tan Son Nhut.⁴²

The diversion enabled the Security Police to mount a counterattack from within Tan Son Nhut. It began with two companies of South Vietnamese Airborne in conjunction with Security Police units and augmentees located north and east of the enemy positions.

The initial drive met fierce resistance after advancing approximately 100 meters, and... was forced to hold and call in more [artillery and helicopter gunship] support... The counterattack moved slowly toward the west perimeter as the advancing friendly troops were pinned down frequently by heavy enemy fire.⁴³

The second U.S. Army armored cavalry troop, B-Troop 3/4 Armored Cavalry, with an attached artillery battery firing in support, relieved much of the pressure when they arrived on the scene at approximately 9:00 a.m. The additional U.S. tanks "attacked the enemy flank from the north with all units on line just outside of the base perimeter."⁴⁴

This action relieved the pressure of the penetration and completely occupied the enemy exploitation force... with support from the Cav units

⁴⁰ Ibid. page 7.

⁴¹ Eric M. Bergerud, *Red Thunder, Tropic Lightning: The World of a Combat Division in Vietnam*, Boulder Colorado: Westview Press, 1993, pages 167 to 169, as cited in Lieutenant Colonel John F. Guilmartin, U.S. Air Force, *Vietnam Chronology and Atlas*, unpublished, pages 86 and 87.

⁴² *Security Police Squadron History*, page 11.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid. page 10.

and their artillery and constant fire support from Light Fire Teams, the counterattacking forces slowly gained momentum.⁴⁵

Lieutenant Colonel Otis used his command and control helicopter to deliver ammunition to the defense forces inside the base perimeter.⁴⁶

Security Police pressed successfully from the north. South Vietnamese Airborne troops, under heavy fire from the captured 051-Bunker, made no progress. The strongpoint was "the last area inside the base perimeter held by the enemy... [as] several sweeps were made within the area to the north to insure no living enemy remained."⁴⁷ U.S. Army tanks and helicopter gunships attempted to destroy the enemy-held position, but failed. Friendly forces ultimately neutralized the captured strong-point just after noon, when a Security Policeman successfully hurled a hand grenade into the bunker. Less than ten minutes later, "the breach was closed and the perimeter was secured."⁴⁸

Fire from around the VINATEXCO Factory continued for several hours. Finally, at 9:00 p.m., USMACV authorized air strikes on the factory buildings. Initial strikes by the Vietnamese Air Force and a number of "strikes by [USAF] F-100's resulted in ninety-five percent destruction of the factory" and secondary explosions. A subsequent search of the rubble revealed a large weapons cache and over 150 enemy bodies—among the dead were seven North Vietnamese pilots and fifteen North Vietnamese aircraft technicians.⁴⁹

For the first time since late 1965, a significant number of U.S. Army troops were committed to the defense of Tan Son Nhut—about 2,500 in all. By the day's end, one troop of U.S. armored cavalry and three battalions of U.S. infantry were placed under Tan Son Nhut's operational control. Two additional U.S. Army companies took up positions around USMACV Headquarters.⁵⁰ At that time Tan Son Nhut's policemen reported, perhaps overstating the obvious, that "the base was considered secure."⁵¹

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ *Red Thunder, Tropic Lightning*, page 170. as cited in *Vietnam Chronology and Atlas*, pages 88 and 89.

⁴⁷ *Security Police Squadron History*, page 10.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ *Combat After Action Report*, page 7.

⁵⁰ The units under Tan Son Nhut's control included: A-Troop, 1st Squadron, 4th Cavalry, 1st Division, the 2nd Battalion, 27th Regiment, 25th Division, the 1st Battalion, 18th Regiment, 1st Division (less one company), and the 2nd Battalion, 327th Regiment, 101st Airborne Division (less one company). Those

AFTER ACTION

After the assault, Seventh Air Force noted that Tan Son Nhut had been “uncomfortably close” to being overrun, and ordered a 400-man increase in augmentation of the defense forces at the declaration of RED (Option I). The Seventh Air Force Commander, General Momyer personally directed actions to ensure that *all* units at Tan Son Nhut would be able to arm *all* their personnel on short notice in the event of Condition RED (Option II).⁵² Both changes “were directed by higher headquarters, and both created problems” for the Security Police Squadron.⁵³ To begin with, the increased augmentation created a huge additional workload for the Security Police squadron. Moreover, the frequent deployment of recently armed yet untrained and undirected support personnel was inherently dangerous.

On one occasion... a firefight actually broke out between the 69th Signal Battalion and the 58th Transportation Company, two U.S. Army tenant units located on the southeast side of the base. The two units, each apparently mistaking the other for a hostile force, used small arms, automatic weapons, and slap flares (one of which misfired and started a grass fire).⁵⁴

Fortunately, there were no casualties during the intramural firefight. Seventh Air Force’s hasty orders were perhaps somewhat extreme. While general arming of non-combatant personnel was indeed desirable in the event the air base was being overrun, but was equally *undesirable* if those conditions did not exist.

guarding USMACV headquarters included one company of the 2nd Battalion, 327th Regiment, 101st Airborne Division and one of the 1st Battalion, 18th Regiment, 1st Division.

⁵¹ *Battle Description*, page 12.

