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Background Paper

on

Operation Safe Side

Between 0025 and 0035 local time on 1 November 1964, Vietnamese communist (VC) troops attacked Bien Hoa Air Base, 25 Kilometers northeast of Saigon. Positioning six 81mm mortars about 400 meters north of the base, the enemy gunners fired 60-80 rounds onto parked aircraft and troop billets. The VC then withdrew undetected and unmolested leaving behind damage all out of proportion to the effort expended. The barrage killed four U.S. military personnel and wounded 30. Of 20 B-57 jet bombers hit, five were destroyed eight severely damaged and seven slightly damaged. Increasingly, thereafter, U.S. air bases became routine targets for enemy ground attacks. The Air Force was ill prepared to meet such an enemy threat. (8:1) Sadly, this fact remained relatively unchanged throughout duration of the Vietnam war.

Air Base Ground Defense prior to Vietnam:

The Bien Hoa attack on November 1964 was without precedent in US Air Force history. Never before had unconventional forces posed such a threat to U.S. Installations. Throughout the history of the Army Air Corps and indeed all U.S military aviation, air bases had been virtually immune to ground attack. During World War I, our greatest air base defense weapon was geography. The enemy simply did not have the capability to project conventional or unconventional forces (guerrillas) into allied rear areas, where nearly all our air bases were located. In the absence of a significant threat, the need to develop aggressive security ground forces for base defense was simply not considered.

In addition, prevailing attitudes of the time, concerning the roles and functions of Air Corps personnel, also played a part in the development of this nonchalant approach to base defense. The views of Lt. Colonel James E. Fechet, Chief of the Training and Operations Group, U.S. Army Air Service, mirrored these prevailing attitude. In 1921 he said "Aircraft mechanics and other technicians need not be infantry trained. Rather, since their duties were entirely different from those of the infantry, they 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," he added, "enlisted men of the intelligence usually found in the Air Service Organizations could be quickly instructed and equipped to perform their part credibly." This view was formalized in 1927 by War Department General Order 7, and persisted to at least November of 1941. Just one month prior to the attack on Pearl Harbor, an angry Maj. General Frederick L. Martin, Commander of the Hawaiian Air Force argued against the plans of Lt. General Walter C. Short, Commanding General of the Hawaiian Department, to train Air Corps personnel for ground defense missions. (8:2)

In World War II, the Germans brought a new style of warfare to the modern battlefield - the Blitzkrieg. Their "lighting war" used a devastatingly effective combination of air and ground forces in sudden, smashing attacks that demoralized and overwhelmed their opponents. This new method of warfare relied heavily on the use of paratroops to seize and destroy airfields and other vital targets in the formerly untouchable allied "rear area." This strategy of neutralizing allied air power by surprise invasions of their air fields greatly contributed to the Nazi conquest of Europe in 1940. In the same manner, the key to the fall of Crete in 1941 was the loss of the British air field at Maleme.

This embarrassing defeat at Maleme caused British Prime Minister Winston Churchill to demand a complete review of all British air base defense policy. In a brutal memorandum dated 19 June 1941 to the Secretary of State for air and the Chief of staff, he flatly declared he would no longer tolerate a half-million air force personnel without a combat role. All airmen were to be armed and trained, ready "to fight and die in defense of their airfields;...every airfield should be a stronghold of fighting air-ground men, not the abode of uniform civilians in the prime of life protected by detachments of soldiers."

As a result of the charismatic Prime Minister's personal intervention, the full responsibility for the defense of airfields was handed over to the Air Ministry. To carry out this mission the Royal Air Force Regiment was established in February 1942. The regiment became for the British Air Forces, what the Royal Marines were for the British Navy, a ground based combat arm capable of defensive and offensive operations in support of the air mission. The regiment grew to a peak strength of 85,000 officers and airmen with 240 field and anti-aircraft squadrons deployed worldwide.

Closely watching the British experiences in Europe, the United States initially followed suit. However, the old attitudes concerning infantry type training and duty for Air Corps members were clearly still in fashion. We chose not to follow the British example, which mandated the arming and training of all "air-ground men" and the development of highly trained, specialized units for base defense. Instead we maintained our current training program for our maintainers and technicians and relegated the unsophisticated task of base defense to "special" units, the politics of the time deemed qualified for this type of menial duty.

