



# AIR BASE DEFENSE IN THE VIETNAM WAR

## PART 1 OF 3



Aerial view of Tan Son Nhut Air Base in Vietnam. The North Vietnamese Army and Viet Cong considered U.S. air bases ideal targets to attack using mortars, rockets, and recoilless rifles. (Courtesy of National Archives)

*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.*

— General Giulio Douhet, noted air power theorist, 1921

Air bases were critical to the United States' efforts in South Vietnam. The sites were entry points for military and economic aid, as well as stations from which to launch attacks against the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong. For their part, the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong recognized the air bases' strategic value. Damage caused, including losses in manpower, aircraft, and materiel, impeded allied operations and fundamentally weakened U.S. efforts in Vietnam. To protect air bases and blunt attacks, the U.S. trained dedicated defense personnel whose mission necessitated learning, adaptation, and vigilance to safeguard these strategic locations.

### Emergence of the Air Base Defense Mission

The U.S. Air Force was initially unprepared for air base defense in Vietnam. U.S. military doctrine provided little guidance. In World Wars I and II, U.S. air bases were traditionally situated far behind the front lines, generally beyond the reach of enemy forces. During the Korean War, the Air Force expanded its base police forces from 10,000 personnel in July 1950 to 39,000 by December 1951. Perhaps due to their expansion, local enemy insurgents tended to ignore them. By the Korean War's end, the Air Force still lacked sophisticated tactical doctrines and policies to guide defense in Vietnam.

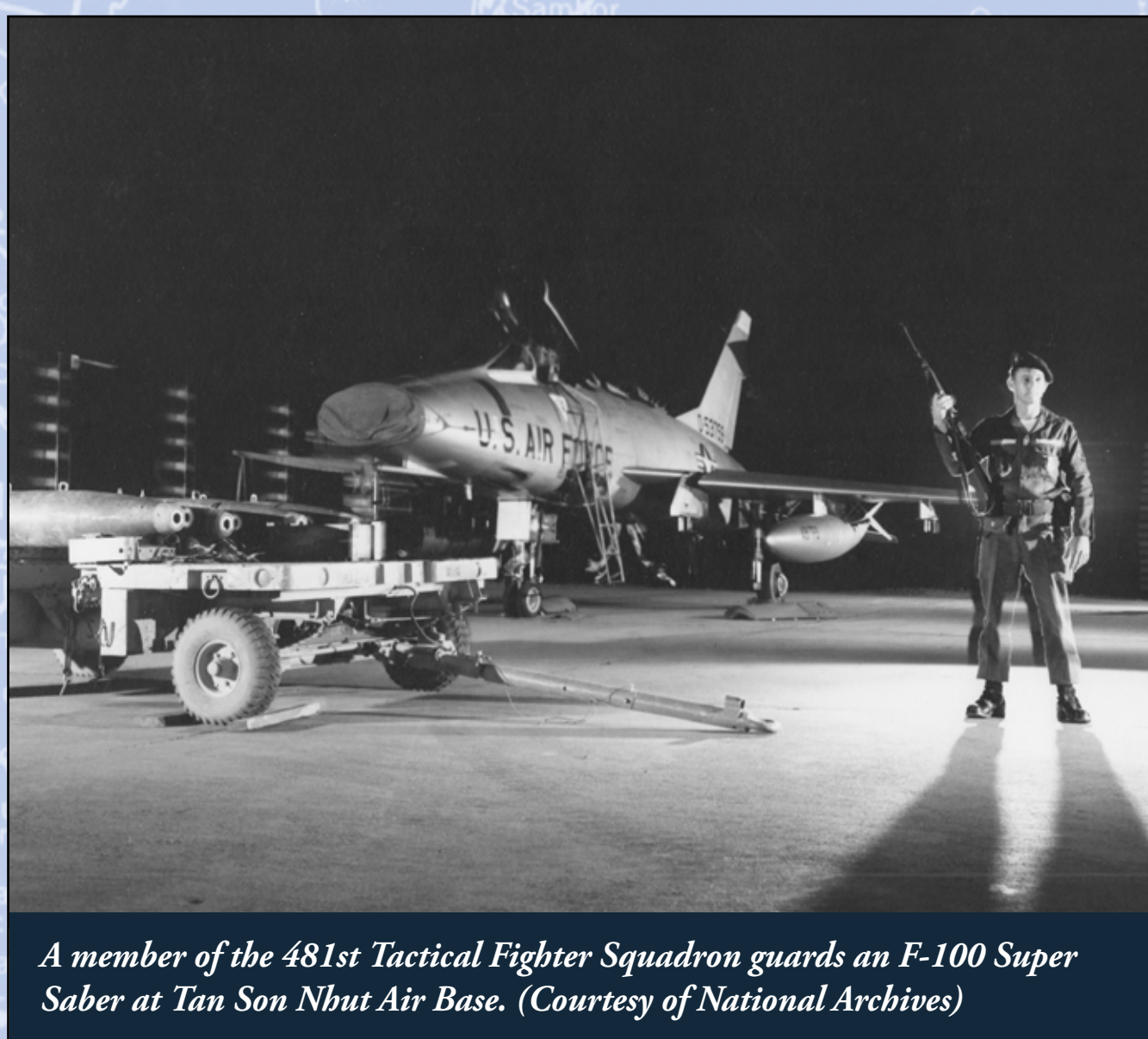
On November 1, 1964, the Viet Cong positioned six 81-millimeter mortars outside Bien Hoa Air Base and fired between 60 and 80 rounds onto parked aircraft and troop billets before withdrawing unmolested. The mortars killed four and wounded 30, destroyed five jet bombers and severely damaged eight others, and slightly damaged seven additional aircraft. The attack made plainly clear: in a conflict with no front lines and an armed local insurgency, base commanders and personnel needed to stiffen defenses and proactively guard air bases.

