
**COMBAT AIR DEFENSE ARTILLERYMEN
HHB 6th Bn 56th ADA (HAWK)**

**VC/NVA ATTACK ON LONG BINH AREA DURING
TET 1968**

- MSG Larry F. O'Neill (ANG)
assisted by Paul Kopsick DQS Historian



My name is Larry F. O'Neill. In 1968 I was a SP4 with Headquarters Battery, 6th Battalion, 56th Artillery, one of the two HAWK missile battalions serving in Vietnam. My MOS was 16K20 (Fire Distribution Crewman) but by 1968 there was little need for anti-aircraft protection around Saigon and for that matter any place else in Vietnam. Both battalions were largely phasing out and preparing to return to the US or to be posted elsewhere in the world. The 6/56th had four line batteries: A, B, C and D and I was part of the Headquarters Battery that supported the line units. At that time the

HHB compound was located east of Bien Hoa airbase on the south side of Highway 1 and right between the PW Camp and a hamlet called Widow's Village.

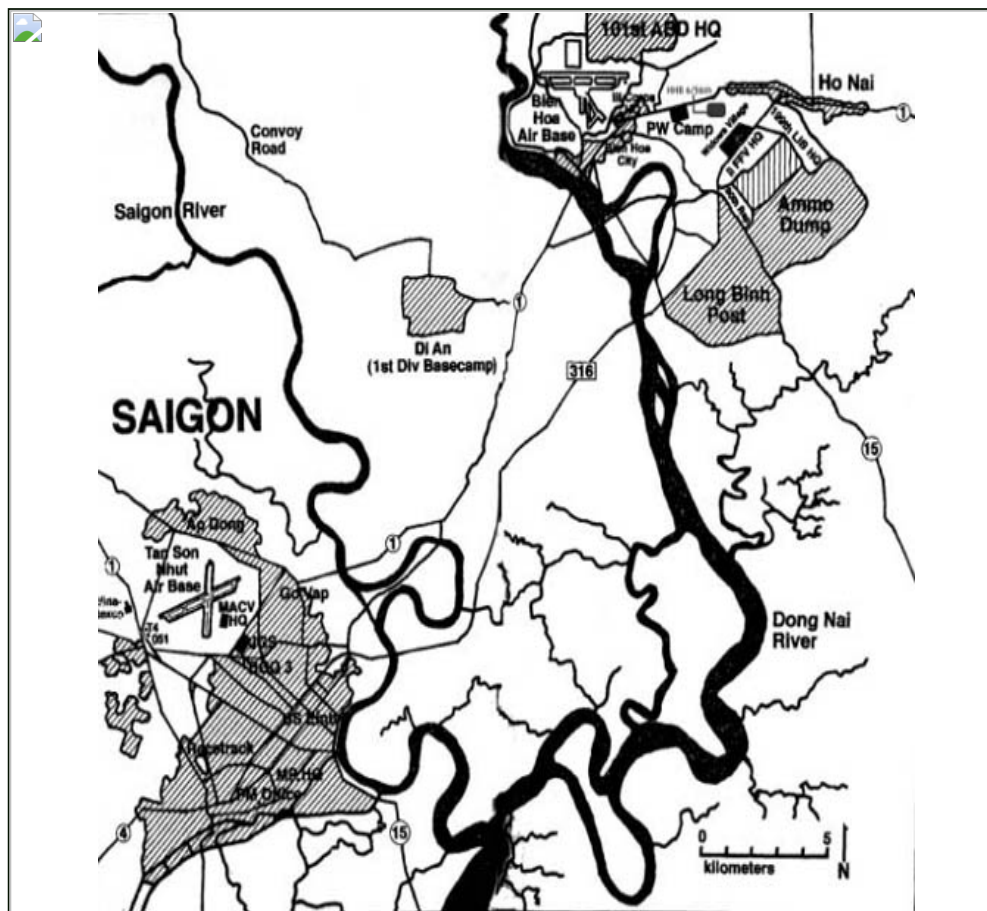
It is a little known fact, but at that time many air defense artillery (ADA) men in these units rarely operated in their original MOS training. This created problems for the ADA units in several ways. For non-ADA units, the ADA men were considered to be REMFs (rear echelon m* f*), sitting safely behind their barbed wire high on the hills away from the action. We all know that there were no front lines in Vietnam and any local could be the enemy but in the minds of some (officers and enlisted alike), if you were not combat trained you were a second class soldier. Furthermore, the lack of real ADA work, created utilization issues with many of the men. You can do so much training and just fill so many sandbags without going crazy and many ADA men were actually anxious to play a more direct role in the war. Many volunteered for other duties or transferred to other line units, sometimes with tragic results.

It is even a lesser known fact that many ADA crewman, originally trained in missile defense, were used routinely in ground combat roles such as perimeter security and as members of reaction forces, true ground combat roles. Although trained only on missiles, my primary job at the 6/56th was security, as I was part of a field reactionary force team. We did everything including perimeter defense, convoy security, civic duty, and ground sweeps outside the perimeter. We were never formally trained in using the M-14, M-60 and grenade launcher, but in Vietnam your learned a lot things while "on the job". This is my personal recollection of the VC/NVA attack on the Long Binh area during the 1968 Tet Offensive around Saigon, specifically the incident referred to at the Battle of Widow's Village.