On February 12th 1942, Gen. George C. Marshall, the Army Chief of Staff, approved the apportionment of 53,299 black Americans to the Army Air Forces with “the stipulation that air base defense units for the number of air bases found necessary be organized and that Negro personnel be used for this purpose as required.” So it was that the formation of the Army Air Forces air base security battalions beginning in June 1942 was influenced by racial as well as military considerations.

The overall plan called for 296 air base security battalions, 261 of these were designated as Black units. However, with Allied forces rapidly gaining control of the skies over Europe and the crippling of Japan’s naval air power at Midway in June of 1942, the threat to U.S. bases diminished as well. By 1943 deactivation of these units had begun. When the Japanese surrendered to the Allied Powers in September 1945, the AAF lost all its remaining ground defense forces with the phasing out of its air base security battalions. (8:3) Choosing the opposite approach the British Royal Air Force opted to retain the RAF Regiment, at the close of the war, as an essential element of a balanced Air Force.

The National Security Act of 1947 established the US Air Force as a separate, independent department equal with the Army and Navy. The Key West agreement of 21 April 1948 described the basic Service roles and each mission for each department. It identified base defense as one of a number of functions common to all the Services; “The responsibility to develop, garrison, supply, equip and maintain bases.” In the joint military jargon of the day, “garrison” embraced “all units assigned to a base or area for defense, development, operations and maintenance of facilities.”

However, the agreement made no specific mention of an Air Force ground combat mission. In contrast, the Army's key responsibility was to "Seize, occupy and defend land areas." Like wise, the Navy and Marine Corps were to "seize and defend advanced naval bases and to conduct such land operations as may be essential to the prosecution of a naval campaign. As you'll recall this is exactly why the British Royal Air Force retained it's RAF Regiment; to conduct those ground operations necessary to allow for the proper exploitation of air power as may be required in future contingencies. (8:5)

The Korean conflict brought about no significant change in the Air Force approach to base defense. The Air Force chose to hire local Koreans for perimeter base security and rely on the US Army for overall external area defense. As a result, during and after the Korean campaign, the main mission of Air Force Security personnel was confined to the protection of resources from theft or pilferage, not the defense of air bases from ground attack. (8:6) This was precisely the situation at Bien Hoa, on 1 November 1964. In fact Air Police personnel at Bien Hoa were even barred from performing security duties on the flight line. By agreement with the local South Vietnamese forces, USAF Air Police were only allowed to guard contonment and supply areas. (8:12)

The attack on Bien Hoa should have been for the U.S. Air Force what the fall of Maleme was for the British; a painful "wake up call" stressing the need for a comprehensive base defense strategy. While it did cause a firestorm of discussions at the highest levels, the Air Force answer was to request that the responsibility for the external defense of air bases be delegated to the more ground combat oriented forces of the Marines and the Army. This position was initially supported in a Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) proposal stating that "a zone enclosing each

base...and contiguous to its boundaries must be defended continuously to a depth and degree of saturation that...will prevent any penetration or the employment of artillery and mortars.” (8:27)

This position was quickly brushed aside by General Westmoreland in a December 1965 letter to his commanders. He stated that “I expect that our combat battalions will be used primarily to go after the VC and that we will not be forced to expend our capabilities simply to protect ourselves...Therefore,...all forces of whatever service who find themselves operating without infantry protection...will be organized, trained and exercised to perform the defensive and security functions, I have discussed...I reiterate that their participation in self-defense is not an optional matter, but an urgent necessity.” (8:28)

