

# Revetments

The Official Journal of The Tan Son Nhut Association

ANNUAL TET ISSUE

"All Included - Non Excluded"

Volume 6, Number 4

The Tan Son Nhut Association, Washington, D. C.

January, 2004

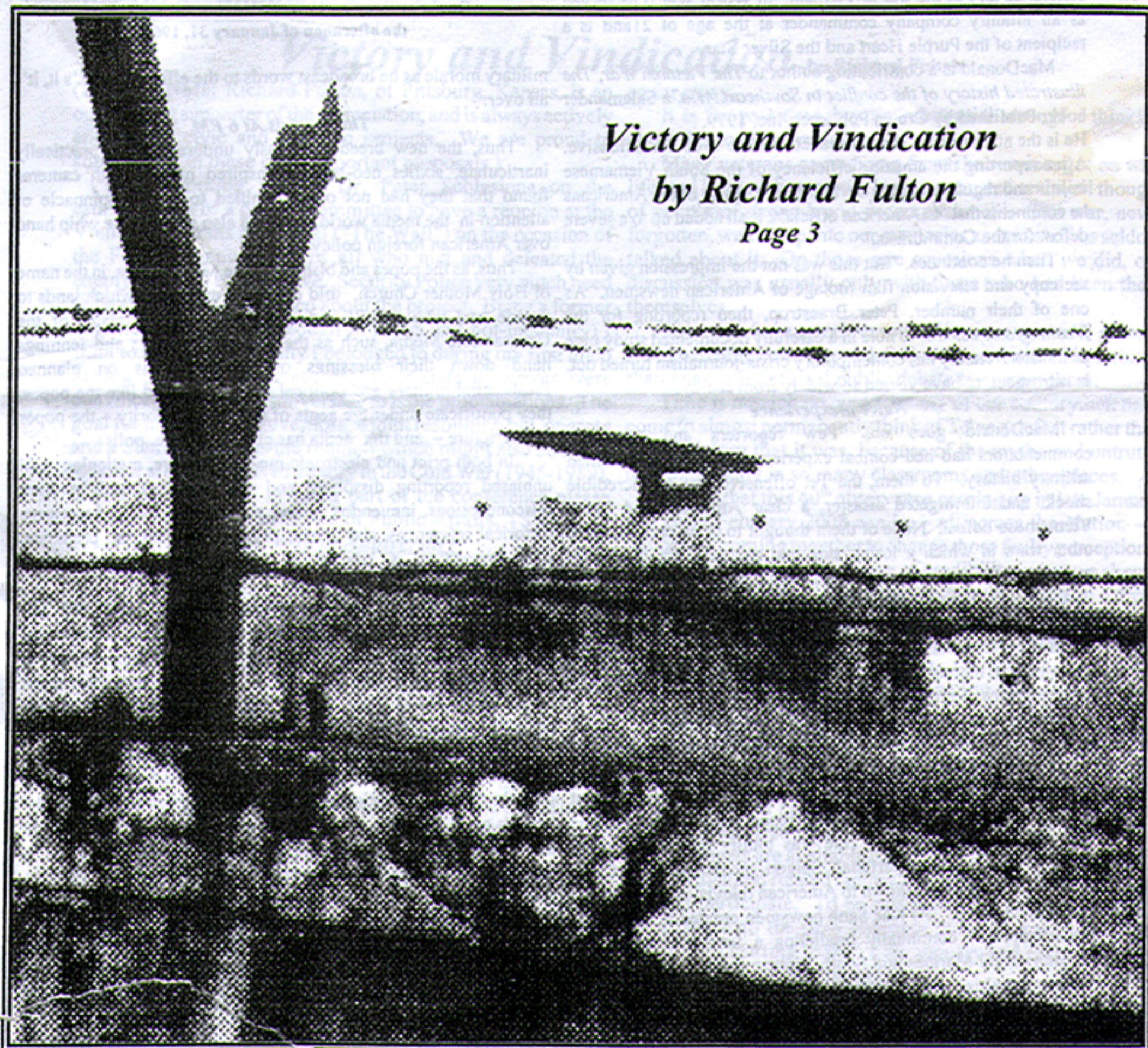
January 31, Thirty-Six Years Ago . . .

## *Tet, The Forbidden Victory*

*Victory and Vindication*

*by Richard Fulton*

*Page 3*



Bunker 051, on the southwest perimeter of Tan Son Nhut, where the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong forced entry onto the base at 0330 hours, January 31, 1968. For the next two hours the 377<sup>th</sup> Security Police Squadron fought one of the war's most heroic holding actions against six enemy battalions until augmented with heavier forces. Contemporary photograph by TSNA Member Frank Ybarbo, who was on the line that night as one of the defenders in the 377<sup>th</sup> SPS.