⁵² The revisions to the Security Police base defense plan, ordered by Seventh Air Force, were applicable to the annexes governing Security Condition RED (Option I) and RED (Option II). The former, according to the plan, is declared when the base is under attack from a known enemy force [of any kind]; the second, when the base is either being overrun or is in imminent danger of being overrun. In practice, the 377th [Combat Support Group] augmentees would be called out only in the event of a large-scale ground attack, but Condition RED (Option I) does not differentiate between large and small attacks or between rocket and ground attacks. Thus, many occasions might arise when the squadron defense forces or even the entire base might be in Condition RED without the augmentees being called out.

Also see Appendix E. *Security Police Squadron History*, pages, 27 and 49.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, page 28.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

The Security Police called for a major re-evaluation of existing base security procedures and principles.⁵⁵ The men of the Security Police Squadron identified nine "lessons learned" from the 31 January engagement. The first four essentially argued that USAF air base security ultimately depends on dedicated U.S. security teams, employed at the point of greatest danger, trained to shoot to kill, and authorized to do so.

According to the Security Police, the first lesson of the 31 January 1968 engagement was the need for better training. The report accurately claimed that Security Police and augmentees

were neither equipped nor trained well enough to effectively counter a regiment-size enemy assault. Consideration should be given to Base Security Police receiving more infantry type training prior to assignment in Southeast Asia. Emphasis should be placed on crew served and heavy weapons, assault tactics, and deployment procedures. Existing Air Force training in the [zone of the interior] and in Southeast Asia is not sufficient to enable Security Police forces to effectively counter forces of this size, equipped as they were.⁵⁶

In the following weeks, the Security Police expanded their in-country training and introduced instruction in new, heavier weapons as they were received by the squadron and incorporated into the squadron's defense plans.⁵⁷

The policemen took issue with improper employment in their discussion of the engagement's second lesson. Regarding "current concepts of base defense and protection of USAF resources as established by higher headquarters' directives," the policemen stated,

too much emphasis is placed on the close-in protection of resources... security forces must be moved from the revetments and other restricted areas to the perimeter where they can effectively engage the enemy. Further, [they] must have the capability to respond with properly equipped reaction forces.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ *Combat After Action Report*, page 14.

⁵⁶ An additional claim within the report, that "Security Police personnel and augmentees... were well-supervised and well-trained in fire control and discipline in basic tactics," appears to be somewhat of an exaggeration. At least one Quick Reaction Team engaged other defensive positions and there are numerous accounts of Task Force-35 augmentees firing vast amounts of ammunition with no visible targets. *Combat After Action Report*, page 14.

⁵⁷ *Security Police Squadron History*, page 5.

⁵⁸ *Combat After Action Report*, pages 14 and 15.

To compensate for the existing directives, the squadron replaced the authorized 12-man Reserve Security Alert Team with four 13-man Quick Reaction Teams on 24-hour alert status, for immediate response.⁵⁹ Furthermore, the policemen dispersed the Quick Reaction Teams, further reducing reaction time.

The Security Police reiterated the need for adequate manpower in their discussion of the engagement's third lesson. Specifically, the Security Police stated that a sufficient number of men must be allocated to *dedicated* security forces and available for *immediate* reaction. "Had the security condition been anything other than Red or Yellow," their report stated,

reaction forces would have had to contain the enemy further inside the interior of the base, probably at much greater loss in lives and USAF resources. It is recommended that a larger standby reaction force be utilized in place of the 12-man Reserve Security Alert Team (RSAT). A 50-man reaction force properly equipped with the same immediate response capability as RSAT would more realistically enable Security Police personnel to halt the enemy at an acceptable distance from priority resources.⁶⁰

In March 1968, the policemen at Tan Son Nhut formally petitioned Seventh Air Force for more men, "requesting an increased authorization of approximately 450 Security Police personnel;" they received no response "as to whether the request had been approved or whether it was likely to be approved."⁶¹

The fourth lesson of the engagement, according to Security Police, was that they needed the authorization to fire when they considered it appropriate. The report adamantly argued that,

a free fire zone/clear area *must* be established around the perimeter of the base. If free fire zones/clear areas had been established [prior to the 31 January 1968 defense] the enemy would not have had easy access to the perimeter fence.⁶²

In the remainder of their report, the policemen disclosed the hazards of entrusting air base security to auxiliary security provisions and exposing their support needs. The

⁵⁹ *Security Police Squadron History*, page 22.

⁶⁰ *Combat After Action Report*, page 15.

⁶¹ *Security Police Squadron History*, pages 4 and 29.

⁶² *Combat After Action Report*, page 15.

Security Policemen first cautioned against using untrained U.S. troops in an air base security role.

