

MANNING THE PERIMETER

The easiest way to knock out an aircraft is on the ground. The mission of the Air Force Security Police was to ensure it didn't happen.

By Edward F. Roberts

When one thinks of the Air Force, it is not security police, but rather fighters and bombers and transport aircraft, that come to mind. But keeping those combat planes in the air required ensuring their safety on the ground, a fact that became clear early in the Vietnam War.

On October 31, 1964, a small group of Viet Cong sappers quietly penetrated the outer defenses of Bien Hoa airfield, located just 20 miles northeast of Saigon. Approaching from the north, they moved undetected until they were about 400 yards out from the main runway. Quietly they began setting up six 81mm mortars. The first rounds were dropped down the tubes at 12:25 a.m. Within minutes, the airfield was an inferno. Four Americans were killed, 72 were wounded. The mortars had ignited stores of aircraft fuel and ammunition. Secondary explosions continued to rock the airfield long after the Viet Cong had slipped away into the darkness. Barracks, storage buildings, vehicles, even a mess hall were set ablaze. It was almost too easy.

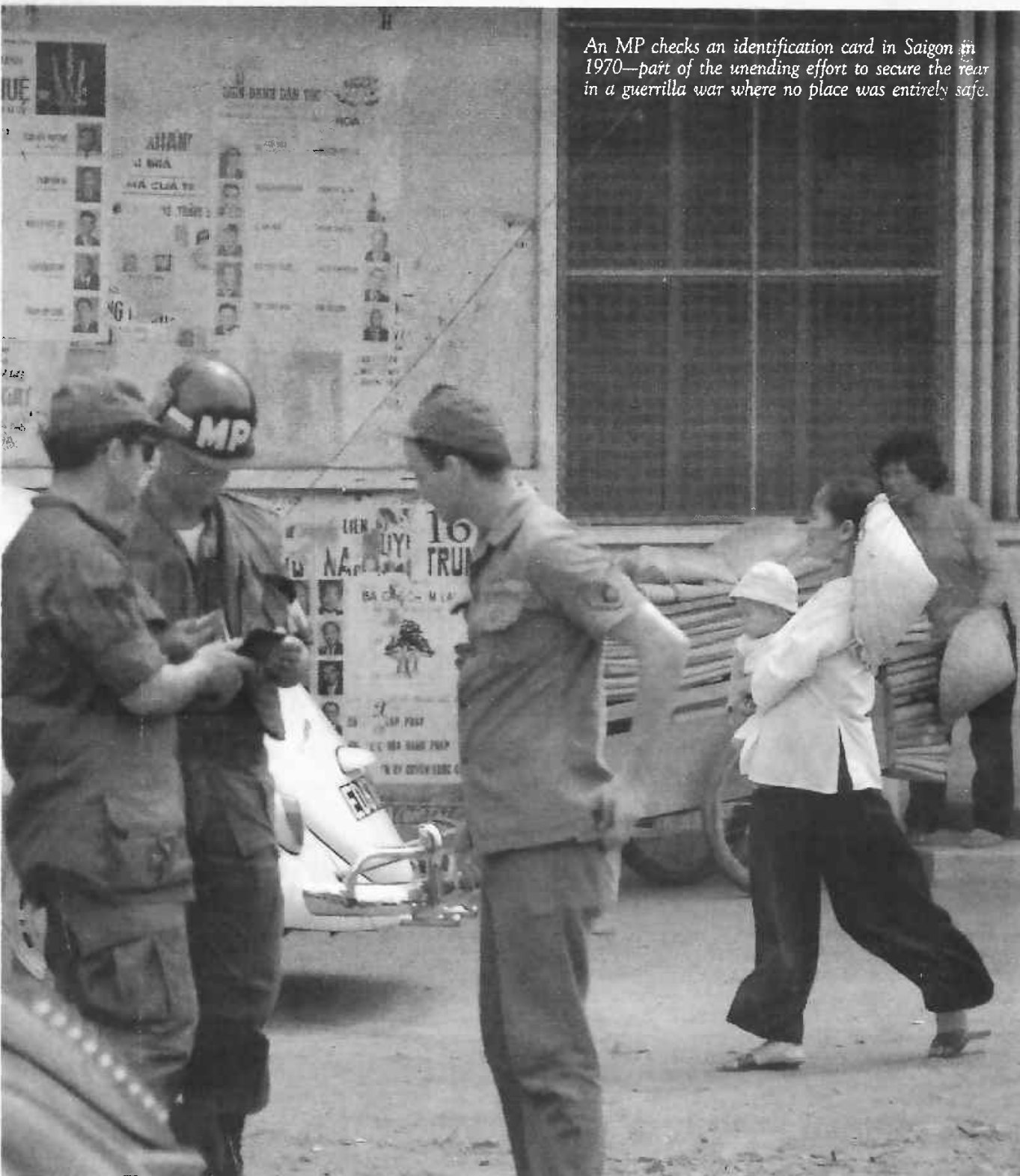
Their primary target had been a squadron of U.S. Air Force B-57 jet bombers just arrived from the Philippines. The first U.S. Air Force planes to operate from bases inside Vietnam, they had received a hostile welcome. Not a single B-57 escaped the attack unscathed. Five were completely destroyed, eight were severely damaged, and seven more received some damage. Besides the B-57 bombers, one helicopter was destroyed and three more were damaged, along with two C-47 (Gooney Bird) transports. The entire attack had lasted less than 10 minutes. The Viet Cong sappers retreated quickly the way they came. They didn't lose a single person in the attack.