In response, the Air Force created an air base defense training program. Air base defense personnel "trained in combat tactics" and, according to Security Policeman Robert Roswell, the result produced highly trained "self-sufficient" forces that operated similar to "an Army unit." Lieutenant Colonel Ray Janes remembered, "We had 57-millimeter recoilless cannons, and .50-caliber machine guns

and armored cars....We spent 30 days at Beale Air Force Base doing infantry training. That's all we did was infantry....We ran up and down hills...and learned how to skirmish."

### Standoff Attacks, Sapper Raids, and Sabotage

U.S. air bases were stationary targets with limited visibility beyond the perimeter, which allowed the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army time to prepare their attacks. In collecting intelligence beforehand, the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army were rigorous and methodical. They used a three-tiered information gathering system that employed direct observation, local civilians who held prominent positions and had access to sensitive areas, and local informants who observed the base's rhythms. Captured Communist documents revealed the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army collected intelligence on multiple aspects of base life, including defenders' primary routes of maneuver, armaments, weapon emplacements, and patrol routes, to name a few.



A member of the 481st Tactical Fighter Squadron guards an F-100 Super Sabre at Tan Son Nhut Air Base. (Courtesy of National Archives)



A U.S. Air Force security personnel stands night watch in a sandbag bunker. (Courtesy of National Archives)



A 377th security policeman inspects the handbag of a Vietnamese civilian worker at Tan Son Nhut Air Base. (Courtesy of National Archives)

Of their chosen methods of attack, the Communists primarily relied on standoff attacks: which were long-range fires from mobile weapon emplacements. Sapper (enemy engineer) attacks were less common. Though the threat of sabotage existed, Communist forces rarely used it.

The North Vietnamese Army and Viet Cong overwhelmingly preferred standoff attacks as their primary means of attack. In placing themselves just outside of the installation's visual range, the Communists took advantage of the U.S. Air Force's dependence on large installations and their limited control over the surrounding area. The Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army then struck from well-concealed positions. Early in the war, they attacked with mortars and recoilless rifles, but by 1966 Communist troops had introduced rockets obtained from China and the Soviet Union, which drastically increased their firing range. Lawrence Motzer, who served as an Air Force Security Officer at Cam Ranh Bay and Tan Son Nhut, observed, "we were always under rocket attacks."

Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army sappers occasionally launched raids against air bases. Sapper raids were designed around small "cells," which usually consisted of three specialists in base infiltration and explosive charges. Cells were part of specialized 200-man sapper battalions that often acted independently of the North Vietnamese Army's larger military structure. They employed secrecy and sophisticated intelligence to sequentially time their attacks. Elements of the battalion would often launch feints to distract base defenders and lure them from the Communist cell's point of infiltration. Cells avoided contact with base defenders, preferring instead secrecy, stealth, and surprise to inflict maximum damage before they withdrew. Their target time from insertion to extraction was 30 minutes.

Despite the thousands of Vietnamese civilians working on air bases, the Viet Cong rarely resorted to sabotage. It is likely the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army believed the risk of sending a lone saboteur too great, and valued Vietnamese civilians who worked on base for their role in intelligence gathering. The U.S. Air Force documented only two cases from January 1, 1965 to June 8, 1969. The more notable of the two occurred at Bien Hoa Air Base on February 8, 1967, when a secretly-planted, Soviet-made explosive device destroyed about 2,600 napalm bombs.

