



37TH SECURITY POLICE SQ.



PROVEN IN COMBAT

Newsletter for the 377th Security Policeman

Volume 6

2014



THEY SERVED PROUDLY

The Story of a Security Policeman 1LT Gerald E. Ingalsbe, USAF

The Missileer Newspaper
March 29, 1968, page 6

Several Earn Silver Star; Brave Attacks At Saigon

SAIGON (7AF) - The Air Force's fourth highest award was presented to two Vietnamese Air Force (VNAF) officers and five U.S. Air Force security policemen who braved fierce attacks by the Viet Cong in the Jan. 31 assault on Tan Son Nhut AB.

Receiving the Air Force Silver Star were Lt. Col. Luu Kim Cuong and Maj. Phung Van Chieu (VNAF), Maj Carl A. Bender, Capt Carl B. Denisio, 1st Lt. Gerald Ingalsbe, TSgt. Billy M. Palmer and A1C Alan D. Tucker.

The American Silver Star awardees had displayed their gallantry by repulsing wave after wave of the enemy force.

Major Bender, ordinarily operations officer for the 377th Security Police Squadron, found himself directing battle tactics when the police had to assume the role of an infantry

unit in the early hours of the Lunar New Year. When his two officers got cut off in the field, the major rushed to the site to resupply machine guns and coordinate the action himself.

Though he received a total of 54 wounds, he continued commanding battle operations, until withdrawn for medical care.

Captain Denisio was surrounded by Viet Cong in the early minutes of the battle. He left his jeep and jumped into a ditch, where he managed to remain undetected, all the while firing on the attackers and radioing positions to Central Security Control (CSC).

At the first opportunity the captain turned his jeep around and roared up the taxiway to rejoin his men. He then took charge of an element and began a sweep near the most intense fighting.

Lieutenant Ingalsbe came under intense fire that Captain Denisio underwent as he was commanding



FOR GALLANTRY—First Lt. Gerald Ingalsbe, assistant weapons systems security officer for the 377th Security Police Squadron, receives the Silver Star from Gen. William W. Momyer, Seventh Air Force commander. Lieutenant Ingalsbe was cited for his gallantry against the enemy in the battle of Jan. 31, at Tan Son Nhut.

underwent as he was commanding a flank on the opposite side of the taxiway. Lieutenant Ingalsbe brought his force into play at a point directly in front of the main enemy assault, blunting that strategic surge.

Sergeant Palmer was in charge of the first security alert team (SAT) to respond to perimeter bunker 051, the point of the enemy's major rush on the base. He held a machine gun position near the hottest of points during the heaviest attack. When down to one clip of ammunition, the sergeant withdrew for a new supply. He then resumed fire, taking a heavy toll on the enemy force.

Airman Tucker was positioned in tower "Tango Four" when the attack began. He radioed that his post was completely overrun, and continued to report enemy positions despite knowing that he would have no chance if his presence was discovered.

Attack on Tan Son Nhut Awards
377th Security Police Squadron
TET 1968 Offensive Awards as of
March 31, 1968

Legion of Merit

1 Recommendation, 1 Approved

1. LTC Carter, Billy Jack

Silver Star

12 Recommendations, 12 Approved

1. MAJ Bender, Carl A.
2. CPT Denasio, Carl B.
3. 1LT Ingalsbe, Gerald E.
4. TSgt Gifford, Bernard C.
5. TSgt Palmer, Billy M.
6. SSgt Ott, Robert E.
7. Sgt Coggins, Alonzo J.
8. Sgt Cyr, William Joseph
9. Sgt Fischer, Louis Harold
10. Sgt Hebron, Charles Edward
11. Sgt Mills, Roger Bertha
12. A1C Tucker, Alan D.

Bronze Star (Valor)

20 Recommendations, 20 Approved

1. 1LT Grover, Melvin G.
2. TSgt Hurler, Michael H.
3. SSgt Beldin, Bernard E.
4. A1C Gilbert, Stanley M.
5. A1C Hoelscher, Michael L.

Bronze Star (Achievement)

6 Recommendations, 2 Approved,
Downgraded 4

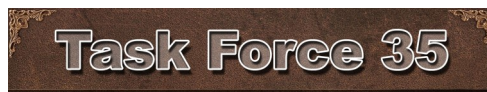
1. TSgt Bloom, James K.

Air Force Commendation Award

104 Recommendations, 86 Approved,
18 Pending

1. A1C Blades, Larry E.

*** If you know the names of any of those missing from the above list, please contact Charles E. Penley at email: cepenley@chartertn.net



Task Force 35 consisted of three platoons of U.S. Army personnel.



There were 30 men in each platoon, with one officer and one NCOIC.

Each platoon had a senior NCO from the 377th Security Police Squadron.

They were known as Army-1, Army-2, and Army-3.

Army-1 consisted of:

1. Gifford, Bernard (TSgt, USAF)
2. Farris, (Sgt)
3. Rojas, Isabel V. (1LT)
4. Boross, Laszlo, Jr. (Sgt, KIA, Jan 31 1968)
5. Brotherton, James E.
6. Conner, Garry W. (SP5, Driver, lead truck)
7. Ford, Ken
8. Hewitt, Tom
9. Hixson, Jerry Jr.
10. Loomis, Skip
11. Michell, John
12. Nielson, John L. (PFC, KIA, Jan 31, 1968)
13. Schaumloffel, David
14. Schroeder, Robert
15. Shearon, Tom
16. Whipple, Daniel B.