A more stringent control of weapons issue to non-defensive force personnel is immediately required. Many of these personnel hampered the Security Police effort and on some occasions were nearly mistaken for hostile forces. Personnel should be instructed to take cover, and weapons should not be issued until Security Condition RED (Option II) is declared.⁶³

The policemen then appraised their South Vietnamese counterparts. Citing numerous incidents during the defense in which members of the South Vietnamese armed forces deserted their static defense posts without apparent reason, the policemen found an "absolute need for co-manning of defensive positions throughout the perimeter."⁶⁴

Problems with the "entry of medical personnel... and subsequent evacuation of the wounded" prompted a request for making medical personnel more readily available to the Security Police.⁶⁵ In light of the complete void of accurate intelligence prior to the assault, the policemen indicated their intentions to "assume that future intelligence reports have questionable validity," and vowed to "maintain a posture [rendering] them totally prepared for an attack at any time, regardless of [official] intelligence indicators."⁶⁶ Equipment required "immediate attention," according to the Security Police.⁶⁷ The After Action Report was another opportunity to ask for more and better equipment—namely more protective defensive positions, heavier weapons, armored personnel vehicles, and a tactical communications network capable of communicating directly with fire support units.

Perhaps foreknowing the ineffectuality of their requests, the Security Police at Tan Son Nhut also initiated a vigorous self-help program. To harden existing defensive positions, the policemen filled sandbags and began acquiring chain-link fencing. Although a direct hit by a Rocket Propelled Grenades could penetrate a sandbag wall

⁶³ Ibid. page 16.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid. page 15.

⁶⁶ Ibid. page 16.

⁶⁷ The report listed grenade launchers, mortars, recoilless rifles, rocket launchers, Armored Personnel Carriers (APCs), multi-channel radio units, and a capability for direct communications with fire-support were as necessary. Ibid. pages 15-18.

more than seven feet thick, chain-link fencing placed a few feet in front of and around the sides of existing bunkers effectively neutralized the rockets—impact with the fence caused the rocket's fuse to become separated from the warhead, making it a dud, or prematurely detonated the rocket, causing a large explosion but very little shrapnel.

CLOSURE

Following the multi-battalion assaults in early-1968, Pacific Air Forces made a desultory effort to integrate Security Police requests for more men, proper employment, and better training as variables in the base security formula. Likewise, U.S. Military Assistance Command took some measure to increase Security Police authority. But, both organizations still approached air base defense as a technical problem, and the hunt for a cost-effective solution continued to hamper the search for a combat-effective one.

In March 1968, at PACAF's request, the U.S. Air Force Chief-of-Staff directed that the "Safe-Side" program, idle since its 6-month test in early-1967, be overhauled and instituted on a crash basis. The plan provided for an initial "500-man Security Police unit" to receive 30-days of intense training and a temporary-duty assignment to South Vietnam.⁶⁸ The hastily trained, temporary-duty unit was to be followed by a "fully, properly trained Combat Security Police Squadron."⁶⁹

Unfortunately much of the Safe-Side training had little relation to ground defense tactics. Instead of utilizing a syllabus based on the experiences of Security Police in Southeast Asia, the training program borrowed heavily from existing U.S. Army curriculum. The training program was

oriented toward U.S. Army Ranger operations and not to the small unit tactics and theory of static defense...[and] a sizable chunk of Safe Side instruction dealt with land navigation, long-range ambush and reconnaissance patrols, stream crossing, rappelling, and like subjects. The

⁶⁸ Seventh Air Force requested "that one Safe-Side squadron be deployed immediately... on a TDY [temporary duty] basis. The squadron is to come under the direction of my Directorate of Security Police for further deployment and utilization as the situation dictates." Letter on the security of air bases in the Republic of Vietnam, from the Seventh Air Force Commander to the Commander of Pacific Air Forces, February 1968, as cited in *Air Base Defense*, page 110.

⁶⁹ Letter on the enhancement of USAF base defense capability in the Republic of Vietnam from the USAF Chief-of-Staff to his deputies, March 1968, as cited in *Air Base Defense*, page 110.

teaching of air base defense operations as actually conducted by security police in South Vietnam was neglected.⁷⁰

Consequently, Safe-Side trainees arrived in South Vietnam with a dim and distorted grasp of the mission they were actually to perform. Furthermore, the USAF made no efforts to reorganize or train Security Police units *already in* Southeast Asia along tactical lines.

Instead of outfitting *ten* squadrons—one for each USAF operating base in South Vietnam—as recommended in the initial Safe-Side experiment, the USAF developed *one* squadron to be used as a contingency force and moved to the base with the greatest need. No action was taken on Security Police requests for increased authorization in the existing squadrons. Even after the *Tet* offensive, requests for additional Air Force security police spaces would be authorized only if the Seventh Air Force could identify an appropriate number of “trade-off spaces to absorb this number within their presently established ceiling.”⁷¹

In May 1968, PACAF published a new manual, *Security Police Guidance for Guerrilla/ Insurgency/ Limited War Environments*.⁷² The new regulation formalized many of the un-official practices used by the Security Police Squadrons in Southeast Asia. According to one Security Police evaluation, “for the most part,” the manual,

reflected the insight gleaned from actual security operations in [South Vietnam]. Gone was the rigid, checklist approach of the USAF cold-war security program. The new manual went out of its way to be general, to allow elbowroom for down-to-earth action on the scores of variables peculiar to different bases.⁷³

The new directive gave the Security Police more liberty in using their men as reaction forces rather than sentinels, and employing them at the base perimeter as opposed to interior posts. It also allowed for the creation of organic intelligence sections in each Security Police Squadron and changing counter-threat techniques.

⁷⁰ *Air Base Defense*, 112.

⁷¹ Message regarding Republic of Vietnam security augmentation, from USMACV Commander, General William C. Westmoreland, to Commander in Chief Pacific Command, in February 1968, as cited in *Air Base Defense*, pages 83-84.