Originally, Pentagon officials had not planned to place American jet fighter aircraft on the ground in Vietnam. They argued that all the air support needed could be supplied from secret airfields in Thailand and U.S. Navy aircraft carriers offshore. They also felt that the Republic of South Vietnam Air Force (RVNAF) could fly air support for Army Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) units that were going into combat being led by American advisers.



The event that changed this thinking was the Viet Cong attack on the U.S. Army Special Forces camp at Nam Dong, near the Cambodian border, in July 1964 (see "Beret Team's Brave Stand" in the Winter 1988 *Vietnam*). During the attack, South Vietnamese pilots, responding to Nam Dong's call for help, failed to bomb enemy targets because their forward air controller allegedly couldn't make contact with ground forces. An investigation showed that many RVNAF pilots couldn't fly at night, their radio nets were slow and unreliable, and most couldn't speak English well enough to communicate with American air traffic controllers or military advisers on the ground.

An MP checks an identification card in Saigon in 1970—part of the unending effort to secure the rear in a guerrilla war where no place was entirely safe.



After the Nam Dong attack, President Lyndon B. Johnson would hear no more talk from Pentagon officials about off-shore aircraft carriers and secret bases in Thailand. His greatest fear was that an important Special Forces base would be overrun and the American news media would turn it into another Dien Bien Phu.

Shortly after the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution was passed by Congress in August 1964, giving the president carte blanche to take whatever military action he deemed necessary in Vietnam, Johnson ordered the first U.S. Air Force jet fighter aircraft transferred from the Philippine Islands to Bien Hoa Air Base.

The Halloween night attack on Bien Hoa and the subsequent media coverage showed White House officials that South Vietnamese airfields could be easily attacked by small groups of Viet Cong doing tremendous damage with little risk to the attackers. Therefore, in March 1965, President Johnson used the vulnerability of American aircraft stationed in South Vietnam as an excuse to bring in the first U.S. combat troops. They were only to guard U.S. air bases—or so the public back home was told. President Johnson soon decided, however, that combat troops were too valuable to waste pulling guard duty around air bases. Thus the United States was back to square one. Who would guard American airfields?



U.S. Army MPs and Air Force Security Police often worked together to halt, or at least reduce, Viet Cong infiltration to areas close to strategic installations—anything from airfields to hospitals were fair game for sabotage or attack.

It was a hard question for Pentagon officials to answer. It was finally decided that a little-known unit within the U.S. Air Force called the Security Police would have the job. It was in the Cold War atmosphere of the late 1940s and early '50s that the U.S. Air Force Security Police was formed.

In its early years, immediately after World War II, an Air Police Training School was begun at Lackland Air Force Base, Texas. Here Air Police trainees studied unarmed defense, military law and marksmanship. A separate group was trained as dog handlers for special K-9 units that would patrol remote or highly sensitive areas of Air Force bases. During the 1950s the Air Police divided into two distinct units: the Air Police, or APs, pulled typical military police duties (main gate, town patrol, accident investigation and enforcement of military uniform regulations); the other group, the Security Police, also called Combat Defense, specialized in base security. The Security Policemen almost never wore the typical white hat and nightstick of the Air Policemen. Instead, they wore fatigues and spent most of their time in the non-public parts of air bases guarding against the "covert threat."

In the early 1960s, the Security Police were strictly cold warriors. Their only weapons were the M-16 rifle and the Smith & Wesson .38-caliber revolver.

Security Police training and experience on Stateside bases were almost useless against the threat posed against American Air Force bases in Vietnam. When the first Security Police began to receive orders for Vietnam in early 1965 none had any idea what to expect. The U.S. Air Force commanders were caught completely off guard by the Bien Hoa attack. They had not even expected to be on the ground in Vietnam, and had assumed that if they did have Air Force bases in Vietnam, then surely the U.S. Army or Marine Corps would provide security.