Army-2 consisted of:

1. Ott, Robert E. (SSgt, USAF, NCOIC, WIA)
2. Monahan, Gary

Army-3 consisted of:

1. Byrne, James

*** If you know the names of any of those missing names from Army-1, Army-2, and Army-3, please contact Charles E. Penley at email: cepenley@chartertn.net



THEY SERVED PROUDLY

The Story of a Security Policeman
Sgt Gerald W. Sommerfeldt, USAF

History Channel Interview
Attack On Tan Son Nhut Air Base
TET Offensive, Jan 31, 1968

Gerald W. Sommerfeldt
377th Security Police
Oct 1967 – Jan 1968

Worked Charlie Sector
During TET, Echo QRT
Wounded in Action

(00:05) Interviewer: All right Sir, just some technicalities here. Could you please state your name and spell your name for us?

Sommerfeldt: Ok, it's Gerald Sommerfeldt – G-E-R-A-L-D S-O-M-M-E-R-F-E-L-D-T.

Interviewer: What's your job now?

Sommerfeldt: Now I'm the controller of a company in Janesville, WI.

Interviewer: What's the name of that company?

Sommerfeldt: The company is SSI Technologies Inc.

Interviewer: At the time of the TET Offensive, what was your age?

Sommerfeldt: My age at the TET Offensive was about, I was about 20.

Interviewer: What do you consider to be your hometown?

Sommerfeldt: Janesville, WI.

Interviewer: What was your job during the TET Offensive? What branch of the service, what rank, what did you do for a living?

Sommerfeldt: I was in the Air Force, I was in Security Police at the time, at Tan Son Nhut Air Base just beside Saigon.

(01:00) Interviewer: Okay, so we're just establishing what your job was. So you were a Security Policeman?

Sommerfeldt: Security Police.

Interviewer: And what did you typically do around the base?

Sommerfeldt: Well, typically, in fact just before the TET Offensive, what I did was I patrolled the flight line, probably from about 6:00 in the morning until about noon. My shift every day was from 4:00 in the morning until 12:00, and about 6:00 I would go in a jeep and essentially, I'd patrol the flight line for people speeding. A very domestic-type job. Very cushy. Check out a jeep and you drive around, and you give tickets if you need to. It was great. [chuckle]

Interviewer: That's very interesting.

Sommerfeldt: Yes. Prior to [??] , the way it was organized at Tan

Son Nhut was you had three flights, an A flight, B flight, and C flight. One flight worked always from four in the morning until noon,

(02:00) the other from noon until 8 at night. The flight that worked at 8:00 until 4 in the morning, was very large, they had the K-9's. Because of the hours of darkness, that flight was twice as big as the other flights. So, when I went to work at four in the morning, there was a sector, I don't recall, I think it might have been called the Echo Sector, and the Echo Sector, I and another person went out and patrolled that with a jeep, because the Security Police had been pulled off of there, so we would just be, you know, kinda driving by and keep an eye on that for a couple of hours until it became light.

Interviewer: Echo Sector, that's where this fight took place, right?

Sommerfeldt: I believe it was, yes.

Interviewer: Now describe that, was it kind of rural, or...?

Sommerfeldt: Yeah, this was on the edge of the base. I have very good recollections of driving in that sector, and right across the road or something, there was a road that went completely around the base, there was a village type thing. They would be there working in the rice paddies,

paddies,

(03:00) and they'd be waving at us and everything like that from across the road. You'd wave at them and everything was fine. I heard later on that every house in that village was tunneled onto the base. I don't know that to be a fact, but that's what I heard.

Interviewer: Now, O-51 bunker was in there somewhere?

Sommerfeldt: O-51 bunker was out in that vicinity. What the O-51 was, it was just a back entry to the base at the end of the runway. I believe the runway was the O-51 runway, probably, in pilot terms. This just happened to be a back entry to the base, not the main gate, which was on the other side of the base. And so, there was a bunker there.

Interviewer: Pretty close contact with, let's put it this way, not much distance for an enemy to travel to make it to a runway at that point, maybe it was one of the closest places on the base?

(04:00) Sommerfeldt: Yes, as I understand, what they did was, on that little road that went around the base, the way this occurred was a car just came around the road, because that happened all the time, and a guy got out of the car, guy keeps having trouble with the engine near the O-51 gate, and they commence to, I guess he took a rocket or something, and blew up the bunker. Once they did that, there were the five Air Policemen in the bunker, Security Policemen, and once they did that, they were able to, there was kind of a minefield around the base, if you can envision a fence, a space, and then a road, there were some mines or something, and I understand they basically could blow up the mines with their mortars. They were extremely adept at mortars, much more than the United States. They would simply put the tube in the ground and fire the mortar and take

off running,

(05:00) as opposed to getting the windage and doing all those kinds of things that would take us a half an hour to get set up just to send the mortar. They would send one and take off, and then you don't know where the guy is. But anyway, they somehow, they then got up to that O-51 gate, which would allow them access to come on to the base. Then, when that alarm went off, that's where we ended up going.

Interviewer: Before we get there, the bunker itself, could you ever see the bunker itself on your patrolling?

Sommerfeldt: No, I do not ever recall seeing that bunker on my patrol.

Interviewer: So it was kind of down a trail?