# THE DAY THE NEWS MEDIA TOOK OVER AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY

by Bob Need, Editor

Charles B. MacDonald was the Deputy Chief Historian for Southeast Asia in the US Army Center for Military History, in which position he supervised the preparation of the US Army's official history of the war in Vietnam. In World War II he served as an infantry company commander at the age of 21 and is a recipient of the Purple Heart and the Silver Star.

MacDonald is a contributing author to *The Vietnam War, The illustrated history of the conflict in Southeast Asia*, a Salamander book, Published by Crown Publisher, Inc. 1979.

He is the author of the chapter that covers the 1968 Tet Offensive. After reporting the amazing efficiency of the South Vietnamese militia and regulars and the devastating response of the Americans he comments that "to American officials, it all added up to a severe defeat for the Communists."

Then he continues, "But this was not the impression given by the copy and television film footage of American newsmen. As one of their number, Peter Braestrup, then reporting for the *Washington Post* was to note in a carefully documented study nine years later: 'Rarely has contemporary crisis-journalism turned out, in retrospect, to have veered so widely from reality.'"

## Naïve inexperience

MacDonald goes on, "Few reporters and television commentators had had combat experience and few had studied military history. To them, the Tet offensive was an incredible shock, and unmitigated disaster, a clear American and South Vietnamese defeat. None of them thought to draw parallels with other wars in which a losing side had staged a grand surprise assault – as Germany had in 1918 and in late 1944. Confirmed in their long-held skepticism, they were determined to expose the subterfuge and chicanery they saw behind the Johnson administration's claims of progress. There was no conspiracy among them, merely a group reaction based on shared biases and imperceptions; but the effect was much the same"

He points out the deliberate slant of coverage, saying, "Damage in the cities, light by the standards of World Wars I and II and Korea, was to most newsmen appalling. Television cameras focusing on one badly damaged block could give the impression of an entire city in ruins." He goes on to report that reporters claimed that the imperial palace in Hue was totally destroyed, where "damage was, in fact, superficial. Saigon, most of which suffered only light damage was shown to American television audiences as a smoldering ruin." At Khe Sanh newsmen created a "Dien Bien Phu syndrome" continually predicting a terrible fate for the garrison of US Marines and South Vietnamese Rangers. Civilian combat casualties made gruesome headlines, while the torture and execution of 5,000 civilians at Hue by the Communists was completely ignored.

And, back home, setting aside his vast combat knowledge and experience in favor of his prejudices, the renowned and once revered Walter Cronkite threw up his hands nearly shattering



On the runway perimeter, Tan Son Nhut Air Base, the afternoon of January 31, 1968

military morale as he broadcast words to the effect of "that's it, it's all over."

## The Gospels At 6 PM

Thus, the new breed of grossly undereducated, practically inarticulate, sixties neo-Marxist inspired hippies with cameras found that they had not only stumbled to the top pinnacle of attention in the media world, they had also attained the whip hand over American foreign policy.

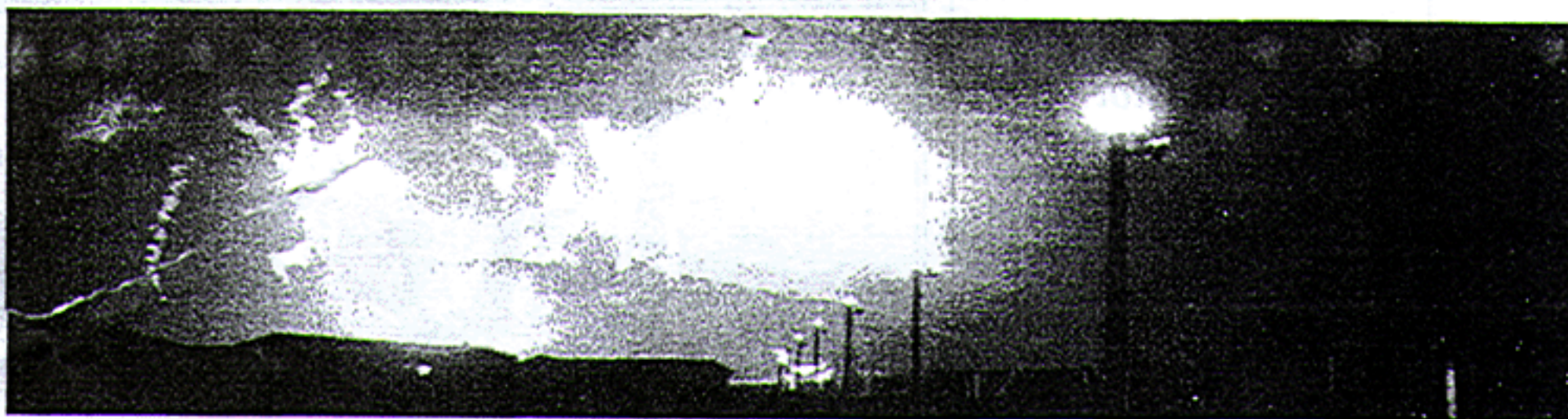
Thus, as the popes and bishops of the Middle Ages, in the name of Holy Mother Church, told emperors and kings which lands to invade and who to kill and enslave, the new prelates of the Unassailable Media, such as the Rathes, Brokaws and Jennings hand down their blessings or condemnations on planned Presidential military and political programs. And like the popes, they pontificate under the aegis of absolute authority – the popes had scripture – and the media has public opinion polls.