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## PART 2 OF 3



A dog handler poses for a picture prior to patrol duty. Despite efforts to reduce noise and mask their scent, North Vietnamese Army and Viet Cong troops rarely were able to fool the dogs' keen senses. (Courtesy of National Archives)



American military police stand guard in an M-151 jeep on the flight line at Tan Son Nhut Air Base following a Viet Cong mortar attack. (Courtesy of National Archives)



U.S. Air Force Security Police patrol the perimeter of Tan Son Nhut Air Base in an M-706 armored car. The vehicle came in three distinct marks: the V-100, the V-150, and the V-200. (Courtesy of National Archives)

*They want to take out the bomb dump. Take out some of the aircraft, and that's what we were out there for, to prevent that from happening.*

—Thomas C. Schmitz, Security Police, U.S. Air Force Vietnam  
(Quote Courtesy of the Wisconsin Veterans Museum)

### Three Layers of Defense

During the war, air base defense personnel established and improved upon three interwoven layered systems of security: intelligence gathering, perimeter defense, and defense in depth. Vietnam was one of the first wars to employ sensors capable of detecting movement for intelligence gathering. Security personnel learned and adapted to the system's quirks, which included sensitivity to high winds, rain, climate, and short battery life. Vietnam-era sensor technology was incapable of scanning great distances at 360 degrees to locate standoff attacks. Therefore, air base personnel positioned sensors along the most likely routes of the attackers' approach. As the defenders became better acquainted with the technology's limitations and capabilities, their counterfire accuracy improved markedly.

U.S. air base perimeter and quick response personnel were armed with the 7.62-millimeter M-60 machine gun, the single-shot M-79 grenade launcher, and, later, the M-203 grenade launcher, which was capable of firing 40 millimeter grenades in rapid succession. Though originally grenade launchers were envisioned for quick reaction forces' use in static defense, base defense personnel soon recognized their value in keeping nearby enemies off balance through harassment and interdiction fire. Because the Communists often operated just beyond the base defenders' reach, security patrols beyond the perimeter were exceptionally dangerous, and defenders quickly educated one

another in simple ways to maintain stealth while on patrol. Air Force Security Policeman Thomas Schmitz recalled, "Most of the time you could hear something out there, but you couldn't see them.... You made sure your dog tags were taped together so they didn't make any noise... little things like making sure that your canteen wasn't half full because half-full canteens slush and you can hear that stuff at night from way far away.... Little things that you'd never think about but they were important."

Sentry dogs arrived in Vietnam by the summer of 1965 and were immediately used to patrol base perimeters. They reached their peak number of 467 by 1967. The "dogs were trained to alert on the smell, the sound, the noise someone would make—the dog's eyes and nose, you just can't hide from them," Air Force Security Policeman Russell Elmore stated. Though trained to attack, most dogs detected intruders and warned their handlers, who promptly alerted base defense. Ultimately, the sentry dog's superior senses proved a reliable and versatile means to protect U.S. air bases. As the U.S. reduced its presence in Vietnam after 1969, the dogs were given a careful medical evaluation and those judged healthy were returned to the continental United States for further military service.

To enhance defense-in-depth capabilities, the Air Force introduced the M-151 jeep to Vietnam in 1965, where it served as the air base's workhorse for the duration of the war. In addition to serving in

quick-reaction forces, security personnel used them to address traffic incidents and conduct patrols on base. The jeep enhanced air base defense response speed and range, and the security personnel inside also carried increased firepower. "I had my M-16. I also manned a M-60 machine gun that I carried across my lap as we were on patrol. So that was a lot of firepower," Lawrence Motzer stated. The Air Force further supplemented the jeeps with M-113 armored personnel carriers and M-706 armored cars. The armored vehicles protected transported personnel and supplies from small arms fire and shell fragments.



A U.S. Air Force military policeman peers out over "mortar valley" to the southwest of Nha Trang Air Base, with his M-60 machine gun at the ready. (Courtesy of National Archives)