Sommerfeldt: Well, the bunker wasn't, where I was patrolling wasn't down a trail but it was just in a part of the base that didn't require any security, they felt, in daylight hours. In darkness, you just wanted to kind of make sure it was not in, I guess someone would consider a danger spot. That's why it was kind of a nominal,

(06:00) just go out there and patrol it for a couple of hours until the sun comes up, and then I would let that other person, he'd go on to some other post somewhere, and then all I would do is continue on patrolling the flight line for the next six hours.

Interviewer: Let's ask about the overall war at the time. How long had you been in Vietnam?

Sommerfeldt: I was not there that long. I winged over in, I believe, October. So I was actually only in country for four months or so.

Interviewer: How did you feel about – was there any of the protest stuff

going on back in the United States yet? Did you know anything about this or was this just a war like World War II?

Sommerfeldt: I had a completely different, you know when I was given my orders, I'm going to Vietnam, you know of course, gee I didn't like that too much, because I had gotten, when I joined the Air Force I had gotten married. So I had only been married about a year.

Interviewer: How long had you been in the Air Force?

Sommerfeldt: I was in the Air Force, probably a year and a half. I went to basic training, then I spent about a year in Ohio,

(07:00) it used to be Lockbourne Air Base. And that's where my wife and I lived, and we got our orders. So, when I went over there, I guess I didn't have any preconceived opinions about it other than, yeah, this is something we're going to have to do, and when I got to Tan Son Nhut, it was, actually Tan Son Nhut was wonderful, it was an in-country R&R.

Many of these folks out in the country, they'd get, I think maybe two R&R's a year. They got one in-country rest and rehabilitation, or recreation, and then they had one out-of-country, and a lot of folks would go to Hawaii or something.

Everybody, I think, did that. But, Tan Son Nhut was an in-country R&R site. Gosh, we had a fantastic place to play basketball, we had a hi-fi tape center, I'm dating myself. We had a BX that would rival a K-Mart in terms of size, you could buy everything up to and including a car there,

(08:00) and have it waiting for you in, say, San Francisco when you came back. So, it was, you know, it was pretty easy duty there for a while. Originally, before I had the nice job of patrolling the flight line,

I had to do what a lot of Security Police do, and I had to sit there and I guarded airplanes, or I had a post, and they're allowing people to come through.

It was security in its purest form. I would cross the road from MACV headquarters there for a while. That started to change my opinion of the war a little bit. If you understand, Tan Son Nhut was essentially the O'Hare Airport of Saigon. In fact, I understand at that point in time it was busier than O'Hare Airport. We, the United States, we were a guest on that base, unlike some of the other bases, we were a guest. That kind of created some funny situations.

(09:00) I'll give you an example – when I was working this post, it was literally the entry to Air America, I worked it with a civilian policeman, a Vietnamese civilian policeman, and every time you work a post of that nature, you have your orders.

You're to check these people, these people, these people. Well, by the time you eliminated the people I could not check, it was almost, I was checking Americans. I always thought, I kind of thought that was kind of strange because I didn't know of too many Americans who were going to go in and blow up an airplane.

But I could not check any Vietnamese, any Koreans, any Filipino, basically no one else. That was his job. But, he might not do a very good job of his job, and I couldn't do anything about it. He had a little,

(10:00) a little shack he could go into, because there were monsoons, it rained. I did not go into any shack. We were not allowed to, so we stood out in the rain and he went in his little shack. He would go out and maybe direct traffic sometimes. Sometimes, I think there were some substances he might have been taking [chuckle],

I'll tell you the truth. So, that started to make me think about “What are we really doing here?” Because if you think about it, it's kind of a waste, or very inefficient to be checking your own folks.

Interviewer: So what do you think the real political situation was at that moment, that you would have found yourself in at that moment?

Sommerfeldt: Well, I think at that time, that was early on in the war, that was in the '67 time frame of the war, and I think probably everybody had,

(11:00) probably, fairly good intentions. But, what I'm afraid of, the end result of it was, you know, if you're going to commit people to a conflict, you've got to kind of do it 100%, and I think that was the danger at that time.

I don't know for sure what the objective was other than “Gee, we're going to win”. Well, that's great, that's a good objective, but you don't really have a plan to win. You hear stories of the folks out there taking pills and then leaving the hills, only to have to go back and take it again.

Well, if you think about it, I don't know if that's good planning or not. I think, also, we didn't know how to fight that kind of a war at that time, it was a pretty good surprise. I was probably tainted somewhat, being in a situation where we were a guest on a base. But, the biggest impression – I'm not totally against the concept of that conflict,

(12:00) I just have problems with the way that it was run, and I don't necessarily bring that down to the people, necessarily the people on the ground as much as, you know, maybe people at higher levels.

Also, if you know you're going to go somewhere and, essentially, your only objective for the most part is to survive a year so you can

come back. You know, it's kind of like I'm going to play a basketball game and all I want to do is not foul out. I don't care if I win the game or not, I just don't want to foul out. I want to finish the game and go home, not necessarily win.

It kind of bothered me in that since, in that it didn't seem like we were really giving all.

Interviewer: Did you think that even then, or was this in retrospect?

Sommerfeldt: I started to feel that way after working on that post, and when you start to see things like that, and you start to hear things,

(13:00) the Vice President of the country at the time, Ky, I think was his name, you know, lived on the base.