The Air Force quickly put together a combat training school at Hamilton Air Force Base, Calif., just a short distance from Travis Air Force Base, near San Francisco, where U.S. mili-

tary personnel shipped out to Vietnam. Air Force personnel, Security Police or not, were ordered to report to the Hamilton base five days before their scheduled departure from Travis. They were then subjected to a four-day cram course in survival in a war zone. Officers, NCOs and enlisted personnel all trained side by side.

The first U.S. Air Force bases in Vietnam were existing South Vietnamese Air Force bases such as Bien Hoa, Tan Son Nhut and Da Nang. Built by the French, these airfields were a security nightmare. Besides being military air bases, they also doubled as civilian airports. This meant they were always teeming with Vietnamese civilians. They also were surrounded by large sprawling refugee villages. These huge slums were tailor-made for VC operations. The Viet Cong could recruit, plan, and launch attacks on the air bases from close proximity to their targets. The sprawling slum areas also provided a ready area for VC sapper teams to disappear into after an attack. Clearing away these slums would take years of delicate negotiations with Vietnamese civilian authorities and corrupt landlords who demanded exorbitant amounts for their properties.

The most perplexing aspect of these bases was that they were Vietnamese, not American, installations. Legally the American aircraft were only guests there. The supreme military authority was the Vietnamese Air Force commanding officer. This created all types of security nightmares. South Vietnamese Military Police (called Quan Cam or QCs) proved to be extremely cruel and vicious one minute, sloppy and undisciplined the next. For a modest bribe, they could be induced to look the other way and allow anything to go on. The earliest U.S. Air Force Security Police sent to Vietnam were instructed to wear a QC patch on their left shoulder so that Vietnamese civilians would understand their purpose. Eventually, U.S. Air Force Security Police would replace most of these QCs, but it took years of haggling to get it done.



Air Force dog handlers train at perimeter defense at Bien Hoa Air Base. Staff Sergeant Michael Brown taunts the dogs by threatening to strike them, while trainees Danny Thomas, Paul E. Hard Arden and William C. Peeler hold on tight.

In June of 1965, a combination Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army (NVA) unit attacked the airfield at Da Nang. The Communist force, numbering almost a hundred men, virtually ran over a South Vietnamese Army unit guarding the base. This time no mortars or rockets were used. The Communists ran wildly among the parked aircraft, firing and throwing sachel charges. When it was over, one Marine was killed, three were wounded. Six planes were destroyed, three were damaged. The attack took less than 30 minutes and the Communists didn't lose a single man, killed or wounded. By the time counterfire began to be leveled at the attackers, they had already disappeared into the night. In the aftermath, a higher priority was given to air base security.

But even before the attack on Da Nang, American officials had decided that the ultimate solution to the problem of defending parked aircraft was the construction of new airfields that would be totally under United States control.

The coast of Vietnam has numerous sandy peninsulas jutting out into the South China Sea. U.S. military planners decided that these sandy strips of land would be the nucleus of U.S. involvement in Vietnam. From docks and airfields built along the coast, men and supplies could be moved inland by convoy or, if necessary, by airlift. President Johnson did not feel that Communist forces would ever be able to amass enough strength to overrun any of these bases. With U.S. Navy battleships and aircraft carriers offshore, and with B-52 bombers standing by in Guam, enough firepower could be brought to bear to halt any assault. And unlike Dien Bien Phu, these seaside bases could be resupplied and evacuated from the sea. Even if the rest of Vietnam fell to the Communists (an idea almost unthinkable in 1965) these coastal bases would become American toeholds on the country, similar to Guantanamo Naval Base in Cuba.

In June 1965, jet fighters at Chu Lai Air Base took off to fly the first combat mission from one of the new coastal bases. By mid-October a PSP (Portable Steel Planking) temporary

runway was completed at Camn Rahn Bay. Soon runways were in operation at Tuy Hoa, Qui Nhon and Phan Rang.

The same military planners were convinced that aircraft parked in Vietnam could be made safe from ground attack. To accomplish this mission they would rely on two technologies; one was as new as the Space Age, the other was as old as man himself.

The new technology was ground-surveillance radar. It came in two types, PPS-4 with a range of 1.5 kilometers and PPS-5 with a range of 5 kilometers. Ground radar could instantly pinpoint the source of incoming rocket and mortar rounds. Once the source of the rounds was determined, artillery fire or helicopter gunships could wipe out the VC mortar and rocket teams. Ground surveillance radar worked so well that after 1969 rocket and mortar attacks on U.S. airfields almost ceased.