⁷² Pacific Air Forces Manual (PACAFM) No. 207-25, *Security Police Guidance for Guerrilla/ Insurgency/ Limited War Environments*, May 1968.

⁷³ *Air Base Defense*, page 108.

While in theory the Safe-Side squadron was to operate as one unit, "in practice the section [consisting of one officer and 32 airmen and organized like an U.S. Army platoon] was the basic tactical element deployed," to bolster the defensive capabilities of several different air bases simultaneously.⁷⁴ Within this less than optimal system, the section operating at one base was often re-deployed without warning to a different base with a greater need. To cushion the shock of a no-notice withdrawal, Security Police Squadron Commanders at the various bases often used men individually, as fillers, and shredded the Safe-Side sections' unit integrity. In December 1969, "because of the progressive withdrawal of U.S. forces and ensuing budget cuts" the USAF discontinued the Safe-Side program.⁷⁵

After the early-1968 assaults, Security Police rules-of-engagement issued by USMACV, "allowed a little more laxity," but remained restrictive. Security Police still had to request permission to fire from the Joint Defense Operations Center, and by the time they did, whatever enemy activity had prompted the request was gone.⁷⁶

The belated rejoinder from PACAF and USMACV was too little, too late. The Communists reoriented their attacks. Now armed with rockets, newly acquired from China and the Soviet Union, the insurgents launched standoff attacks with a renewed vigor.

⁷⁴ Ibid., page 112.

⁷⁵ Ibid., page 110.

⁷⁶ Message regarding Tet 1968. from Frank Bracken to Benjamin Hettinga, July 2001.

SECTION 6

CONCLUSIONS

This thesis examined the nature of air base security by analyzing actual attacks on Tan Son Nhut air base, specifically the events leading to the base's defense on 31 January 1968. It demonstrated that the U.S. Military customarily views air base defense as a technical problem but the central issue of providing security to U.S. air bases is, in actuality, a human problem.

The primary case study was selected largely for its importance within the context of the Vietnam War. It was also selected because it is a limiting case in air base security and conclusions drawn from its examination reasonably apply to air base security in general. A counter-factual history suggests the importance of the 31 January 1968 defense. A comparison with one *recent* attack on a USAF base indicates the applicability of the insights gained by studying the events at Tan Son Nhut during the Vietnam War.

COUNTER-FACTUAL

If the Security Police had not checked the 31 January 1968 Communist assault at or near Tan Son Nhut's perimeter, the enemy force surely would have overrun the entire installation. Because the breach in the perimeter fence could not fully be exploited, only one third of the main attack force ever engaged defensive forces. Failure by the Security Police would have resulted in: a substantial increase in loss of life, theft and/or destruction of vast amounts of U.S. war equipment, the compromise of vital information, and the possibility of captives being exfiltrated from the base as Prisoners of War or executed; the effects would have been felt on local, theater, and international levels.

If Communist forces *had* overrun Tan Son Nhut, it is doubtful they could have held the air base for very long, but it is probable the death toll would have risen significantly.

Even if the main line of defense had faltered, other Security Police teams were located throughout the base interior and would have defended various strongpoints—weakening the assaulting force. As it was, two troops of U.S. Army armored cavalry arrived to help relieve the beleaguered Security Police. If the air base had been overrun, it would have become the focus of all forces in the Saigon area, and the U.S. Army's response would have been even greater. Nevertheless, during the fighting to recapture the base, the increased loss of life would have been substantial (the *additional* number of dead would have consisted primarily of U.S. soldiers, as mostly Communists were killed in the actual attack). The assaulting forces carried no evacuation plans—they were to hold Tan Son Nhut until the “general uprising” forced the U.S. out of South Vietnam, or until they died in the effort. Tan Son Nhut was the command hub from which control over the Capitol Military District radiated; the effective organization of all counter-attacks within the Saigon region would have been seriously disrupted, resulting in even more U.S. casualties.

If the attackers gained access to large portions of Tan Son Nhut, facilities and equipment those areas would have been stolen, damaged, or destroyed. Most aircraft and ordinance would have been destroyed with satchel charges. One stated task of the attackers was to shut down flight operations, thus runways would have been damaged to the greatest degree possible. The enemy used captured ammunition and arms to press their attack, and would have continued in attempts to take or hold portions of the installation. Furthermore, “that among the many [Communist] casualties... there were 7 [North Vietnamese] pilots and 15 [North Vietnamese] aircraft technicians.”¹ This suggests the Communists were seriously entertaining the notion of commandeering U.S. aircraft (either for their own purposes, or to exchange with the Soviet Union) and flying them to North Vietnam.

Tan Son Nhut housed the headquarters of the Vietnamese Air Force, Seventh Air Force, and USMACV, as well as the residence of the Vietnamese vice president. If any of these key facilities had fallen, all information within could have been compromised. A copy of some memorandum, plan, or report detailing most (if not all) major aspects of the

¹ *Combat After Action Report*, page 7.

political, psychological, and military war against the Communists could be found somewhere within the Tan Son Nhut perimeter.