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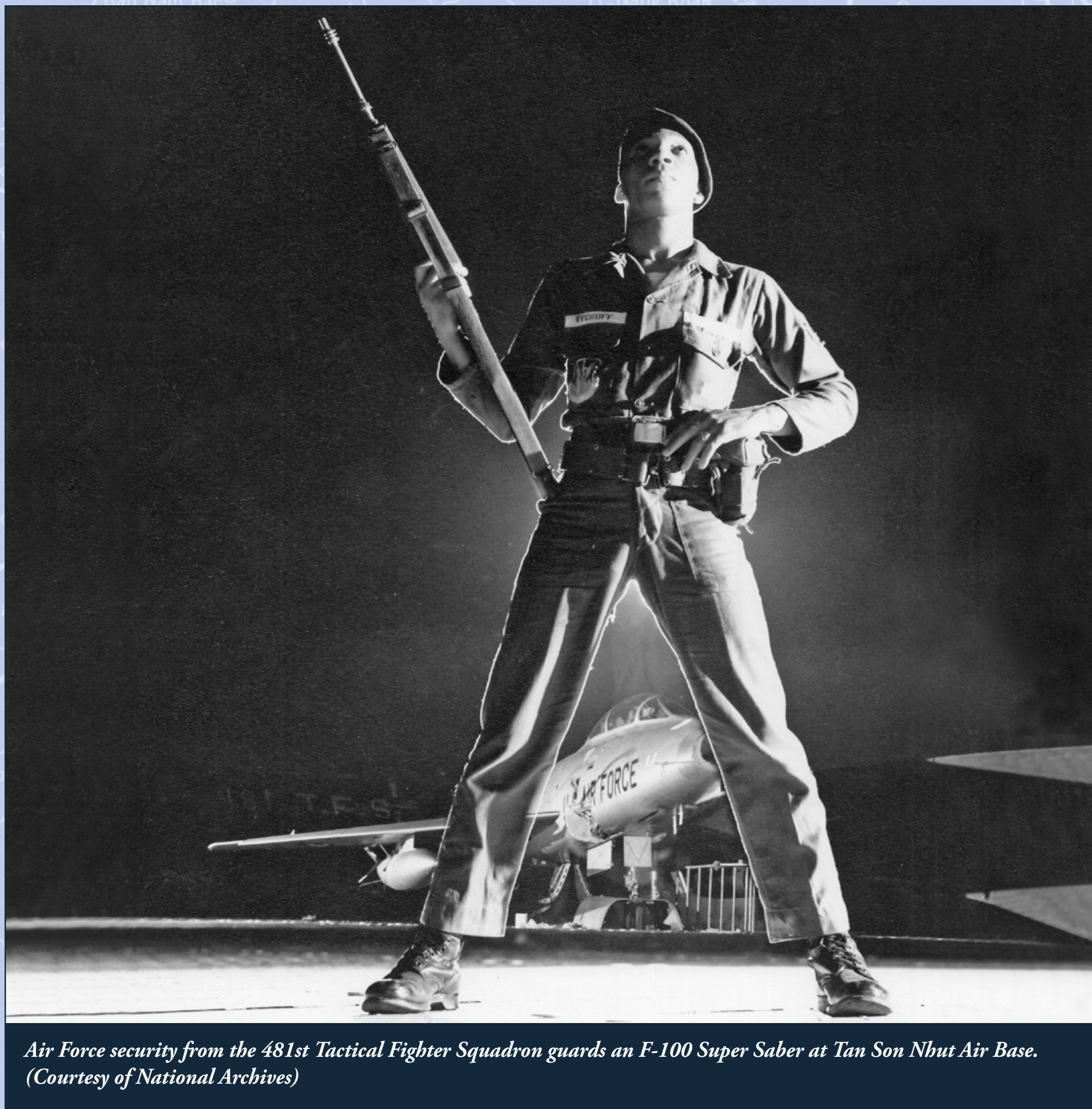
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# AIR BASE DEFENSE IN THE VIETNAM WAR

## PART 3 OF 3



Air Force security from the 481st Tactical Fighter Squadron guards an F-100 Super Saber at Tan Son Nhut Air Base. (Courtesy of National Archives)



Members of the 6250th Air Police Squadron and Vietnamese soldiers guard the perimeter of Tan Son Nhut Air Base from inside a sandbag bunker. (Courtesy of National Archives)



An early morning patrol passes through an abandoned village on Phu Cat Air Base. (Courtesy of National Archives)

***This is Blue-3. I think that this rocket attack is cover for a ground attack, so take cover from the rockets but poke your heads out every few seconds. If you see any VC, make'em 10-13 (radio code for dead).***

— Lieutenant Colonel Kent Miller, Commander of the  
3rd Security Police Squadron at Bien Hoa on January 31, 1968  
(Quote Courtesy of Air Force Security Forces Association)

### Large-Scale Attacks During Tet, 1968

Though Communist troops typically raided U.S. air bases in small numbers, on January 31, 1968, as part of the larger Tet Offensive, Viet Cong and North Vietnamese forces launched unprecedented battalion-size attacks against Tan Son Nhut and Bien Hoa Air Bases, which were located directly north and northeast of Saigon, respectively. It is likely the attackers meant to overwhelm both air bases with sheer numbers and prevent U.S. air support from aiding beleaguered units elsewhere. Following the attacks, captured intelligence revealed units had been directed to hold until reinforced or issued further instructions. Locally, the bases' capture would have aided in toppling Saigon. More broadly, Communist control over two U.S./South Vietnamese air bases would have resulted in a tremendous loss of life, materiel, and a crippling psychological defeat.