But the old technology of revetments worked too. The revetments used in Vietnam came in four basic types. The most sophisticated and expensive protective revetments were high, semicircular, elongated vaults made of reinforced concrete. Looking much like domed hangars, they gave good protection against the small rockets and mortars used by the Viet Cong. These "concrete vault" revetments were most likely to be found on the old colonial airfields such as Da Nang, Nha Trang, Bien Hoa and Tan Son Nhut. Because of the sprawling refugee villages found on the very edges of these bases, they were much more likely to be hit with rockets and mortars than were the new coastal bases.

On coastal bases, the most common type of revetment found on a flight line was called "steel revetment." It gave no overhead protection like the concrete vault, but offered good protection from ground fire and contained the explosion in the event an aircraft blew up. Steel revetments were constructed with perpendicular walls built of interlocking steel plates. The walls were positioned about five feet apart with the space in between filled with loose earth. A steel end plate held it in place. Steel revetments could be laid out in any configura-



Airman Second Class Leonard Bryant and his dog, Nemo, perform a night perimeter patrol along the fence line at Tan Son Nhut Air Base, a favorite Viet Cong target.

tion needed, the most common being single walls between aircraft and squared U-shaped pens that usually contained two aircraft. The biggest advantage of steel revetments was their portability. They could be quickly erected or taken down in a few hours, using teams of men to connect and disconnect the steel plates and earth-moving equipment to relocate the dirt. They were part of the instant airfield concept being used all over Southeast Asia.

The third type of revetment was usually found around bomb dumps and fuel storage tanks. They were simply mounds of earth quickly erected by engineers. The biggest problem with this type of revetment was erosion. Sometimes quick growing grass was planted, other times squares of sodded grass were used. On most coastal bases the only type of earth readily available was loose beach sand in which grass simply would not take hold and grow. Engineers found that they could prevent erosion by spraying the sand mounds with a thick coat of an asphalt-tar mixture.

The last type was the cheapest and easiest revetment to build and the most commonly found type in Vietnam. It was the "sandbag wall." Almost every enlisted man sent to Vietnam, and a good percentage of officers, spent at least some time filling sandbags. They were everywhere in Vietnam. Almost every building on every base was protected by one or more layers of sandbags. Sometimes empty 55 gallon drums were filled with sand to augment the sandbags.

The use of ground-surveillance radar and revetments greatly diminished the probability of rocket and mortar attack. However, the probability of sapper attack had greatly increased.

During 1965, when military authorities were desperate to get new bases and port facilities in operation as soon as possible, the Department of Defense contracted with several large civilian construction companies experienced in operating in the Far East. For security reasons it was recommended that only Korean and Thai laborers would be used. This simple precaution was quickly abandoned. The reasoning was that employ-

ing Vietnamese workers would build up good will, thus helping win the hearts and minds of the people. Priority in employment would be given to widows, orphans and next of kin of Vietnamese soldiers. This, it was hoped, would maintain security. In reality the civilian construction companies utilized Vietnamese employment contractors who quickly hired thousands of laborers regardless of their loyalty or relation to Vietnamese soldiers.

The hoards of Vietnamese base workers roaming at will over newly built, so-called secure airfields meant that each new air base had a built-in Viet Cong escape system. The pat-down searches of Vietnamese base workers each morning forced Viet Cong sapper teams to penetrate the perimeter in order to get their weapons and explosives on base. However, after the sapper teams had struck and done their damage, instead of retreating back across the perimeter where helicopter gunships and artillery could get at them, they simply disappeared on base. The nature of all sapper and mortar attacks on U.S. bases showed that they were either led by, or completely carried out by, persons totally familiar with the layout of the bases. Most believed they were base workers.

Security Policemen arriving in Vietnam quickly realized that duty would vary according to where they were in the country. As a rule, duty on one of the old colonial bases differed greatly from duty on one of the newer coastal bases being built from scratch. However, all Vietnamese bases were divided into three zones of responsibility. The first and most important was defending the parked aircraft. The second was sensitive secondary areas such as ammo dumps and fuel storage areas highly vulnerable to Viet Cong attack. The final area, and the one most difficult to defend, was the outer perimeter of the base.

New Security Police personnel "just in from the world" were usually given a couple of weeks of training in the weapons they would be using in Vietnam. Security Police back in the States hardly ever came into contact with M-79 grenade launchers, M-60 machine guns, 81mm mortars, Claymore mines or trip flares. The training was liberally spaced with periods of stringing barbed wire, filling sandbags, building bunkers and hooches. The training and details allowed the new guys to become accustomed to the climate of Vietnam while allowing them to get a full night's sleep. Despite this brief breaking-in period, most found their duty shifts long hard grinds. Too soon they were on duty.