Perhaps most significantly, the Communists would have captured a huge number of U.S. military members throughout the base. The Communists would no doubt have attempted to exfiltrate some captives (perhaps the highest-ranking) to the Cambodian border. It is likely the majority would have been killed.

In a worst case scenario, the South Vietnamese population in and around Tan Son Nhut would have understood that Communist forces had overrun the base and rioted, resulting in complete havoc in part of the capital city of Saigon. Although unlikely, it is possible and South Vietnamese Government and U.S. casualties would have further increased. In any case, all large-scale military reactions to the *Tet* offensive would have had to be run through a temporary command center. Counter-actions would have been delayed and confused, probably resulting in greater Communist success and more U.S. casualties.

Regarding vital information, many possibilities exist depending on the amount of control the Communist forces were able to establish at various locations on Tan Son Nhut and the amount of time they occupied those locations. In a worst-case scenario, even the most vital information would have been compromised, undermining the entire U.S. military effort in Vietnam. Then again, it is possible that the assaulting force would never have gained access to any secret documents. Most likely, the infiltrators would have actually captured very little secret information; but all information exposed to the attackers would have to be treated as if it was, indeed, compromised. The impact to combat operations throughout South Vietnam and the increased bureaucratic workload would have been staggering.

By the time U.S. forces regained control of the base, most of its mission essential equipment would have been destroyed, damaged beyond repair, or stolen. Tan Son Nhut received more military air traffic than any other base in South Vietnam; little U.S. military supply arrived to or moved through the Republic of Vietnam without passing through the base. Thus, the loss of Tan Son Nhut as an airfield would have seriously disrupted the logistical supply of all U.S. forces in the theater.

The capture of personnel on Tan Son Nhut is again the most troubling. In addition to adding to the death toll, many high-ranking personnel in Seventh Air Force Headquarters, USMACV Headquarters and elsewhere on Tan Son Nhut would have been captured or killed (although General Westmoreland and the highest USMACV leadership were absent from USMACV headquarters). In addition to the aforementioned strain placed on forces throughout South Vietnam, enough upper-echelon leadership would have been eliminated to seriously disrupt the military chain of command and further cripple any U.S. actions for some time.

On the international level, there are three possibilities: A major military victory for the Communists during the *general offensive* could have been a catalyst for a *general uprising* of the South Vietnamese population, resulting in a “decisive victory” for the insurgents and an immediate withdrawal of U.S. forces from South Vietnam. A major military defeat of U.S. forces might have so enraged the population of the United States (specifically the highest leadership) as to transform the conflict into a total war, ultimately resulting in the complete political-military-economic destruction of the Communists and the end of North Vietnam as a functioning nation. Or the major military victory/defeat would have no dramatic international implications (other than marginally accelerating or decelerating the timeline of the war), the Communists would achieve an *indecisive* tactical victory, and the United States would continue to prosecute a limited war in South Vietnam.

A “decisive victory” for the Communists was not probable. The support of the South Vietnamese populace indeed rested on their perception of the ultimate outcome of the war.² Nevertheless, while the South Vietnamese people near Tan Son Nhut surely would have allied themselves to the Communists, it is questionable if many would have contributed to an armed uprising. Furthermore, while a Communist victory may have resulted in a *local* uprising, it most evidently would not have instigated the *general uprising* recognized by the North Vietnamese leadership as necessary to expel U.S. military units from the Republic of Vietnam.

² Captain Stewart Herrington, U.S. Army, *Stalking the Vietcong: An Inside Account of Operation Phoenix*.

A reorientation of U.S. opinion and policy regarding the nature of the war was nearly impossible. Tan Son Nhut was not the *Maine*, or Pearl Harbor. It was not even U.S. territory. And, during the *Tet* offensive, the common American began to doubt if Vietnam was America's war (and of this the national leadership was keenly aware). Furthermore, a military historian, or military professional, fully recognizes the strategic value of a rear area headquarters. The American public would certainly have recognized this to a degree, but a loss of control at Tan Son Nhut would probably not have impacted public opinion toward the war much differently than the loss of control within the U.S. embassy compound in Saigon (although a stolen F-4 may have aggravated some). Besides, the U.S. still would have compiled the largest "body count" of the war. Even with the loss of Tan Son Nhut, the overall Tet Offensive could (and in all probability would) have been presented, however unsuccessfully, as a U.S. victory. Finally, a dramatic escalation of the war still threatened to inadvertently begin a nuclear exchange with the Soviet Union.

In all likelihood, the capture of Tan Son Nhut would have accelerated the conclusion of the Vietnam War, but would not have drastically altered the course of the war. The Communists would have claimed a "decisive victory" although one without a *general uprising*. Changing political sentiments in the U.S. would likewise have been accelerated and increased in intensity, calling for a more rapid Vietnamization of the war. Decreased effectiveness and compromised information would have accelerated the collapse of the South Vietnamese military and political systems. But the course of the war itself would not have changed significantly.

Although even a major military victory at Tan Son Nhut most likely would not have gained the Communists a "decisive victory" in the international arena, the implications on local and theater levels would have been dramatic. If the Security Police failed at Tan Son Nhut, it probably would not have changed the course of the Vietnam War, but it would surely have seriously altered the context in which the war was concluded.