You have a sense that there's something, something not completely right, you know, and everyone is probably completely different than World War II, where, by golly, there's this Hitler, or there are these Japanese, and we absolutely have to do this.

Boy, there's just all kinds of incentive, where here, I don't know for sure what the incentive was other than most cases, a lot of people, especially people at the lower ranks, the incentive is to put in your year and get home. I think my impression has never changed of that. To this day I'm conflicted about, you know, was that a moral conflict, was it not a moral conflict, I cannot to this day decide.

(14:00) The only thing I do know is that if you are going to go in and commit to do something, whether it's that or today, you have to have a complete plan.

It's much like a company that says “We're going to bring out this product” and they have no plan as to how they're going to do it. “Oh, I think we're just going to have a product, and when we have that

product, I don't know how we'll bring it to market, we don't really have a strategic plan, it just seems like a good idea to bring out a product."

I kind of have a feeling that the planners that were, didn't really have a concise, if you want to call it an "exit plan", maybe you want to call it an "exit plan". It was just, kind of a, we'll just throw some people over there and we'll do stuff. Then we'll bomb, you know, and then eventually, I think one of the things, I think the assumption was at that time, you can bomb anyone into submission. I think we learned in that war, once we were in that war, we learned you cannot bomb anyone into submission.

(15:00) You can bomb them and bomb them and bomb them, the only thing you can, unless you wipe out every single person. People, it almost strengthens their resolve.

Interviewer: Okay, well let's go to that night. How was your perception of the, I guess the state of emergency? Any different that night than it was before, exactly where were you and describe your barracks and your bunker? Just create a movie for me, if you will.

Sommerfeldt: We had known, we were told ahead of time that we were on a high alert, a red alert, and it was made a little more difficult because during TET, they really celebrate. There are fireworks going on everywhere, all the time.

It's just unbelievable. We think we have Fourth of July celebrations here, there is nothing, I don't know where all the fireworks come from. But, anyway, we knew that there was, apparently there was something going on, so we're on somewhat of a red alert,

(16:00) so it was not completely, a complete surprise. But, we were, you know I was again off duty.

Interviewer: Did you take the alert seriously? I had heard that this happened quite a bit.

Sommerfeldt: Oh no, no. I did take, and I think most of us did take the alert, because it didn't happen all that often at Tan Son Nhut. At Tan Son Nhut, remember this is an in-country R&R site, not that much happened at Tan Son Nhut, it was very, kind of very domestic, and so when you go on red alert, you had a pretty good feeling that something is, may happen, but not enough to have everybody out working twenty-four hours a day, that type of thing.

So we were still off duty, being on alert, and as what we did over there, I was on, everyone was assigned, that was off duty, was assigned to a Quick Response Team, and that meant that there was a truck right outside of your barracks, and there were thirteen people on each QRT, and if the alert, if the alert went off,

(17:00) you would be getting in your truck and going to a pre-designated spot on the base.

Interviewer: Those trucks were equipped with caskets?

Sommerfeldt: Yeah, I guess that was a convenient box. [chuckle]

That had, you know, a lot of ammunition, it had machine guns, M-16's, etc. The plan would be, as soon as the alert went off, you ran out and got on your truck and you went to your designated spot on the base, okay?

You may not know that ahead of time, you would know that when you get in the truck, at least that's my understanding. When we got hit, the hatches, or the barracks, that we lived in, because of the inclement weather, because of the wet, etc., they were very airy. Basically, the walls were screen, and

with kind of louvers that go down so that the rain didn't come in. But, you could see out of, you could sort of see through the side of the wall. When the alarm did go off, the sirens went off,

(18:00) folks immediately knew it was probably the O-51 gate that was under attack, because you could more or less, you could see it in the distance. If you'd been on the base long enough, you knew that, oh, that's the O-51 gate.

And, so, the alarm goes off, we go down, get in the truck, and look at where we are supposed to be going, and it was the O-51 gate. So I knew that my QRT was headed kind of right for the brunt of things.

Interviewer: So, were you afraid?

Sommerfeldt: No, I don't think so. You know, you might be, but I guess it's kind of like adrenaline or something, you know, and you don't really think of it as being, I'm sure I was afraid subconsciously, OK, but there's too much happening, you know, and all of a sudden your mind becomes, you know a whirlwind, what am I going to do here, what about this, and I happened to be a Sergeant on the team, so I was the one that got the M-60 machine gun,

(19:00) it was an M-60 machine gun, and then several M-16's, etc. So I would be the one with the M-60 machine gun, and I would have a person that brought the ammo, because M-60 machine gun, you had cans of ammunition with it.

Interviewer: Were you comfortable with it? Was it an easy weapon to wield?

Sommerfeldt: It's fairly heavy. No, it's a fairly heavy weapon. It's not something that, you know, take on a stroll very easily. I would pity the poor folks that would have to go on patrols with an M-60 machine gun.

I don't know how much it exactly weighed, but it was a pretty big thing. Our plan was, then, we would go out to our designated spot, which was somewhere, the O-51 gate was right at the end of a runway, essentially, and so we were on the runway, we went out on the runway and, you know, got off of the truck and we're going to advance toward the enemy at the O-51 gate.

Interviewer: Leaving the truck on the runway?

Sommerfeldt: I believe, leaving the truck on the runway.

Interviewer: How many of you, thirteen?

Sommerfeldt: Thirteen of us.