In both print and electronic media objective, meticulous and unbiased reporting dissolved and was replaced with creative misconceptions, innuendos, veiled accusations, totally inaccurate historical references, and blatant personal opinion and prejudice. Any opposition is labeled as "elitism" and "mean-spirited jingoism."

Up until Tet, combat coverage was reasonably fair and balanced, but immediately after waves of abuse of the military and the government washed over the American people from millions of television sets every evening. "Our brave boys" became "those rotten pot-smoking baby killers" fighting a losing battle while raping a helpless little nation in Southeast Asia.

And now, thirty years later we are torturing poor Saddam Hussein, and raping the peaceful little nation of Iraq. They have brought misrepresentation and outright distortion of facts to the heights of an art form. Some of the greatest and most successful military operations in history are ignored as the situation is described "as a mess." Using the tried and true rubrics of Vietnam they trot out all sorts of synonyms for "quagmire." The Allied coalition is described as a bunch of nobodies, shrouding the fact that our powerful traditional ally Great Britain, and Australia, and Spain and Italy, and many other staunch supporters stand shoulder to shoulder with us. Practically with glee they rush to report each and every killed in action in an accusing tone directed towards the Pentagon and the White House. This is a change in tactics because during the Vietnam War they didn't care how many dogfaces got scratched on a daily basis.

We can only hope someday truth will return to the front page.



On the Tan Son Nhut perimeter, the morning of January 31, 1968. Photo by the Editor

## Tet 1968 - 2008

# *Victory and Vindication* by Richard Fulton

(Editor's Note: Richard Fulton, of Pittsburg, Kansas, is an outstanding supporter of the Association, and is always actively engaged in civic and patriotic projects. We are proud to support him in these most important proposals.)

I am working with a Dr. Peter Schlesiona on the establishment of a central committee to have a reunion at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial ("The Wall") on the occasion of the Fortieth Anniversary of all who met and defeated the enemy's 1968 Tet Offensive. Security Police very much need to be aware of and informed about the project. Being a former dog handler myself (although in Libya and not-in-country) I want to see the community I belonged to during my first hitch having a shot at involvement. Four state governors were convinced on the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary to issue proclamations. The goal for the 40<sup>th</sup> is all governors, a joint resolution of Congress and a Stamp as well as the reunion which might also be a way to honor all who achieved victory in the Cold War (1945-1989). If you are interested in being part of the conference please contact me through the Office of Public Affairs, TSNA.

### The Fortieth Anniversary of the 1968 Defeat of the Communist Tet Offensive

An important event will take place in just four years.

The year 2008 will mark the fortieth year since the most important occasion for our Nation in the Vietnam War. It was late January and on through the spring and early summer of 1968 that we and our allies met and defeated the enemy's so-called Tet Offensive.

With so many veterans of that war now entering into senior years, early 2008 is a proper time to remember this important battle, to honor those who fought – and won – the Vietnam War's fiercest and most difficult engagement, and to challenge the misperceptions and lies about it that have been allowed to exist and persist for the past four decades.

The struggle to defeat the Communist enemy's Tet Offensive is not very well understood. It was one battle and yet it was also a series of engagements. The common thread was poor reporting with a lot of resulting confusion, of which opponents of the struggle, propagandists, the poorly informed and unnecessary apologists all made the most.