In this policy statement General Westmoreland was not breaking new ground of any kind. On the contrary, he was merely restating one of the oldest and first principles of military leadership. The simple, undisputed, fact that each commander bears the ultimate responsibility for the security of his own command. This was and still is a common sense reality of leadership for traditional ground and naval forces. However, in an Air Force raised in such a historically safe environment, this concept was so foreign, that it took Lt. General Joseph H. Moore six weeks to analyze General Westmoreland’s letter. When he finally disseminated it to his command, he attached the USAF interpretation of the actions directed by Gen. Westmoreland. Lt. General Moore told his air base commanders that General Westmoreland’s letter applied “specifically to US ground forces.” He further directed his commanders to take “all feasible internal security measures for self-defense actions.” He also ordered his commanders to keep in close contact with the ground forces assisting in local defense. (8:28)

Without the guaranteed support of US ground forces, the USAF chose to relegate these external defense duties to the marginally competent South Vietnamese military. Simultaneously, an increase in the number of security police personnel was authorized and these troops were deployed to South Vietnam for the purpose of improving internal security. By concentrating only on internal and perimeter security, the Air Force adopted a "calculated risk" approach to base defense, rather than expend the manpower and resources necessary to assume those external defense duties. This concept became the established practice throughout the majority of the war. With the exception of limited air operations, the USAF ground defense mission did not extend beyond the legal boundary of the base. This left the vulnerable approaches to these installations open to exploitation by the VC. This easy access to avenues of approach around Air Force installations led to these areas being nicknamed rocket belts, for obvious reasons.(8:28)

Operation SAFE SIDE, a concept is formed:

By late 1965, it became undeniable that the USAF would have to beef up its security forces in order to protect its vital resources. The Air Force reaction to the unwelcome task demonstrated just how institutionalized the 1927 comments by Lt. Colonel Fechet had become. The Air Force answer was to ship the various base defense components piece meal to Vietnam, man by man, weapon by weapon. Only after they had arrived in the combat zone were they assembled, equipped and trained. Fechet's words seemed to echo throughout the Quonset huts of South Vietnam. "In the case of domestic emergency,...enlisted men of the intelligence usually found in the Air Service Organizations could be quickly instructed and equipped to perform their part credibly." So it was that through On the Job Training, security police units were formed at the 10 major USAF bases in RVN.

These locally trained security squadrons mirrored their state side counterparts. Security personnel were as one Army officer observed with disbelief. "deployed as individuals much as peacetime interior guards along base perimeters, with out unit integrity. Yet, they were expected to fight as small tactical units, against locally superior hostile tactical forces." Nearly 4,000 security policemen were sent to South Vietnam in 1965 and early 1966. Their training in the continental United States (CONUS) consisted of little more than a few hours of orientation with the M-16A1 rifle. This training was usually conducted at Hamilton AFB, California, while enroute to Vietnam. (8:79)

SAFE SIDE I:

During these early days of the Vietnam War, the Air Force Security Police community was busy discussing the mammoth security problems posed by the South East Asia scenario. After a lengthy and difficult battle with the Air Force establishment, permission was secured to proceed with a test of the newly proposed "Combat Security Police Squadron" concept, code named Operation SAFE SIDE. According to a 27 August 1966 message from CSAF to CINCPACAF, AFIGO 90406, "The purpose of SAFE SIDE is only to determine the best way to train, equip and use Air Policeman to provide internal base security." (7:1)

Operation SAFE SIDE was a one year test program conducted during the period from 1 September 1966 through 11 August 1967. This program developed an Air Force Security police unit for the purpose of evaluating advanced security equipment and methods for air base defense. Additionally, first hand, in-country experience was critical for the continued development of air base defense doctrine and tactics in an insurgent or limited war environment. The SAFE SIDE

project was designed as a two phase evaluation consisting of ; (1) Training and (2) employment within a hostile environment. (3:1)

Phase I, Organization and Training. (5 September through 16 December):

On 18 July 1966 Special Order G-42, Headquarters USAF, announced the designation of the 1041st USAF Security Police Squadron (Test) effective, 1 July 1966, as the test vehicle for Operation SAFE SIDE". In April 1966, in anticipation of this order, three representatives from the contingencies and Special missions branch, Directorate of Security Police and Law Enforcement spent 13 days TDY briefing commanders and conducting interviewing volunteers. 65 individuals were selected for cadre positions and an additional 161 were selected for the squadron's remaining authorized positions.