The nerve center for base security was a complex of heavily guarded buildings called Central Security Control (CSC). Within the CSC compound were housed various adminis-

OPERATION SAFESIDE

In the mid-1960s, the increasing air base threat caused the Air Force to begin "Operation Safeside," in which a new and highly trained security police was developed. This Combat Security Police program was originally based on the training and deployment of the 1041st Security Police Squadron.

Armed with heavier weapons than standard security police—including M-706 armored personnel carriers, 81mm mortars, light and heavy machine guns and Model 70 Winchester sniper rifles—and equipped with sophisticated detection devices and state-of-the-art communications gear, the 1041st trained at Schofield Bar-

racks, on Oahu, Hawaii, in late 1966, using Army Ranger training methods. It was deployed to Phu Cat Air Base in South Vietnam in January 1967, and immediately began testing the concept of combat-trained security police for air base defense.

The 1041st initiated daylight reconnaissance patrols, day and night observation posts, motorized patrols with vehicles mounted with heavy weapons, and a highly successful ambush program. In early 1967, airmen from the 1041st ambushed and killed the Viet Cong (VC) commissioner of An Nhon province and a high-ranking chief of VC security assault forces. The 1041st

trative offices, the radio dispatcher, an assembly area for troops going on duty, an arsenal and the RSAT area. The Reserve Security Alert Team, or RSAT, was a detail pulled by Security Police going off duty. They had to stand by inside the CSC compound to provide rapid reinforcement in the event of an emergency. They were allowed to remove all their gear, helmets, web belts and flak jackets, but not undress. They couldn't even remove their shirts or boots. Cots were provided for sleeping but most men on RSAT found it next to impossible. Usually 8-10 men were assigned to RSAT from each shift. A larger QRF, or Quick Reaction Force, had to stand by at a special tent or hooch away from the flight line where CSC was located. Thirty men were assigned to QRF. They were allowed to take off all their combat gear as well as their shirts. However, they had to keep on their pants and boots. Like those on RSAT detail, they were permitted to sleep, if such a thing was possible inside the dirty, hot, humid and overcrowded quarters.

Security Police in Vietnam hated RSAT and QRF. It meant 16 hours of straight duty. If you happened to pull it on a shift-change day, it meant 24 hours of straight duty. For example, suppose you worked a midnight shift, and then you pulled eight hours of RSAT or QRF; you then had to report back to duty at 1630 hours to pull a swing shift that didn't end until midnight. While Marines and Army troops often spent weeks in the field, periodically they were rotated back to a base camp to catch up on sleep and warm chow. U.S. Air Force Security Police never had a break their entire tour (except R and R) from this long grind of constantly being on duty or standby. After a while it began to take its toll both physically and psychologically.

The most sensitive area of an air base was the flight line. In the air, modern American jet fighter aircraft like the F-4C Phantom or the F-105 Thunderchief were formidable weapons. But on the ground, they were as helpless as a newborn babe. While revetments and ground radar greatly reduced the danger to aircraft from mortar and rocket attack, there was a high danger of sabotage to the aircraft because of the large numbers of Vietnamese base workers. A beer can down an air intake or a match thrown into jet fuel was all it would take to destroy or seriously damage any aircraft.

There was really only one way to guard airplanes on the ground, something sentries called "humping." One guard with his weapon, in this case a 12-gauge shotgun, walked back and forth in front of the revetments. Sentries "humping the flight line" were not allowed to sit down, lean against anything, or

also bagged several VC couriers with important documents that revealed that the North Vietnamese Army's (NVA) 304th Company, 300 Sapper Battalion, was targeted against Phu Cat Air Base.

Proving that the Combat Security Police concept worked, upon its rotation back to the United States the 1041st Security Police Squadron was replaced by a special unit from the 37th Security Police Squadron which was also charged with training other in-country Security Police squadrons in aggressive search-and-destroy techniques.

Meanwhile, in July 1968, the Air Force Chief of Staff approved the Combat Security Police program and ordered the formation of the 82nd Combat Security Police (CSP) Wing. Two squad-

rons, the 821st CSP and the 822nd CSP, were immediately trained at Schofield Barracks and deployed to Vietnam. The training center later moved to Fort Campbell, Ky., the home base of the Army's 101st Airborne Division.

As part of the U.S. drawdown in Southeast Asia, Operation Safeside was discontinued as a separate entity in December 1969, and the concept merged into the Air Force's standing Security Police squadrons. In its almost four-year history, however, the Combat Security Police, learning the necessities of air base defense in a hot guerrilla war situation, made an outstanding contribution to the war effort and dramatically enhanced air base security in South Vietnam.