(20:00) So, being the person that had the M-60 machine gun, my job was, essentially I would spray spare round, if you think of the old Westerns, and guys say "I'll cover you", it's a little bit of that concept, and then they would move up and, you know, you continued to advance in that fashion.

Interviewer: What time was this?

Sommerfeldt: I think it was probably, you know, 3:00 in the morning, 3:30 in the morning, something of that nature.

Interviewer: When you got to the end of the runway, what could you see?

Sommerfeldt: We didn't get to the end of the runway. I never got there.

Interviewer: Wherever you got, what, when you looked out and jumped off the truck, what did you see in front of you?

Sommerfeldt: They were popping flares, the United States, you know the government had been setting up flares and things. So that you had an idea, because it was still

dark. I don't recall seeing too many things at that moment.

You had lots of things flying around in the air, you know, the tracer bullets, things of that nature. At that time I didn't, I couldn't at that moment see any of the enemy at that moment.

(21:00) Interviewer: Did you have a feeling there was incoming fire from the other side of the road or something, or?

Sommerfeldt: Well, you knew there was, yeah, there's, you knew there was fire coming at you because there's a distinct sound of being on the receiving end of a bullet going over your head, okay?

You know what that is. So, yeah, there was some of that going on, you know? And we just kept progressing, nothing had happened, we kept moving closer and closer.

Eventually, with one of the flares that was up there, because it had a kind of an eerie red glow, as a flare would have, and so at night it's a kind of surreal type scene, I guess. But, at one point, I saw quite a few of the enemy moving in kind of a sideways direction. I don't know how many, but there was a good group, probably at least 20, maybe.

(22:00) Interviewer: If you don't mind me stopping you just for a second, when you get to wherever your truck stopped, you stopped for a reason. Did you stop because you felt, "Whoa, there's too much resistance for us to move up, we'll be shot, let's stop and get off on foot and try to move forward"?

Sommerfeldt: That's what the commander of the QRT decided.

Interviewer: And who was that, what rank was that?

Sommerfeldt: You know, I think it probably would have been at least a Master Sergeant or something, I

really to this day do not recall who that person was.

Interviewer: So you weren't making that call?

Sommerfeldt: No.

Interviewer: You were just a senior, one of the more senior ...

Sommerfeldt: I was, yeah.

Interviewer: You grabbed the M-60 when it stopped.

Sommerfeldt: That's correct.

Interviewer: But you didn't make the call to stop it.

Sommerfeldt: No, not at all.

Interviewer: But it was very clear to you where your objective was, the gate.

Sommerfeldt: Yes. Absolutely. We knew at that moment, that's what we were supposed to do. There are multitudes of other QRTs going to other spots on the base simultaneously.

Interviewer: But just you at ...

Sommerfeldt: Just us, at the O-51 gate, at that point.

Interviewer: You move out, so twenty guys standing there. Tell me about that again, seeing those guys.

Interviewer: Really, it's like that book?

(23:00) Sommerfeldt: Yes. Yeah, it is, after I read that book, I noticed that.

Interviewer: So you had, there was a flare and you thought you'd seen like twenty bodies.

Sommerfeldt: At that moment, as I'm advancing and we're getting closer, I don't know if we were then

100 yards, 50 yards of the gate, I'm not exactly sure. It was not that terribly far away, but I distinctly saw a group of the enemy kind of moving from one, if you think about it this was off the runway, off the side of the runway, because we were not on the runway itself doing our advances. We got off to the side, thank goodness.

Interviewer: Are you in grass?

Sommerfeldt: You're in some grass, yeah, kind of. I don't recall it being that tall at all. I just don't recall it being that tall.

Interviewer: And bunker O-51, was it in your consciousness at this point? Were you anywhere near it?

Sommerfeldt: Yes.

Interviewer: What did you see?

Sommerfeldt: But, again, you're quite a ways away, maybe fifty to one hundred yards away, you know, and I'm not paying attention to the bunker necessarily.

(24:00) Interviewer: Any flares going?

Sommerfeldt: When you see flares, an occasion, you could maybe see some of the enemy coming through there. I recall they had to sort of come through in single file, because they had to cut the wires to the gate, okay? So you couldn't, you know, you just couldn't come in in masses, they had to file in. I do have a couple of recollections of seeing that, but it was quite far away.

Interviewer: Was the bunker overrun at this point?

Sommerfeldt: Yes. The bunker was overrun at that point. The bunker was overrun before we ever got there.

Interviewer: Firing coming from it?

Sommerfeldt: Probably, I believe maybe so, because I do know there were, at that point there were probably enemy in that bunker, because our people were probably dead, there were four or five Airmen in there that probably got killed during the blowing up the bunker, if you will.

Interviewer: Yeah, I talked to one of those guys. But, when you get there, you're not immediately going, "Oh, there's the bunker, let's go save that". That's not even part of it.

Sommerfeldt: Well, no, right at that moment, all I'm trying to do is advance a little bit, spray around so these other guys,

(25:00) and to tell you the truth, I hadn't thought that far into it, and you know, gosh, what'll I do when I actually get here, you know? It didn't occur to me, maybe it would have occurred to me ten minutes later, I don't know.

At the moment, I was just spraying it around and then I can say, all of a sudden I happened to see a group of the enemy moving, you know, kind of hunched over, trying to go behind, there was a kind of a knoll or a little hill, you know, and I think they were trying to probably get behind that hill.