Although the formal training syllabus was not approved until June 1966, it was anticipated that a minimum of 45 instructors would be required to train and organize this special unit. Training for cadre personnel was accomplished by sending them to several existing service schools. Training received by these individuals was extensive with the primary foundation being provided by the US Army's Ranger school. This nine week program conducted at Ft. Benning Georgia offered the greatest number of subjects considered critical to the SAFE SIDE unit training program. It was also the best available course for developing small unit leadership, skill and confidence in small unit, conventional and counter-guerrilla operations.

On 4 May 1966, 62 individuals began a week of introductory training in the basics of land navigation, physical fitness and the use of Army field gear. This was considered essential to bring them up to the most basic levels of competence prior to the start of the formal Ranger training on 11 May 1966. When the class graduated on 12 July 1966, only 19 Air Force personnel had

successfully completed the course, the remaining 43 had been eliminated for various reasons throughout the training. Due to the compelling need for instructors and the inherent time constraints of the SAFE SIDE program, personnel failing to complete Ranger school were allowed to proceed with their additional cadre training.

After Ranger school, cadre personnel were selected for additional specialized training in a variety of subjects. Four Ranger School graduates were selected to attend a two week special instructor course in O'Neil Hand to Hand combatives. Three more NCOs completed the US Army Intelligence course. Two more attended the US Army Special Infantry Weapons Course to learn the basics of operating the M-60 and .50 caliber Machine-guns and the 81mm mortar. Five cadre members received training in advanced weapons maintenance while attending the US Army Weapons Maintenance Course at Scholfield Barracks, Hawaii.

Two additional types of key training for cadre personnel consisted of Forward Controller training and Dog handler training. 25 cadre members received special Forward Air Controller training by members of the 7th Direct Air Request Flight, Wheeler Air Base, Hawaii. Due to an inability to get training quotas for the existing US Army Scout Dog Course. The Air Force established its own Scout Dog course at Lackland AFB Texas. Three Army instructors and one Air Force NCO with instructor experience were selected to organize and train 15 airmen and dogs in Scout Dog operations between 8 June and 30 August 1966.

These cadre members used the knowledge and skills gained through this intense training regimen to develop and conduct a unit training program for the remaining SAFE SIDE personnel. Their unit training program, modeled after the Ranger school example, was incredibly tough, with

an intense focus on realism. This 15 week course was broken into three phases designed to teach individual skills and unit operations which would ultimately produce a combat ready fighting force.

Phase I was an eight and a half week academic phase, where classroom instruction was provided in a wide range of subjects. These subjects were broken into four blocks of instruction: Block I, the "Special Subjects" block provided instruction on topics ranging from field hygiene and map reading to tactical communications, forward observer techniques and combat intelligence. Block II, was devoted to Weapons and Demolition's training, focusing on the 12 different types of weapons and demolition devices to be used by the unit once deployed to Vietnam. Block III, focused on Combat tactics stressing advanced field craft such as stream crossing, rappelling and huge amounts of patrolling. The final academic block was Block IV where the emphasis was placed on specialized training in Counter Guerrilla Operations.

Phase II was a grueling five and a half week course in applied field craft. This phase required students to apply the concepts and principles from Phase I, while living and operating under the most primitive field operating conditions. Phase III was devoted to Combat Locale Orientation and was one week long. The phase tied the entire course together by focusing all prior training on the operating conditions at the actual base in Vietnam, where they would be deployed and evaluated.

A thorough evaluation of this training program was conducted continuously throughout the course. It was determined that the 15 week course was satisfactory for a rushed "pilot course" and with further refinement and modification could be reduced to ten weeks. Additionally, the need for separate training courses for NCOs and Officers was identified. This would better prepare this group to assume their roles as Combat Security Police supervisors. It was also determined that all

individuals selected for instructor duty should be required to complete an Air Training Command Instructor course. Overall with only these minor difficulties the course was a resounding success. (3:2-2 to 2-8)