Those of us who were actually there had the experience seared into our minds and engraved in our souls. We knew the people killed and wounded. We saw the struggle at its grassroots, and we knew with absolute certainty how wrong are the perceptions today about that place and time so long ago and

so far away.

It is far past time for the substantial wrongful thinking about Tet to be corrected.

Many veterans came home from the service, got on with life, and became hometown leaders – trusted and well thought of people of strength and accomplishment. The war, never forgotten, went deep into our memories and most of us seldom talked about it. On those rare occasions when we did, our discussion was usually only with those who had been there themselves.

That was for a good reason. We were not well greeted when we came home, so we left alone the emotional lies, rather than engage in rational public debate to correct them.

Time is moving on, and so many of our countrymen have come to almost permanently think of Tet as a defeat rather than of the victory that it was, because of the myths and untruths told for so long in so many classrooms and other places.

So it is that this 40<sup>th</sup> observance coming up in late January and early February 2008 can be – all across the Nation – a moment of coming together to change those faulty perceptions.

We can do, from a position of credibility, what we should have done in 1968. That is face to face explanation – from veteran to citizen – about what really happened in Tet.

In four years, 2008 will mark a time in communities all across the land for Americans to engage in proper communication with one another, and to take a mature and thoughtful look back at the event.

Right now, what the history books say to our grandchildren about Tet is as twisted as was the reporting of the event all those years ago. It is far past time for those of us who were there to leave our place of shelter and re-engage, to work hard to set the record straight.

Fact sheets are available that provide a precise chronology of the battles and related factors. Please stop and consider how you can participate. To be successful, we must proactively make use of all the time available in the best way possible. That means starting today. Late January and early February 2008 is a time not that far off.

There is so much to do. Please consider becoming part of this effort. Please write to me. The accurate legacy of those who served in Vietnam is at stake.

Respectfully,

*Rick Fulton*

## Thoughts of Our Sky Pilot



The Reverend Doctor  
James M. Warrington  
Chaplain, T.S.N.A.

### Science and Religion

In an age when many people believe that science has unlimited powers even to the displacement of religious faith, it is reassuring to read the words of Dr. Vannevar Bush, honorary chairman of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and a pioneer in America's nuclear energy program.

"There is a misconception that scientists can establish a complete set of facts and relations about the universe," writes Dr. Bush in a magazine article. "Science proves nothing absolutely. On the most vital questions, it does not even produce evidence."

But he adds, science does have a contribution to make. It renders us humble. "It paints a universe in which the mysteries become highlighted ... which become ever more awe-inspiring as we gaze." Moreover, science continually reminds us that we are still ignorant and there is much to learn. "It is earlier than we think."

Because of its inherent limits science must often remain silent. This silence, he says, is the silence of humility, not the silence of disdain. "A belief may be larger than a fact. A faith that is over-defined is the vary faith most likely to prove inadequate to the great moments of life."

"Young men who will formulate the deep thought of the next generation should lean on science, for it can teach much and it can inspire. But they should not lean on science where it does not apply."

## Burke's Days at Tan Son Nhut

WELCOME TO  
THE TWILIGHT ZONE!



Dr. Bush adds these words about the role of the theologian. "He can accept the aid of science, which draws for him a wide universe in all of its majesty, with life in all its awe-inspiring complexity. Then he, the theologian, can step beyond, to lead all mankind in paths of righteousness and in paths of peace."

May we provide such leadership for the next twelve months.

\* \* \*

## VNAF/TSNA Reunion Off

Joint planning for a spring 2004 reunion in conjunction with the VNAF Association has been suspended since the VNAF have not yet selected a date. Plans for a TSNA Memorial Day meeting at The Wall will be announced in the next *Revetments*.