Melted jet engines and twisted metal on a U.S. Air Force F-4C aircraft which was hit by a rocket during an attack at Da Nang Air Base. (Courtesy of National Archives)

Between 2,200 and 3,000 Viet Cong and North Vietnamese infantry and 200 sappers attacked Tan Son Nhut while 1,000 to 1,500 Viet Cong and North Vietnamese infantry attacked Bien Hoa. U.S. and South Vietnamese defense personnel at both bases expertly moved to blunt the attacking forces while quick-reaction forces that included Army helicopter Light Fire Teams, AC-47 "Spooky" Gunships, U.S. Army infantry elements, and South Vietnamese regional and popular forces buttressed defenders and repelled the assault. At both air bases, the defenders' excellent training and firepower forced the Communists from the perimeter within hours.

Small arms and automatic weapons fire and probing continued at Tan Son Nhut through February 9, 1968, and sniper fire continued for several days at Bien Hoa. Communist rocket and recoilless rifle attacks continued to hit Tan Son Nhut and Bien Hoa throughout the month of February, resulting in considerable loss of life and base damage. From the fighting on January 31, the U.S. reported at least 900 Communist fighters were killed around Tan Son Nhut and more than 400 at Bien Hoa. In the latter case, the North Vietnamese Army made up an estimated 60 to 68 percent of the attacking force.

### Conclusion

From 1964 to 1973, the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army launched 475 total attacks against air bases at Da Nang, Pleiku, Phu Cat, Tuy Hoa, Nha Trang, Cam Ranh Bay, Phan Rang, Bien Hoa, Tan Son Nhut, and Bin Thuy. Of those, 447 were standoff attacks that employed mobile weapons emplacements consisting of recoilless rifles, mortars, and rockets. More than any other form of attack, air base defense personnel feared "getting hit by a rocket or mortar attack" security policeman Robert Roswell recalled. Training and adaptation to the war's realities led personnel to gain familiarity with and practice avoidance against indirect fire. Air Force Security Policeman Donald Lee Schmidt recalled at Tan Son Nhut, "the B-40 rocket leaves a whistle in the air...just before it hits....when you heard that whistle...you dove for cover and layed flat on the ground and jumped in your bunker and really just tried to dig as low as you could into the ground." Over the duration of the war, U.S. air base personnel suffered 155 killed and 1,702 wounded in action from Communist attacks. In addition to its air bases in Vietnam, the

U.S. maintained Udorn (also known as Udon), Nakhon Phanom, Taklii, Ubon, Khorat (also known as Korat), Don Muang, and U-Tapao Air Bases in Thailand. North Vietnamese guerillas launched five attacks against these air bases, one at Udorn, three at Ubon, and one at U-Tapao. In Thailand, U.S. Air Force base commanders oversaw allied Thai security personnel, who maintained base defenses.

U.S. air base defense in Vietnam may be best understood as a mission of continual adaptation. Throughout the war, base by base, defense personnel learned and adjusted to North Vietnamese and Viet Cong capabilities and shifting tactics. Their solutions were often compromises between immediate defense needs and resource limitations. The U.S. was never able to interdict standoff attacks, as manpower constraints prevented defenders from extending their patrols far beyond base boundaries. Instead, air bases developed hardened aircraft shelters impregnable to most rocket and mortar attack.

Despite resource limitations, defense personnel were diligent and creative in countering Viet Cong and North Vietnamese attacks. They developed new tactics, operations, organizations, and responses to threats. In adapting, defenders upgraded their weapons, technology, vehicles, tempo of operations, and procedures. They also placed minefields beyond base perimeters, improved fencing, lighting, and weapons emplacements. As a result, though the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army launched 475 attacks against air bases in South Vietnam, their operations suffered no major disruptions.

\* The Department of Defense's Vietnam War Commemoration would like to thank Vietnam Veteran Rick Fulton for his assistance in the creation of the Air Base Defense Poster Series.



A U.S. Air Force security personnel guards an F-4 Phantom parked under a hardened aircraft shelter at Phu Cat Air Base. (Courtesy of National Archives)

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