In a memorandum for the Chief of Staff USAF, dated 15 November 1966, the Inspector General, discussing the recent inspection of the 1041st Combat Security Police squadron described members of this unit saying they had "joined to fight." The high degree of morale of the 1041st was exceptional and had in fact become a "challenge" in their words to all US Army units at Schofield. This characteristic of high morale and esprit de corps was consistently displayed throughout the training phase of the SAFE SIDE program. Their pride in achievement was evidenced by their fierce pride in being members of the 1041st. There are numerous examples of this incredible enthusiasm and team spirit. For instance, after an eight mile hike the squadron voluntarily ran the obstacle course before double timing the remaining mile back the barracks. (3:6-2)

Phase II, In country employment, Phu Cat AB, RVN 16 January through 4 July 1967):

During this phase, the 1041st was deployed to Phu Cat AB RVN and assigned to the commander of the 37th Combat Support Group, (PACAF). The unit was tasked to provide surveillance and protection in depth along specified sectors of the base perimeter. In a letter dated 35 May 1967, the base commander stated "The security operations conducted by your unit since January 1967 has provided excellent perimeter defense in depth for Phut Cat Air Base. Your concept of operations which included observation and listening posts, active patrolling and ambushes, along with quick reaction forces, has been a highly effective security system. The success of your unit and efficient results were most noteworthy because as enemy infiltration and

periodic probes against the base increased, the security furnished by your organization definitely protected the base during the crucial phases of construction and development. During the period of your operations, the 1041st Security Police Squadron definitely discouraged enemy activities against the base, and prevented them from interrupting the tactical mission. No enemy damage to U.S. Air Force resources or personnel occurred during this time." (1:1)

The six month Combat Employment phase was completed in July 1967. The operation, while considered a resounding overall success, was put on hold while the results and lessons learned were analyzed. The SAFE SIDE program appeared doomed to languish in the kind of permanent limbo created by the bean counters and feather merchants who controlled the budget and manpower authorizations for the Vietnam War. Of course this all changed when the North Vietnamese gave the US Air Force and indeed the entire country another wake up call. That wake up call came in the actions collectively known as the Tet Offensive of 1968.

SAFE SIDE II

In response to the unprecedented battalion size attacks by the VC/NVA on USAF bases during the 1968 Tet offensive, the Seventh Air Force commander took the initiative. On 18 Feb 1968, he requested "that one Safe Side squadron be deployed immediately to Phan Rang on a TDY basis. The squadron is to come under the direct control of my Directorate of Security Police for further deployment and utilization as the situation dictates." He saw the Combat Security Police squadron in a back-up role, providing immediate response to high threat area and situations. (5:1)

The Chief of staff approved the Seventh Air Force request by designating the Tactical Air Command as the single manager to implement the SAFE SIDE Program. On 1 March 1968, the

Air Force Chief directed a two part program. Part one called for the organization and deployment of a "500 man Security Police unit" on temporary duty to SVN, after 30 days of intense training on the M-16, M-60 machine-gun and ground defense tactics. Part two required that a "fully, properly trained Combat Security Police Squadron" replace the hastily trained unit before the latter reached the 179 limit on TDY. This was obviously a crash program. (2:1)

Within two weeks the 82d Combat Security Police Wing, the USAF Combat Security Police Training School and the 821st Combat Security Police Squadron were activated. Manned by TDY personnel these units were organized at Schofield Barracks, Hawaii. The 821st and other Combat Security Squadrons were authorized a strength of 21 officers and 538 airmen. The hurried training of the 821st kicked off by 15 March 1968 and on 15 April the unit was in place at Phan Rang AB. The 822nd CSPSq was organized next and manned with TDY personnel from nearly 100 units. They replaced the 821st in August 1968, which rotated back to the CONUS. The third and last squadron, the 823rd was organized at England AFB, La., in October 1968. Its personnel, most of whom were permanently assigned were trained at Ft. Campbell Ky., where the CSP Training school had been relocated since August 1968.

The 823rd took over from the 822nd at Phan Rang in March 1969 and was in turn relieved by the 821st in August 1969. At this point the rotation cycle ceased. Because of the progressive withdrawal of U.S. forces and ensuing budget cuts the SAFE SIDE program was discontinued in December 1969 and all its CONUS units deactivated. The 821st remained in South Vietnam at a reduced strength of 250 until February 1971 when it too was inactivated.