So, I kind of, I kind of, I don't know if the right term is let them have it, but I really concentrated my fire there. I kind of committed an error in that, rather than spraying around as you're supposed to, you know, short bursts, I kind of held on it and was trying to kill the enemy. Every fifth round, on an M-16, was a tracer round. So, if you can imagine a machine gun,

(26:00) if you just hold on it, then you essentially create a line, and if somebody's adept, I guess, with mortars or something of that nature, you essentially create a wonderful target for them, which is

what I think, I think that's what I did. Go ahead.

Interviewer: I was going to say, at some point were low on ammo, so you must have sprayed quite a bit of ammo out there.

Sommerfeldt: I did. In fact, that was one of our problems, is getting low on ammunition. Which, in retrospect, was probably fortunate, if you could say it's fortunate, in a weird way it was fortunate. Because, the fact that we were running low on ammunition, someone was bringing ammunition to us.

Interviewer: Did you drop any of those guys? Did you see any of the enemy fall under your bullet?

Sommerfeldt: I can't tell you the truth, I don't know. I do know, since I could see the tracers as well, only thing I can tell you is that the tracers were going right in there, okay? They were not going over their heads,

(27:00) so I have to assume, because I do know there were, in that vicinity, I don't even know how many enemy were killed but it was extraordinary, it was in the hundreds's, right at the O-51 gate, because there was a big concentration there.

Interviewer: So you were spraying [...] What happens next?

Sommerfeldt: Okay. I do that and then, the only recollection I have, and this gets very foggy, but I have a distinct recollection of, I simply bounced. Remember, I'm laying flat on the ground, as is other folk here, laying prone, and I just bounced.

Interviewer: You and your loader, or you and your assistant...

Sommerfeldt: He's right by me.

Interviewer: Where was everyone else?

Sommerfeldt: They're right near to us. Luckily, unluckily, I was the only one that got hit at that time. I don't know, afterward, but at that moment I'm the only one that got hit, and I didn't even realize I got hit, I just knew, I had a feeling that something, something must have happened.

(28:00) I didn't hear anything, didn't hear any explosions or anything. I just bounced. Then, at that point, things start to get kind of cloudy, because I had the, you know, well I was hit fairly bad.

I had a distinction of, the only way I could describe it is that, you're exhaling and you can't stop, okay? It's like, everything is going someplace, and then you realize something must be goofy, and then I think probably shock comes in and things of that nature.

Interviewer: Literally a feeling of lungs exhaling?

Sommerfeldt: That's the only way I can describe it. That's not in fact what's happening, but that's the only way I can describe that to you. What it is, I guess, is the blood's going, something, but that's the only way I can actually describe it, it's kind of like you can't catch your breath, you just continually exhale and something's not right here.

(29:00) Things, you know, things look different.

Interviewer: Before you continue, describe what, how you were hit.

Sommerfeldt: Then, I'm trying to find out what was wrong, you know, and you're sort of checking, and what happened was I got hit in the side, on my hip, in the flank, you might say.

Apparently, the mortar, I'm not even sure to this day they know exactly what it is, but it definitely was a mortar or a rocket, something of that nature, because it went in the

flank and it came around my abdomen, and it had not come out my stomach, it had, only thing it hadn't done is break the skin, so eventually they took the thing out and it was a four inch, a piece of mortar I'm told about four inches long or something.

Interviewer: It was under the skin, it hadn't ...

Sommerfeldt: Yeah, it hit me in the flank and it went right around my abdomen, around the rib cage, what it did was it shattered my hip joint

(30:00) and cut my sciatic nerve, and it cut my bladder and some things like that, but it did not go through my stomach. I'm told that if it had gone a quarter of an inch, another direction it would have cut my spine, or if it had gone another direction it would have cut this main artery, I would have never made it anywhere.

Interviewer: Were you, had you called, had you and your team, had you and your assistant called for ammo?

Sommerfeldt: Yes, we did, and that's why I say it was kind of retrospectively, it was fortunate in a sense.

Interviewer: How long do you think you were laying there, spraying?

Sommerfeldt: It could not, I'm thinking it could not have been more than a half and hour, forty-five minutes.

Interviewer: Oh, you were there that long? I thought you were going to say two minutes.

Sommerfeldt: No, no, no, no. All together, from, say, getting off the truck, yeah it had probably been a good half of an hour or so that, as we're doing this, because it doesn't happen that fast. It was a half an hour, forty-five minutes, maybe.

(31:00) Interviewer: So this was a half and hour fight right here, that your down there shooting, and running and ...

Sommerfeldt: Yeah, that's true.

Interviewer: You must have found several other, you know, perceived targets, I mean flashes, winks of muzzle flashes that you shot at in addition to this group of twenty guys, right?

Sommerfeldt: This group of twenty is the first ones that you might say, you know, wow, there's a target. Up to that time, you know, you might have seen things, but I'm continuing to do the spraying around.

Interviewer: Can you break that down just a little more for me, that half an hour period, before you see the twenty, before you get hit, what exactly are your guys around you doing? What are they shooting at? What kind of, what conversation's going on? [break]

Interviewer: Can you break down that period of time, that 20-25 minutes where you get off the truck and you're kind of just figuring out what to shoot at and what to do, what are you saying and what are your guys doing and what's the conversation?