APPLICABILITY

Since the Vietnam War, the nature of USAF base security appears to have changed very little. The USAF continues to base its operations in hostile regions, sometimes operating as tenants at host-nation airfields; indistinguishable enemies continue to reside within resentful populations. Sporadic assaults against those bases have also continued. The most vivid recent example was the 1996 attack on the Khobar Towers complex at King Abdul Aziz air base near Dhahran, Saudi Arabia.

The Security Police personnel deployed to Saudi Arabia, including the Squadron Commander, were on 90-day temporary-duty assignments. Once they arrived, the USAF employed them as lightly-armed sentries in observation posts. They received no formal training because the provisional unit was not staffed for that function.³ Rules-of-engagement and political factors limited their authority to fire, and *any* hazard outside the perimeter fence was considered the responsibility of the Saudi police.

The Khobar Towers complex served as the USAF tenant-unit headquarters and housed U.S. service members.⁴ Security Police immediately identified the complex, less than 100 feet from the northeast perimeter fence, as a point of danger. In May, the Security Police requested increased Saudi patrols outside the northeast fence, organized a quick reaction force of ten policemen, and built eight defensive fighting positions. The U.S. forwarded several other Security Police initiatives through official tenant-host channels. The requests were rejected. Saudi government officials refused to move the northwest perimeter fence outward because it would make access to Saudi homes more difficult; they refused to allow the removal of vegetation from the fence because it would allow Saudi civilians to observe U.S. personnel in western attire. According to the Security Police Squadron Commander, in June the Base Commander ordered the Security Police to replace the M-60 machine guns in their defensive fighting positions with dummy barrels for political reasons.⁵

³ The Security Police Squadron Commander stated that the policemen did conduct scenario-based training despite the lack of training personnel.

⁴ The USAF tenant-unit was the 4404th Wing (Provisional).

⁵ Lieutenant Colonel Robert L. Creamer, USMC, and Lieutenant Colonel James C. Seat, USAF, *Khobar Towers: The Aftermath and Implications for Commanders*, pages 21 and 22.

Later that month, Security Police personnel in an *observation* post watched a green tanker truck enter a public parking lot along the northeast base perimeter, approach the Khobar Towers complex, stop, and back-up to the base perimeter. The two occupants of the truck then exited the vehicle and got into a small car that speed from the scene. Less than five minutes later, the truck exploded. Nineteen airmen were killed in the blast. The U.S. Military investigated the incident and made recommendations by the end of the year. Some of the un-classified, official suggestions included: reviewing manpower and rotation policies, preparing defenses according to a degrees of vulnerability, assigning all security force members a weapon, and establishing stand-off exclusion areas around base perimeters.⁶

FINAL CONCLUSIONS

This report examined the nature of air base security through a careful analysis of actual attacks on one U.S. air base during the Vietnam War. It demonstrated that the U.S. Military customarily views air base defense as a technical problem but the central issue of providing security to U.S. air bases is, in actuality, a human problem. The report's four sections, each an extension of the one before it, progressively investigated the nature of air base security on more detailed levels. The principal study, the 31 January 1968 defense of Tan Son Nhut, is a limiting case in air base security; there exists no other single Security Police combat engagement more extreme and thus more directly relevant to the nature of air base security.

A historical overview of U.S. air base security efforts clearly demonstrated that the U.S. military has made a superficial commitment to the ground security of air bases. Even when air base security was absolutely necessary, the U.S. military gave the task little priority or prestige. When security forces did manage to develop more robust security systems, more powerful military organizations eliminated those systems in the search for a cost-effective solution. This lack of continuity undercut a human-approach to air base security. The United States entered the Vietnam War without an appropriate security concept for the security of USAF bases.

⁶ As cited by Lieutenant Colonels Creamer and Seat in their research report, Appendix 1: Abstract of Findings and Recommendations from the Downing Assessment of the Khobar Towers Bombing, pages 99-108.

A closer look at the daily challenges faced by policemen during the Vietnam War confirmed that both PACAF and USMACV both approached air base security as a technical problem. A dual chain-of-command and conflicting policies regarding air base security forced the Security Police into an untenable position. Furthermore, the USAF implemented Security Police directives, manpower standards, and training programs that relied on a technical approach to air base security. When issuing rules-of-engagement, USMACV did the same.

Nevertheless, an examination of actual assaults against Tan Son Nhut revealed that policemen at Tan Son Nhut correctly identified air base security as a human problem. The Security Police advocated a human approach in conflict with the technical approach taken by the PACAF and USMACV. At every available opportunity the policemen articulated their need for additional men, more appropriate employment, better training, and increased authority. But, both PACAF and USMACV largely ignored the requests, focusing instead on the possibility of technological breakthroughs and the “scientific” application of technical equipment.

The primary case study further suggests that attention to the human problems of air base defense ultimately prevented Tan Son Nhut from being overrun on 31 January 1968. The Security Police at Tan Son Nhut were technically unprepared to prevent a battalion-sized attacking force from overrunning the installation. Nevertheless, the Security Police *did* repel an attacking force of over 2,500 Viet Cong and North Vietnamese regulars. They were able to do so only because of human effort. The Security Police took extraordinary measures to ensure their policemen were, to the greatest degree possible, properly employed, realistically trained, and authorized to act.