Samuel A. Creed



Viet Cong mortarmen and sappers turned Pleiku's helicopter facility into a junkyard on February 7, 1965. Eight Americans were killed and 104 wounded.

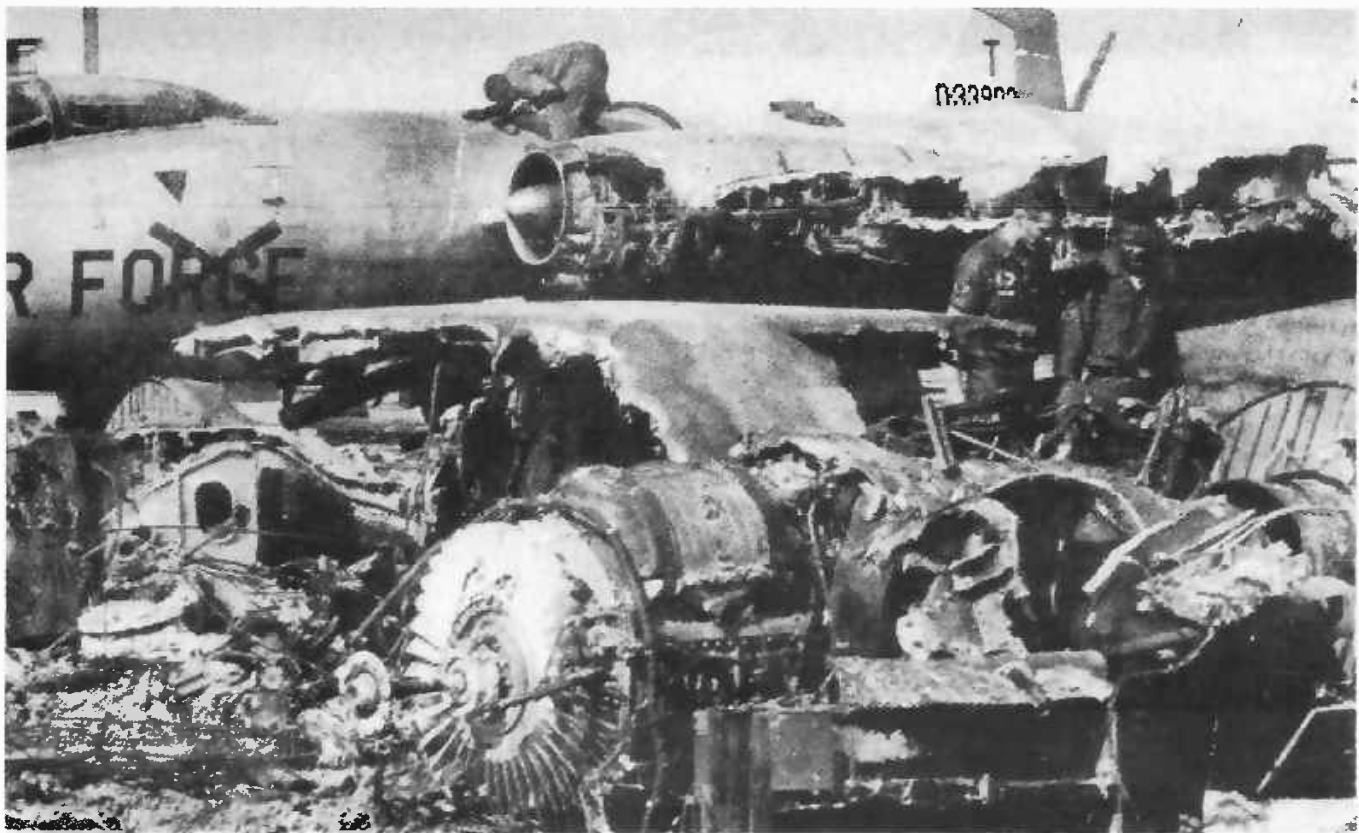
engage in unnecessary conversation with any other person. There was no shade from the broiling Vietnamese sun, no cover from pouring tropical rains. Humping duty was reserved for low-ranking men, newly in-country.

The only break from humping the flight line was an occasional visit by a Security Alert Team (SAT). These were three-man jeep patrols designed to give quick backup to any sentry needing help. While SAT teams were supposed to give rapid reinforcement to sentries on post, they also rode around supplying men on post with hot coffee at night and fresh water in the daytime.