Founded 1995

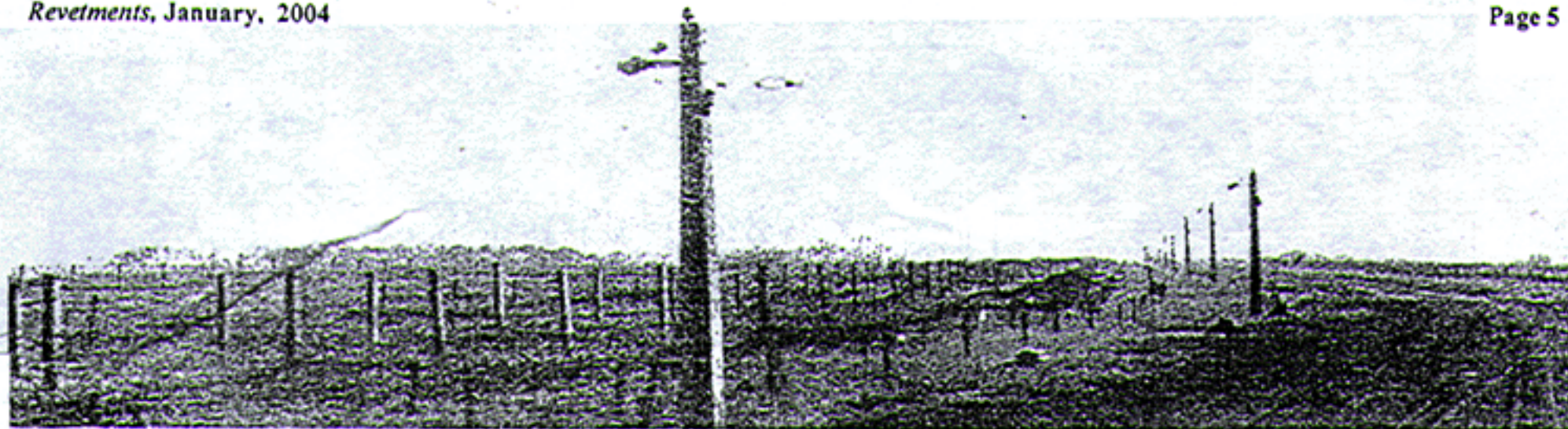
By Don Parker & John Peele  
*Revetments* is an official publication of the Tan Son Nhut Association, Inc. 6203 57th Avenue, Riverdale, Maryland 20737. The Association is a non-profit fraternal organization chartered under appropriate statutes and law.

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*Revetments* is published monthly at the Office of Public Affairs, TSNA, Suite 709, 330 West Brambleton Avenue, Norfolk, Virginia 23510. Telephone: (757) 627-7746; FAX: (757) 627-0878; E-Mail: [hercules29@worldnet.att.net](mailto:hercules29@worldnet.att.net)  
Pictures, stories, announcements and other material intended for *Revetments*, should be forwarded to Public Affairs not later than the 15<sup>th</sup> of the month preceding publication.

Membership Information  
Annual Membership \$20.00  
Five Year Membership \$80.00  
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Along the perimeter road, Tan Son Nhut Air Base. USAF Photo

## *Tan Son Nhut Attacked 35 Times*

by Colonel Kenneth Moll, Alexandria, Virginia

During the Vietnam War there were 475 attacks by Viet Cong and North Vietnam Army troops against the ten in-country United States Air Force bases. These killed 155 Americans and 154 Republic of Vietnam airmen and soldiers. Wounded in action totals were 1,702 and 504 respectively. The U.S. suffered 75 aircraft destroyed and 898 damaged; RVN aircraft losses were one third of that.

There were 35 VC/NVA attacks against Tan Son Nhut, stretching from April 1966 to January 1973. These attacks cost 45 American and 56 RVN lives. Wounded in action totals were 187 U.S. and 148 RVN. Six U.S. aircraft were destroyed in the attacks and 189 damaged. Five Vietnam Air Force aircraft were destroyed and five damaged. These losses were due mainly to 343 rounds of artillery that struck inside Tan Son Nhut during the war.

This information comes from an Air Force history Office publication *Air Base Defense in the Republic of Vietnam, 1961-1973*. It was written by Lt. Colonel Roger P. Fox, a Vietnam veteran and was published in 1979 as a paperback by the Government Print Office, but is currently out of print and no longer available.

All 475 attacks are reflected in the book's Appendix 1, "Chronology of VC/NVA Attacks On the Ten Primary USAF Operating Bases in RVN, 1961-1973."

### *Bien Hoa was first - TSN last*

The first attack struck Bien Hoa on November 1, 1964, killing four Americans and wounding 30 while destroying or damaging 25 aircraft. The 475<sup>th</sup> and last attack hit Tan Son Nhut just 92 minutes before the Vietnam Cease-Fire at 0800, January 28, 1973. Eleven rounds impacted on base, killing two RVN servicemen and wounding four (by this time virtually all Americans had left Vietnam).