Since the Vietnam War, the dynamics of air base security have endured essentially unchanged. The 31 January 1968 defense of Tan Son Nhut remains the limiting case in air base security, and continues to expose more about the nature of air base security than any other single historical example. U.S. Air Force base security still depends on dedicated local defense teams—Security Police—posted at the point of greatest danger, trained to shoot to kill and with the authority to do so.

APPENDIX A MILITARY ORGANIZATION OF GROUND UNITS

A working knowledge of, or the ability to reference, the basic military organization of ground units is useful when discussing air base security operations. The following table provides some general information regarding ground unit designations and their relation to one another.

U.S. ARMY

- Fire Team - A team of two soldiers, mutually supporting each other.
- Squad - Several fire teams operating together under a Non-Commissioned Officer.
- Platoon - Several squads, approximately 50 men, commanded by a single Officer.
- Company - A combination of three or four platoons, ranging from 100 to 200 men.
- Troop - An Armored Cavalry company equivalent, consisting of various vehicles.
- Battalion - An arrangement of several companies; usually about 600-900 men.
- Brigade - A group of two or more battalions; usually about 3,000 men.
- Division - A group of two or more brigades; from 6,000 to 20,000 men.

U.S. AIR FORCE SECURITY POLICE

- Flight - Fifteen 15 to 300 policemen performing the same duty at the same time.
- Section - A functional grouping of 30 to 600 men, depending on their assigned task.
- Squadron - The unit responsible the security of one base, about 800 to 1,000 policemen.
- Group - A compilation of squadrons; the support group included the Security Police.
- Wing - The collection of flying and support groups operating from one airfield.

VIET CONG/NORTH VIETNAMESE REGULAR¹

- Cell - A three-man unit of close comrades and confidants, akin to brothers.²
- Platoon - Several cells operating as a unit and family, from 15 to 20 men.
- Company - A combination of several platoons, about 50 to 60 men.
- Battalion - A group of several companies; usually about 400 men.

VIET CONG/NOTRH VIETNAMESE SAPPER

- Cell - Ideally three men, although sometimes as large as five.
- Element - One or more cells with a common task, functioning as one; up to 25 men.
- Party - A raiding party usually consisted of around 100 sappers.

¹ The standard Communist policy was to tailoring their military organization to meet the needs of changing circumstances and prevents a uniform definition of Viet Cong/North Vietnamese Army organization.

² Communist organization, especially the cell, was as much political as military.

The three-man cell became the recruit's military family, people he looked after and who in turn cared for him. As the cell matured and ripened, the three soldiers became close comrades and confidants... the young soldiers began to think of themselves and their company as a 'band of brothers,' and elite organization able to withstand any hardship and dedicated to the welfare of the common people.

Vietnam at War, page 63.

APPENDIX B

USAF-LEVEL SECURITY DIRECTIVES, -1968

The highest level directives on air base security were issued as Air Force Regulations (AFRs) and as Air Force Manuals (AFMs). Regulations outlined general orders for air base security, while manuals contained information on implementing the regulations. The USAF required *all* security units in the service to follow these USAF-level directives. Lower levels of command issued more detailed orders, but always in line with the USAF-level guidance. During the Vietnam War, policemen claimed, "governing USAF directives were silent on how to organize and employ security police in a hot war."¹

March 1953. AFR 355-4, *Local Ground Defense of Air Force Installations*

This regulation was the culmination of lessons learned in the Korean War. In addition to internal security, the regulation outlined an appropriate system for "protection of its installations against... infiltration, guerrilla warfare, civil disturbance, and local airborne, seaborne, or ground attack" based on the wartime experiences of Air Police. It was rescinded in May 1968.

June 1956. AFR 205-5, *Installation Security System*

As stated in the text of Section I, this regulation attempted to protect the weapons systems, equipment, material and facilities needed for "massive retaliation." It ordered that the USAF's existing Internal Installation Security program be expanded, and that "base defense plans will prescribe procedures to be employed in support of sabotage alert plans."³ In it the USAF revoked the concept of limited ground combat capability for an expanded interior guard system. AFR 207-1 superceded the regulation in 1964.

February 1963. AFM 205-3, *Air Police Security Operations*

This first security manual provided instructions for implementing AFR 205-5.

June 1964. AFR 207-1, *USAF Aerospace Systems Security Program*

As described in Section II, this regulation was also designed to protect the U.S. Air Force's nuclear response capability from first-strike attacks, and did nothing new to address air base security in limited war scenarios. It ordered "realistic graduations" of security capabilities, and naively maintained that "while maintaining capabilities designed primarily to counteract enemy clandestine operation, the program also [would] counteract all other forms of ground threat that may be encountered." The

¹ *Air Base Defense*, page 79.

USAF updated the regulation in 1972, 1975, and 1979. But, it remained essentially the same.

June 1964 AFM 207-1, *Doctrine and Requirements for Security of Air Force Weapons Systems*

This document, the AFR 207-1 companion manual, outlined the implementation of all aspects of the Aerospace Systems Security Program.

July 1966 AFM 207-2, *Handbook for Security Forces*

In accordance with its title, this manual's purpose was to serve as an Aerospace Systems Security Program handbook available to all policemen.