The next step up from humping the flight line was gate shack duty. Gate shacks were hastily built structures of two-by-fours and plywood, heavily defended by layers of sandbags. Gate shacks were found all over air bases. They protected all vehicular entranceways to the flight-line area. They also guarded vehicular and pedestrian approaches to bomb dumps, fuel storage areas, liquid oxygen storage, base operations, hospitals, PXs, BOQs, nurses quarters, even officer and NCO clubs. While gate shack duty was long and boring, it was a big step up from humping the flight line. Inside a gate shack you had some shade and overhead protection from rain.

Falling asleep on guard duty back in the United States usually cost the sentry a stripe. During the American Civil War it was punishable by death. In Vietnam, it could carry that same penalty. Part of the difficulty with staying awake at night was the difficulty of trying to sleep in the daytime. It was simply too hot to sleep in the plywood hooches and dull-green tents in which the security police were quartered.

The U.S. Air Force Security Police showed their mettle during the Communist Tet Offensive in early 1968. Almost every major city in Vietnam received some type of attack during the Lunar New Year that marked the beginning of the Year of the Monkey. The worst attacks against air bases were against Bien Hoa and Tan Son Nhut. Both bases were attacked by more than



The need for increased air base security was first made painfully clear on the night of October 31, 1964, when a Viet Cong mortar attack on Bien Hoa destroyed five B-57 bombers, damaged eight others, and killed four Americans.

two battalions of Viet Cong. A defensive force made up of U.S. Air Force Security Police, South Vietnamese and U.S. Army troops fought bravely to give the Viet Cong one of their worst defeats of the Vietnam War.

The Bien Hoa attack, that began in the early morning hours of January 31, 1968, saw the large VC force thrown back with a loss of 139 killed and 25 captured. Four Americans were killed and 26 wounded. The Viet Cong managed, despite their strong effort, to destroy only two aircraft and damage 17 others. The Tan Son Nhut attack went even worse for the Communists: not a single aircraft was destroyed and only 13 received damage. The Communists suffered 157 killed and 86 wounded. The South Vietnamese lost 30 killed and 89 wounded.

In all the media hysteria that followed in the wake of the Tet Offensive, the bravery of these men, who successfully defended Bien Hoa and Tan Son Nhut, was barely mentioned. However, the next year a VC sapper attack on the huge U.S. Air Force base at Camn Rahn Bay would make worldwide headlines. In August, 1969, a squad of Viet Cong guerrillas slipped through the northern defenses of the air base and made their way unerringly to their targets. Of all the combat support targets on base to attack—the aircraft parking area, ammo dumps, fuel or liquid oxygen storage areas—the Viet Cong decided to attack the lightly guarded 12th Evacuation Hospital where hundreds of wounded American soldiers were receiving medical treatment. They hurled satchel charges into crowded hospital wards and raked buildings with machine-gun fire. Two Americans were killed and 98 were wounded, some gravely. Nineteen buildings were damaged or destroyed. They also managed to blow up a large water tower and the base chapel. After their vicious attack on the wounded men in the hospital, the guerrillas managed to escape without losing a single man either killed or wounded.

The Camn Rahn Bay attack clearly showed the importance of perimeter defense. In Vietnam, anything, even a water tow-

er or hospital, could be the target of a Viet Cong attack. The military importance of the target was also irrelevant. The base chapel and water tower destroyed at Camn Rahn Bay had no military significance at all except to create headlines in the United States and fuel the anti-war movement.

The biggest difficulty with perimeter defense was a shortage of experienced American sentries to guard the far-flung perimeters. Air Force bases are not neat and compact like Army firebases and Special Forces camps. They covered hundreds of acres, and perimeters were measured in miles, not feet. After the parked aircraft were adequately guarded from possible subversive base workers, and all the necessary gate shacks were posted, there just weren't enough men left to guard the perimeter.

The key fixture in perimeter defense was something called an observation post (OP). On coastal bases that had hills, OPs were always positioned near their summit. On bases with flat terrain, tall fortified towers were built. Their purpose was clear, to scan the horizon looking for any sign of Viet Cong activity. Positioned in support of the observation post were perimeter bunkers. Basically the system worked like this: The OP was supposed to detect the approach of the Viet Cong; the perimeter bunker was to halt their advance.

Perimeter bunkers were hand-built to suit the various types of terrain found around a base perimeter. Some bunkers were large enough for four or five men. These were usually equipped with a .50-caliber machine gun, and served as a type of main resistance point with the smaller bunkers actually providing flanker protection. Communication was usually by field phone.

Lighting on the perimeter was provided by mortar batteries that fired 81mm illumination flares. These rounds exploded about a thousand feet in the air, releasing a burning flare that descended slowly on the end of a metal wire connected to a parachute. When an OP or perimeter bunker saw something suspicious, they would contact CSC by field phone or radio and request illumination. CSC would then relay the

appropriate coordinates to the battery so they could hang and fire the round.