For each of the 35 Tan Son Nhut attacks "Standoff" tactics were involved. The enemy stood off outside Tan Son Nhut and fired weapons from a distance to evade defensive fire from the base. Typical VC artillery weapons were 82 mm. mortars, 57-/75 mm. recoilless rifles and 107 mm., 122 mm. and 140

mm. rocket launchers. All these could be man-packed just about anywhere or transported by waterway, oxcart, bicycle or truck. Of course, enemy heavy and light machine guns, rifles and side arms were used also.

Fox's book says that "new coverage of the attacks consistently portrayed the VC/NVA as successful and the allies as inept." He also notes, unsurprisingly, that such attacks undermined Allied troop morale and diverted them from offensive activities to defensive.

In two Tan Son Nhut attacks, the enemy employed other tactics as well as Standoff. On December 4, 1966, they used "Sapper" tactics. Sappers were small groups of men who tried to intrude undetected onto the base in order to plant and detonate explosives at pre-selected targets. Lightly armed, sappers avoided contact if possible and tried to complete their mission and withdraw within 30 minutes.

### *1968 sees Monumental Attacks*

The second instance of using more than Standoff techniques came on January 31, 1968, when the enemy's Tet offensive began at Tan Son Nhut. This was a monumental attack described as "multi battalion." The VC/NVA made elaborate preparations and dedicated one Sapper and four infantry battalions to the attack. The intent was to overrun and hold all of Tan Son Nhut. Battalion assembly areas were placed about 9-12 hours marching time, maybe 30 kilometers, from Tan Son Nhut. When the order came to move, clandestine VC/NVA forces marched to Tan Son Nhut mostly through paddies, jungles and swamps, depending on night, camouflage and carefully selected routes. Arriving without warning at 0320 hrs. they cut perimeter fences and immediately attacked the base. The enemy didn't succeed in capturing Tan Son Nhut, of course. But they did kill 23 Americans and wounded 86; RVN casualties were slightly higher. Aircraft losses were less severe - the U.S. had 13 damaged. Notably, 157 VC/NVA were killed, evidently on-base, and are buried in a mass grave. Nine of the enemy were captured.

Bien Hoa experienced a similar but smaller multi-battalion  
(See 35 Attacks, continued on Page 6)



Nightly flares illuminate the runways at Tan Son Nhut. USAF Photo

### 35 Attacks, continued from Page 5

attack launched 20 minutes earlier that same night. Interestingly, the book cites enemy casualties only for these two attacks. No such data is presented for the other 473 attacks during the Vietnam War, presumably because VC/NVA Standoff methods allowed them to carry away most of their killed and wounded. Lt. Colonel Fox describes these two Tet attacks at Tan Son Nhut and Bien Hoa as "... the most sensational and highly publicized of all VC/NVA operations against U.S. air bases. Without precedent or sequel, these two simultaneous attacks were unique in the history of air base defense in the Republic of Vietnam."

Fox's book prompts many fascinating insights and questions. A few are -

-The two attacks against Tan Son Nhut in 1966 were a quarter of all attacks that year against the ten air bases. The one on April 13, 1966, had an astounding 243 rounds explode inside Tan Son Nhut, setting a record never again equaled. In terms of rounds received on base, the April 13 Standoff attack accounted for almost half the 443 impacts in all 1966 attacks. Only DaNang (189 rounds on February 27, 1967) and Bin Thuy (110 rounds on March 5, 1968) ever got over a hundred Standoff rounds in one attack.

- Tan Son Nhut dodged the bullet in 1967 - there were no attacks even though Vietnam as a whole had twice as many attacks (17) as in 1966. Attacks in 1967 focused mainly on DaNang, Bin Thuy, and Bien Hoa. Tan Son Nhut also escaped attack in 1970 when there were 106 attacks Vietnam-wide.

-The year of Tet, 1968, set the record for number of airbase attacks, 121. Tan Son Nhut got 24 of them. When Tet began at the end of January with the Tan Son Nhut and Bien Hoa multi-battalion incursions, attack frequency jumped markedly. Intensive actions continued for five weeks, though with decreasing strength and ferocity. Activities after that slowed markedly until in October, November and December 1968, Vietnam suffered only one attack per month.

-After 1968 the number of raids continued at over 100 per year during 1969 and 1970 but then decreased to about 50 per year in 1971 and 1972.

-The scale of individual attacks shrank greatly after 1966 when attacks averaged 56 standoff rounds. Attack intensity then halved each successive year for four years - 30 rounds

per attack in 1967, 18 in 1968, 111 in 1969, and 4.5 in 1970. After 1968 the attacks became noticeably smaller and weaker - often mere pinpricks of less than a dozen rounds. Only rarely was anyone killed in those later raids. Obviously, VC tactics or capabilities (or both) had changed markedly. Had American tactics changed also, forced the enemy to cut prohibitive losses?