Sommerfeldt: This is going to sound somewhat evasive, but there isn't a lot happening. We get off the truck, and we're going to advance toward that O-51 gate, and you don't advance thirty yards at a time, you know. I might only go up five or ten yards, okay, and they would come up, and I'm going to be honest with you, I don't even know if they were shooting at anything at that point in time, and it was, that was all it was, I would just spray and move up a little.

Now, they could have been shooting at things, okay. I knew there

were things being shot at us. I don't recall any conversation, any conversation at all amongst anyone. Not that it didn't happen but I don't recall anything other than I'm telling the person that's with me that we are low on ammo. We need to get some ammo and I'm sure that was being communicated, that was probably being communicated to the leader of the QRT. They probably had the radio.

Interviewer: So vocally?

Sommerfeldt: Probably, yeah,

(33:00) Basically, you know, hey we gotta get some ammo out here, and he had a radio, so he called in for the ammo, I'm assuming. I'm sure they were shooting at something, but I'm going to be honest with you, I don't know, I do not know. I was just worried about doing what I'm doing.

Interviewer: Sure. The shots coming at you sporadic or pretty heavy, or?

Sommerfeldt: No, just sporadically, I think. I don't recall it, you know, I couldn't say we were under heavy fire, the base was under heavy attack, but we as just our unit, you know, our little 13-man unit, not necessarily. I think, at that point in time the were more concerned, the enemy is more concerned, they want to get on the base.

Interviewer: So you're hit?

Sommerfeldt: Yes.

Interviewer: You start to, things start to cloud up for you, but you know, Bender comes in. So take it from, take it from your clouding up and the next realization you have.

Sommerfeldt: After I'm clouding up, then I, somehow I have a recollection that this jeep arrived.

(34:00) The jeep that brought the ammunition, I believe. Someone

came over to me, and this I really can't tell you who, but someone came over, apparently it was Carl, and so I remember someone saying "Can you walk, Airman?"

So I tried to get up, you know, and walk, but I couldn't, I just kind of fell back down, that's when I kind of figured out the leg wasn't working. At that point, still, I don't recall any pain or anything of that nature. It was just, probably, you're in shock, I suppose. I don't know. They got me into the jeep. Someone got me into the jeep.

Interviewer: There's this key part, which maybe you don't remember, but they say that you actually were firing as he was dragging you away.

Sommerfeldt: If that's the case, I just don't have a conscious recollection of it. I don't know if it was, I don't know if it wasn't.

(35:00) No recollection. I just vaguely remember getting to the jeep. I do believe the driver of the jeep, then, that was going to take me back, I think Carl may have been in a separate jeep.

I think he was going all over the base all night. I think the person that was in the jeep was a Lieutenant Grover or someone, I believe that was his name, okay.

Now, they get me to the jeep, and they're going to, I guess, take me to the base infirmary, the medical facility on the base. You have to understand, as soon as the base got hit, or the alert went out, all of the lights go out, there are no lights on the base, okay. So, we're going, and this is a large place. Tan Son Nhut Air Base was a large, large place.

As we're, I have a recollection, as we're going toward the infirmary,

(36:00) this is a little bit amusing, it could have been very serious.

[chuckle] Some of our guys, there were bunkers throughout, you know, on the streets, right beside the street there would occasionally be a bunker of some type in case of emergency, and I think a lot of the people, the Security Police that just got there, probably that day or the day before or something, didn't have a lot of experience or anything, and they threw them in these bunkers. I know they opened up on us.

One thing I do have a recollection of, when you fire an M-60 machine gun, the tendency is to go up. You almost have to hold it down because it's going to take off on its own. So, I remember, I have a recollection of some [abrupt edit]

Interviewer: You're on your way out, but you got newbie SP's in the bunker.

Sommerfeldt: Well, yeah. As we're going down these streets that, kind of the main streets of Tan Son Nhut, if you will,

(37:00) there were several bunkers, and I think at one point I have a recollection of someone firing at us with an M-60 machine gun.

That was the bad news, the good news, the bad news was they're firing at us, the good news is that they didn't really know how to use the gun, so it was probably going thirty feet over our head.

I recall the driver, you know, having to flash the lights, to say essentially, you know, we're on your side. They got me to the infirmary, and that night, all I had to do, I didn't do much at the infirmary.

To this day, I'm very disappointed, because I recollect them having to, they were going to have to figure out how to cut my clothes off. By that time I was starting to get into, then I was getting into severe pain. It was kind of bothersome. One of the sort of status symbols you

might have over there, is to have, especially, remember we're Security Police, we're not the guys out in the jungle, we're on these nice air bases.

(38:00) It was nice to get a survivor knife, a survival knife, which is a very long knife, and I can't go into how I got it right now, but there's a lot of bartering going on, anyway I had my survivor knife, and they said "Well, here, he's got a knife here, let's just cut the clothes off with that", and to this day I've never seen that knife again.

That kind of disappointed me. But, nonetheless, they took care of me, and then we had, since apparently I was one of the early casualties. I had to essentially wait for a load because they're going to take the ambulance to 3rd Field Hospital in Saigon. A very large hospital.

They can't risk for one person, so eventually, some other folks got hurt, don't know who, couldn't tell you to this day if they were civilians or whom, and we went out the main gate, Lord knows, probably as fast as the ambulance could go, because the main gate of the base was under attack as well. They got me to the 3rd Field Hospital, and then at the 3rd Field Hospital,

(39:00) it was like a large carport of stretchers, because, from all over the country.