APPENDIX C

SECURITY POLICE MANPOWER AUTHORIZATIONS¹

When the Joint Chiefs of Staff refused to dedicate U.S. Army and Marine Corps troops to local security of air bases in late 1965, the U.S. Air Force began a crash buildup of Security Police Forces for the mission. This action continued until mid-1967 when the authorized strength leveled off at slightly less than 5,000.

Date	12-Month Duty	Temporary Duty
Start - 1965	250	
Mid - 1965	700	
Start - 1966	2,100	
Mid - 1966	4,000	
Start - 1967	4,490	200 ²
Mid - 1967	4,712	
Start - 1968	4,712	
Mid - 1968	4,712	540 ³
Start - 1969	4,712	515
Mid - 1969	4,712	485
Start - 1970	4,712 ⁴	
Mid - 1970	4,460	
Start - 1971	3,840	
Mid - 1971	3,035	
Start - 1972	2,385	100 ⁵
Mid - 1972	1,292	

¹ Manpower authorizations are applicable to the Republic of Vietnam only. *Air Base Defense*, 82.

² Safe Side Test Unit: 1041st USAF Security Police Squadron (Test).

³ Safe Side units: 821st, 822nd, and 823rd Combat Security Police Squadrons.

⁴ For approximately one month in early 1971, about 250 additional Security Policemen were transferred to Pacific Air Force before the unit's inactivation on 15 February 1971.

⁵ Emergency deployment from the continental United States to strengthen Seventh Air Force security capability.

APPENDIX D

RULES OF ENGAGEMENT AND GUARD ORDERS¹

RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

Since the air base may be attacked by fire from outside the base or by infiltrators or agents inside the base, it shall be established policy that:

Guards, sentries, outposts, watchposts and patrols will fire on any force or individual committing a hostile act either within the base or from outside the base. A hostile act is defined as firing in the direction of the base, setting up weapons within range of the base (unless prior clearance has been secured by friendly forces), attempting to infiltrate or overwhelm by numbers an outpost, or failure to halt when ordered to do so when within the base.

All necessary force to defeat and attack shall be applied. Such force may include: small arms, automatic weapons, crew served weapons, artillery fire, armed helicopter attack, attack by aircraft, or attack by infantry or armored formation.

All reasonable care will be taken to reduce damage to innocent personnel and buildings, but defense of the air base will be considered as overriding.

GUARD ORDERS

I understand that it is my duty to defend the air base against any action which [sic] may threaten life or property. Effective attack may be made by mortars, small arms, low trajectory weapons, and other devices located outside the perimeter of the airfield as well as by infiltration.

I understand that I am authorized and directed to utilize whatever force is necessary to render and attack harmless, whether the attack comes from inside or outside the base.

If I observe an attack or threat from outside the base, I will report the attack or threat and take the position or force which [sic] threatens the base under fire with the most effective means at my disposal. Within the base, I will not fire unless it is either a direct assault, I see weapons being emplaced, or the personnel refuse to halt. When I observe weapons being emplaced, a direct assault, or flashes which [sic] I can recognize as a weapon directed against the air base, I will respond with maximum firepower.

¹ Letter, USMACV to 7th AF, 4 July 1966.

APPENDIX E

SECURITY ALERT CONDITIONS¹

NORMAL CONDITION. This condition will not be utilized prior to the cessation of hostilities.

ALERT CONDITION WHITE. This is the day-to-day emergency security posture which [sic] will be maintained on a sustained basis in order to meet minimum security standards set forth in this manual.

ALERT CONDITION GREY. This posture should be implemented when intelligence reports indicate a need for increased vigilance. This posture can be maintained over a period of several days or weeks if necessary. It provides the commander with additional security police personnel to increase security at entry points, observation posts, and vital resources. He may also constitute additional quick reaction forces and deploy them at various locations on the base along likely avenues of approach.

ALERT CONDITION YELLOW. This posture provides the commander with an option for utilizing all security police personnel on an 8-hour per day basis. Security police support functions should be minimized and days off cancelled to provide additional security personnel. Provisions should be made for personnel from other base functions to augment the security force. The OPLAN 207-XX must specify the actions taken to provide the additional personnel required to maintain this posture and succeeding postures. This would normally be implemented when reliable intelligence data indicates that the base is going to be subjected to an attack, the timing of the attack cannot be predicted, and the advance state of preparedness may have to be maintained for a period in excess of 72 hours. This posture is a definite drain on the resources of the base and limits the capability of each organization which [sic] furnishes augmentees in performing its primary mission.

ALERT CONDITION RED (OPTION I). This posture provides the commander with the option for utilizing all security police and augmentees to provide the maximum security possible over a short period of time. Normally, personnel would be utilized in an initial maximum effort and then stabilized on a 12 on, 12 off posture. This condition would be implemented when the base is under actual attack, or when intelligence data indicates that an attack on the base is imminent.

ALERT CONDITION RED (OPTION II). This posture describes the highest security posture possible with full utilization of all available security police, augmentees, and base personnel. It is a desperation type operation to establish and hold a secured line of defense around the perimeter of the base when the external defense forces have been overrun or are unable to cope with the threat of known enemy forces advancing toward or attacking the installation. Concurrent with the implementation of this posture all priority resources should be evacuated. Those that cannot be evacuated should be destroyed.

¹ Pacific Air Forces Manual 207-25, May 1968.

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