-Curiously, reductions in raid size then stopped, and in 1972 the average VC/NVA attack increased to 15 rounds. Could this be because most Americans were gone and it was easier to mount a Standoff attack?

Such questions can best be answered by those who were there. Many personal stories can be told to illustrate what happened during the listed 35 attacks on Tan Son Nhut.

Just as broad descriptions and statistics are important for the Vietnam War's history, people's experiences are vital too. They bring life, reality and comprehensibility to the big picture. As noted in *Revetments* Tan Son Nhut Association members are beginning to come forward with personal accounts. Those stories are needed - before it's too late - to become part of our over all history.

## *Machine-Gunned at Tan Son Nhut*

(Editor's Note: We are very grateful for Colonel Moll's very interesting and informative article. We feel it would not be complete without including the very personal encounter he had during the attack of April 13, 1966.)



It looked like a routine T-39 "Scatback" nightly mission to deliver Tan Son Nhut reconnaissance photos to Thai fighter bases for their morning mission briefings and target kits. When filing our flight plan we'd learned the weather was good and, unlike some evenings, there were no special notices or warnings.

I was left seat pilot, also aboard were a copilot, crew chief and one passenger. Shortly after midnight on April 13, 1966, I taxied the T-39 to the eastern takeoff position, making sure the high-powered landing lights and wingtip and tail

(See *Machine-Gunned*, continued on Page 7.)

**Machine-Gunner, continued from Page 6**

navigation lights were on. Even at that hour the sky was sometimes cluttered with gunships, helicopters, recon and special mission aircraft. We'd been instructed to keep all lights on - to see and be seen.

On takeoff roll halfway down the runway, I was puzzled briefly by glowing "bees" floating toward me from somewhere off the west end of the runway. Each would approach leisurely for a couple of seconds, then suddenly zip over the cockpit. Before even a dozen had passed, I recognized what they were - I'd seen them fourteen years earlier when flying F-80 fighter-bombers in Korea. Those "bees" were machine gun tracer bullets!

Tracers glow red. Their firing rate is deceptively low because only a few machine gun bullets are visible tracers. Viewed from a target cockpit, oncoming tracers look slow because there's hardly any change in windshield "angle-off." The tracers stayed almost at the same spot on the windshield until whistling overhead at the last moment. If their angle-off hadn't changed at all, the bullets would have been on a collision course with their target - ME!

Almost automatically, I reached down and turned off the landing light switch. Then I groped above my head for the navigation light switches and flicked them off too. The tracers suddenly stopped. Continuing the takeoff was no problem - I still had instrument lights and a dim red overhead light, yet these could not be seen from outside. To the shooters, my T-39 had disappeared.

Once airborne I pondered whether to turn my navigation lights on again but decided for the moment, to chance a midair collision. Without external lights, we headed north toward our turning point near DaNang. Naturally I immediately reported what had happened to the Tan Son Nhut tower. Almost as if he didn't quite understand or believe what I was telling him, the controller acted quite casual. He asked no question and offered no word of trouble experienced by others.

Neither did I receive any special information when we returned to Tan Son Nhut some five hours later. When we got on the ground all was quiet except it was apparent the base had been attacked. Many aircraft revetments were hit - but none of our half-dozen T-39s were damaged. My flight crew and I soon departed for some rest in quarters.

Some 35 years later I learned from an Office of Air Force History book that this was the first attack made against Tan Son Nhut by the Viet Cong/North Vietnamese Army. It was also one of the most severe of 35 Tan Son Nhut attacks during the 1966-1973 period. This April 13, 1966, attack killed seven Americans and wounded 111. Sixty-two aircraft were damaged. It killed two RVN airmen and destroyed two of their aircraft.

This destruction was caused by 243 rounds of artillery shells fired into Tan Son Nhut from covert artillery emplacements off base. (VC 120 mm. mortar range was 3 miles; in 1966 they began using 122 mm. rockets with 7 mile range.) Records do not show VC use of smaller weapons such as machine gun fire.

Anecdotes survive. Chief Master Sergeant Doug Campbell, then assigned to the 377<sup>th</sup> Air Police Squadron, writes it was his "worst memory of Tan Son Nhut . . . Charlie dropped mortars in the JP-4 tanks behind the tower area and lit up the flight line like a baseball field at a night game. The he simply 'walked' his mortars up the flight line . . . lots of damage to the aircraft, especially the C-130s (sitting ducks) ... After that night everything changed."