It was just, that was very surreal, it was literally like a line going into a car wash, going into an operating room. Luckily, I got picked, and I say that sincerely, there were Red Cross people, I believe, something that literally had the job of deciding who to operate, who could go to surgery and who couldn't. So, I got in the line, and that was kind of the end of that. From that point on, it was just, you know, hospital time.

Interviewer: What do you think the impact of TET was, in retrospect, after all these years?

Sommerfeldt: Interestingly enough, I think that the impact of that was, we could win any battle there was

(40:00) because I think they, my impression is that they gave it everything they had, the enemy, North Vietnamese, the Viet Cong, gave it everything they had, and they couldn't win.

They probably, they had incredible amounts of casualties. I saw some after-battle pictures, at the O-51 gate, and as gruesome as this sounds, they were literally, pushing the bodies into these large ditches that they had to bury them. It was just, it was just incredible.

If you actually go back and see how many Security Police got killed in that battle, five I think. And hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of the enemy. So I think what happened was, you know you could win any battle there is, but that didn't win the war. It only won the battle, and that goes back to my original comment,

(41:00) you didn't have a really good, in my opinion, a very good strategic plan on how we were actually going to win this thing, because you can win every single battle there is and still not win, essentially, win the war, because of various kind of opposition, politics enters into it, the determination of the enemy enters into it. They'd been fighting for, I don't know how long, a thousand years? Long time.

Interviewer: Before we run out, the impact of the wounding, on your life.

Sommerfeldt: Again, it's a good news and bad news thing. Yes, the bad news is, I spent three years in the hospital. I spent two years and one good month of that, in a body cast from my chest down to my toe, and all of the nastiness that goes along with that, and all of the surgeries, and all of those kinds of

things, but in retrospect, in terms of my entire life, it probably was good in the sense that I probably didn't have a lot of direction prior to getting wounded.

(42:00) After I got wounded, the direction was kind of made for me. Luckily, I was able to go to college afterwards. You know, get into a good profession, being able to make a decent living since then.

I don't know what I would have been doing had that not been wounded. Now, I would have been walking a lot better. I wouldn't have had all those problems, but in the big picture, it probably wasn't the worst thing. Interesting as it seems, maybe that means the cup is half full instead of half empty. It depends on what you decide to do with things. I suppose you could mope and you could just say "That's the end of my life, and I'm just going to, not do anything and I'll live on some VA pension." You could do that if you wanted to, or you could elect to actually live life.

Interviewer: Very nice job, sir, thank you so much, we really appreciate this.

Sommerfeldt: Thank you.



377th SPS Receives Highest Unit Award

TAN SON NHUT AB, Vietnam (Special) — The United States' highest military unit award, the Presidential Unit Citation, was presented recently to the 377th Security Police Sq.

In ceremonies here, Maj. Gen. Robert J. Dixon, 7th Air Force vice commander, attached the citation's distinctive blue streamer to the squadron colors.

The award, signed by President Nixon, covered the period Jan. 31, 1968 to Feb. 2, 1968 and credited the 377th SPS for "... extraordinary heroism in connection with military operations against an opposing armed force."

The citation read in part, "... Tan Son Nhut AB suddenly came under attack from a large, multi-battalion hostile force using rockets, mortars, automatic weapons and small arms. The small 377th SPS, armed only with light weapons, reacted immediately, established strong defensive positions, and heroically

held off the attackers during the early, critical hours until Republic of Vietnam and United States Army reinforcements could respond."

This marks the second award the squadron has earned for meritorious service in the defense of Tan Son Nhut. On March 31, 1967 the outstanding unit award was presented to the squadron for action in defending the base against enemy attacks on Dec. 4 and 5 of the preceding year.

Commander of the squadron during the period covered by the award was Lt. Col. Billy J. Carter. The present commander is Lt. Col. Carl Roy.

Airmen and Soldier's who died on the West End of Tan Son Nhut Airbase, during the TET Offensive, January 31 - Feb 18, 1968.

SGT Laszlo Boross Jr.
13 Oct 47 - 31 Jan 68
Panel 35-E, Line 087

HHC 69th Signal Battalion

SGT William Joseph Cyr
Oct 45 - 31 Jan 68
Panel 36-E, Line 005

377th Security Police Squadron

SGT Louis Harold Fischer
19 Dec 45 - 31 Jan 68
Panel 36-E, Line 008

377th Security Police Squadron

SGT Charles Edward Hebron
18 Sep 45 - 31 Jan 68
Panel 36-E, Line 013

377th Security Police Squadron

SGT Roger Bertha Mills
30 Aug 46 - 31 Jan 68
Panel 36-E, Line 025

377th Security Police Squadron

PFC John Leif Nielson
28 Dec 41 - 31 Jan 68
Panel 36-E, Line 028

HHC 69th Signal Battalion

**Below you will see the weapons that
was recovered from the O-51 Bunker**

MAR

68

Highway-1

Tan Son Nhut Air Base, West End, view from on base, to off base.
Vinatexco Textile Plant is to the right and not in this photograph.



Echo Bunker-37, better known as the O-51 Bunker. This is a rear view looking west.

On the night of Jan 31, 1968 during the Tet Offensive, the enemy overran the bunker and used it against the American's.

The American's utilized jets, helicopters, tanks and ground personnel to attack and retake the bunker where four 377th Security Policemen were killed and Sgt Alonzo Coggin's was the only person to survive.