If needed, a "flare ship" could be summoned to the perimeter. These were specially equipped helicopters or C-47 transports that could slowly circle an area, dropping flares at regular intervals. A pair of flare ships flying at intervals could keep an area illuminated all night.

Each perimeter bunker, and in fact the whole far-flung base perimeter, was guarded by a type of tropical no man's land filled with barbed wire and mines. Most civilians who have never seen Vietnam can't understand why these death strips didn't halt the approach of Viet Cong sapper teams. They just couldn't understand what a totally brave, versatile and determined enemy the Viet Cong were. The small Orientals would strip down to near naked, grease their bodies and wiggle their way through the tightest coils of barbed wire, disarming mines as they went. Under cover of darkness and bad weather, they could penetrate any perimeter, avoiding all obstacles, to emerge on the other side without so much as a scratch.

One of the bad things about these death strips was that they quickly became overgrown with tropical vegetation that was almost impossible to clear away due to the barbed wire and mines. With men rotating back to the States every day, it was easy to lose track of exactly where the mines were planted. Periodically, either South Vietnamese or Korean Marines were used on the perimeter and of course they put out their mines. After awhile it became so confused, nobody seemed to know exactly what was and wasn't out there. The Air Force decided to use a herbicide called Agent Orange to kill the vegetation. So, U.S. Air Force Security Police were exposed to the controversial chemical just like their counterparts in the Army, Navy and Marines.

OP and perimeter bunkers, due to a shortage of men, were not built close enough together to close off all possible avenues of approach. To fill in the gaps, listening posts and ambush posts were established. The secret of effective listening and ambush posts was that the location must be different each night. Men were dropped off on the perimeter with orders not to dig holes, clear away any brush, or leave any evidence of their position. The object was that a lone man, carefully positioned at a different spot each night, was more likely to detect VC sappers attempting to penetrate the perimeter than either a walking sentry or men in a bunker. The man on listening post was not to engage the enemy but rather detect their presence and report it using a portable radio transmitter.

An ambush post was basically the same thing as a listening post, except it was usually two or more men with M-16s or an M-60 machine gun. They were supposed to actually engage the enemy. Listening and ambush posts were reserved for seasoned veterans. It was dangerous duty and the men who pulled it knew it. Security Police in Vietnam referred to listening posts and ambush posts as the Russian roulette method of base defense.

Security Police also pulled search-and-destroy patrols similar to those conducted by the Marines and infantry. One of the basic principles of defense is that you can't allow the enemy to group up or operate freely around your perimeter. The only way to ensure this didn't happen was routine, regular patrols.



Air Force Lt. Col. Eugene J. Kelly and Army Sergeant Lorenzo Beckwith inspect a Soviet-made Katyusha rocket launcher from a Viet Cong weapons cache captured near Bien Hoa.

Security Police, being perpetually short of men, had to use troops already exhausted by all-night guard duty to pull the patrols that took off shortly after daylight and sometimes lasted all day. What they were looking for was VC-built bunkers, signs of tunnels and mortar stakes. At Camn Rahn Bay it was discovered that secret cave-bunkers were being built directly under newly constructed buildings. Apparently base workers had scraped out these caves while buildings were still under construction. The purpose of these caves was obvious. They were hideouts for sapper teams. Many were discovered with stolen C-rations inside. Once the first of these caves was discovered, the rest were fairly easy to find using K-9 teams.

The U.S. Air Force Security Police were some of the first units to arrive in Vietnam and were destined to be one of the last to leave. By 1972, Vietnamization had reduced the number of U.S. combat troops in Vietnam to less than one division. Yet that same year, the U.S. Air Force still had over 20,000 men in the Vietnam theater of operations. U.S. Air Force planes were making bomb runs over Cambodia and Laos as late as April 1973 when the Paris "Peace" Accords went into effect and all U.S. military forces were withdrawn.

Without the U.S. Air Force Security Police the massive U.S. air support in Vietnam would have been impossible. And it was a tough job. Security Policemen exposed themselves to danger every day they were in-country. Security Policemen were wounded and killed in Vietnam. Those who survived unhurt went through one year of long, grinding guard tours in searing heat and pouring rain, and performed their duties bravely and diligently. They may not have been as glamorous as the fighter and bomber crews, but they were equally as essential. □

Edward Roberts served as a U.S. Air Force Security Policeman in Vietnam at Camn Rahn Bay in 1965 and 1966. Suggestion for further reading: The United States Air Force in Southeast Asia 1961-1973, Carl Berger (ed.) (U.S. Government Printing Office).