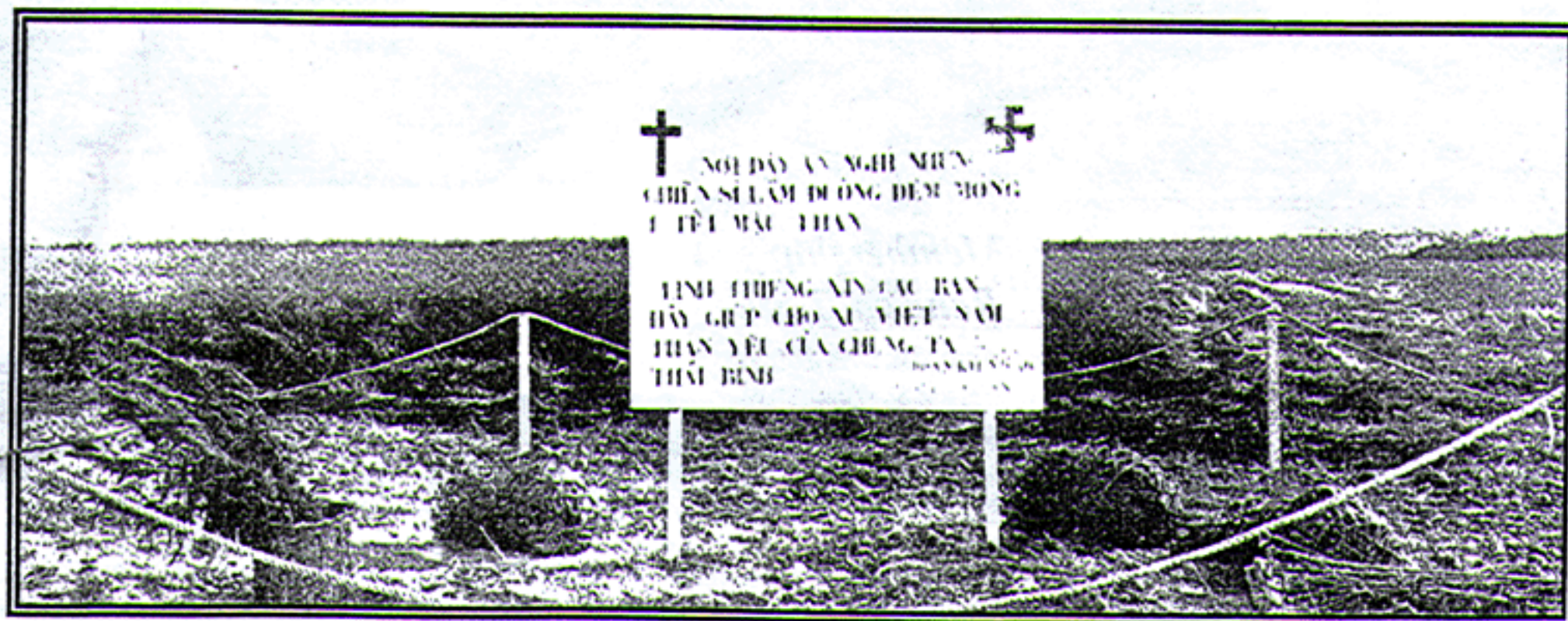
*Revetments* contributor, Taylor McKinnon, recounts how his brother John, a C-124 navigator, landed at Tan Son Nhut soon after the attack. The fuel farms were still burning. Stepping out of his plane, John observed, "If this is atypical day where you work, I would ask for a transfer!"

Taylor also tells about surveying damage the next day with George Juhasz, flight test Quality Control officer. They looked inside a four-engine C-121 "Constellation" where a mortar round had entered the open rear ramp and exploded, peppering all the wiring bundles and hydraulic lines with shrapnel. Up came General Westmoreland and an entourage of newsmen, one of whom commented on the damage. The general observed, "Have it back in commission in a couple of hours." Taylor notes, "Poor George stated 'It'll never fly again.' Oh, if looks could kill!"

It's interesting that there were rumors that this C-121 was used to broadcast TV programs to the Vietnamese - an idea of President Lyndon Johnson.

Since learning these things, I sometimes wonder if, perhaps, my T-39 was the first target of the first attack on Tan Son Nhut.

*Kenneth L. Moll*



The mass grave of the VC/NVA soldiers who tried to over run Tan Son Nhut, Tet 1968

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