How effective was the combat security police concept under these "real" conditions? The first major issue that must be addressed when answering this question is that SAFE SIDE II was a

crash program of fast paced actions. The problems of haste cropped up in the program's training. Because they were available, former members of the 1041st test unit were pressed into service as instructors. As previously stated very few of these individuals had any formal instructor training so they lacked the necessary teaching skills. Additionally, since the Ranger School model was used extensively in the test program's training, these new "instructors" relied heavily on that model. As a result the emphasis was on Ranger style field skills rather than the principles of base defense and perimeter security.

This resulted in a train wreck in the minds of squadron members between the training expectations of their mission and the realities of Security duty in South Vietnam. The most widespread misconception was that the combat Security squadrons would furnish external defense for air bases by manning ambush sites and conducting long range search and destroy patrols. Armed with this ignorance of their true mission and an attitude of fierce unit pride and superiority many personnel had difficulty integrating with the more conventional security units.

Employment of the Combat Security Police Squadrons (CSPSq) was another major problem faced by these units. The concept called for the entire squadron to operate a one cohesive unit. In practice, however, the section, one officer and 32 NCOs and airmen was the basic tactical element deployed in SVN. At the deployed location, the CSP elements came under the operational control of the local security police commander. But, being elements of a theater wide contingency force, they were often re-deployed without prior notice to bases with a greater need. As a result, to lessen the impact of these no notice withdrawals, Security Police commanders were reluctant to place a CSP element in charge of a entire sector. Instead these highly trained and motivated personnel were used as fillers to cover personnel gaps caused leaves

and administrative actions. This shredding of unit integrity was the source of the bitterest complaints from CSP officers and NCOs.

However, in retrospect the impact of the CSPs on the base defense efforts can best be summed up by a widely accepted evaluation by a former Seventh Air Force Director of Security Police, he stated the Combat Security Police squadrons,

“Made a significant contribution to the air base defense mission. Of all the security police forces in-country, the CSPs alone possessed a tactical organization and the desired proficiency in the employment and maintenance of crew served weapons. In every instance they were capable of timely response to deployment requirements, in some instances, with no more than one hour prior notification.”

Its important to note that, at no time during the Vietnam war or since has the Air Force attempted or even considered the conversion of “its enormous mass of non-combatant personnel” into “fighting air-ground men,” as urged on the RAF by Winston Churchill in World War II. A select few personnel were identified as Security Police augmentees, but their effectiveness is limited due their lack of training. During the Vietnam conflict those engaged in base defense operations, security policemen and augmentees totally an estimated 12 percent of all USAF ground personnel. (8:112) After the Kobar Towers incident in Saudi Arabia, one has to ask the question: How long can the world’s most powerful Air Force continue to operate from bases which Churchill would describe as the “Abode of uniformed civilians in the prime of life protected by detachments of soldiers?”

Since the earliest beginnings of air power, the airplane’s necessary reliance on elaborate ground based installations has been recognized as its Achilles heel. This has never been more

evident than today as the US Air Force prepares to enter the 21st century. The airplane has become the ultimate symbol of military power and the dominant force on the modern battlefield. Yet as the power and sophistication of our aircraft increase so does the reliance on more and more elaborate support bases. We must realize the inherent vulnerability that comes with being recognized as the most dominant Air Force in the world. After Desert Storm, every nation in the world concedes that American pilots and their aircraft represent an unstoppable combination of man and machine that has no equal in the skies above the earth. Due specifically to this unequaled command of the air, our pilots, aircraft and support bases become the primary targets for enemy special operations forces. Any potential enemy realizes that the key to defeating the United States lies in the words of a very old Italian aviator, Giulio Douhet, who in 1921 said, "It is far 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."

So it is with the United States Air Force today. Perhaps the time has come to put aside the attitudes of the past and consider expanding the basic training of our airmen. Today, more than ever, we need to realize the most important skill every airman can and must possess is the ability and willingness to fight to defend our bases on the ground, so American air power can continue to rule the skies.

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