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The Lay of the Land

When you left Saigon you generally headed northeast to Bien Hoa, which by 1967 it was known as the Long Binh area. The highway was Vietnam Highway Route 1 that headed "up country" to Da Nang, Nha Trang, Hue and other points of interest all the way to Hanoi. The south side of Highway 1 was pretty much all built up once you crossed the river as the II Field Force's headquarters had been pretty much transferred out of Saigon to Long Binh.



The lay of the land at the Long Binh detachment was: Along one ridge line was the ammo dump, stretching down the Vung Tau highway (QL 15) from Route 1 and the "Repo Depo" and Hospital area which were the initial Base Camp of the 1st Infantry Division's 2nd Brigade when they arrived in Viet Nam about July 1965. It was smack dab on top of a major VC Tunnel Complex: as, reputedly, was the north end of the Di An base camp on the west side of Highway 1.

The Bien Hoa AFB was the first turnoff to the left (north) as you came thru the City of Bien Hoa. The Highway turned back south for a bit, then headed east-northeast again. At the ridge, just before the curve was the last entrance to Bien Hoa AFB to the north.

Headquarters Battery 6th Bn 56th Air Defense Artillery (HAWK) was located on the south side of Highway 1 east of the airbase and in-between the Prisoner of War Compound and Widow's Village just before you reached the City of Ho Nai. The ground outside our perimeter was not secure and neither were the adjoining hamlets. Groves of rubber trees were growing just outside the perimeter and the trees and along

with Widow's Village were often the source of sporadic enemy mortar and small arms fire.

- MSG Larry F. O'Neill

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Tet 1968



Prelude: Jan. 29-30-Hints of impending trouble began to appear the night of Jan. 29-30 as units in the region encountered small arms and light mortar contact. Reports filtered in of more serious incidents in other parts of Vietnam. By mid-morning on the 30th, MACV headquarters flashed a fateful message to all commands: "The Tet Truce was terminated."

This announcement was confirmed by further news of an enemy buildup in the Long Binh-Bien Hoa area, about five miles down the road from 9th Division headquarters at Bearcat. A platoon of the 2d Mechanized Battalion, 47th Infantry was summoned to II Field Force headquarters at Long Binh as a security element. Throughout the late afternoon and the next morning, intelligence sources indicated an increasing threat to the sprawling Long Binh-Bien Hoa complex. (from the 9th Infantry Division's magazine *The Octofoil*, Vol. 1, No. 2., from early 1968.)

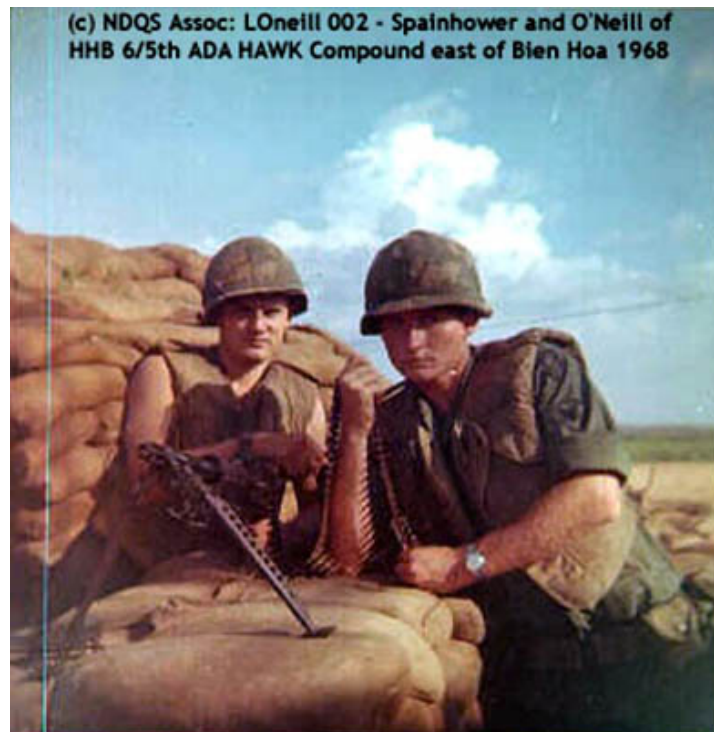
My story starts on the night of January 30th, just after midnight I was on my way out to one of our guard towers on the perimeter to pull my shift. All of a sudden the VC/NVA outside the perimeter started firing at me with a .51 caliber machine gun, I could see the green tracers going right past my head. I guess I was silhouetted against the lights inside the perimeter and some NVA got anxious at seeing such a clear target and fired. Right then all hell broke loose. Later on my buddies would tease me about actually starting TET as everything was quiet until I headed out to the perimeter.

I never got to our guard tower; I instead ran back to one of the rifle bunkers and dove in. There was already a black soldier in the bunker and I started to return some fire. I then decided it might be better to get down for a while as the incoming rockets and mortars were getting really heavy. So I laid there next to this guy and it wasn't to much longer when all of a sudden there was an tremendous explosion next to my head and I couldn't hear a thing. In the concussion from the explosion, the guy next to me had squeezed the trigger on his M-14 and just about blew my head off. Well I thought I'd better get out of there ASAP as I was not real happy with this guy right then. There

were enough people trying to kill me and they didn't need his help. So I went off to another bunker.



Every so often I would take an incoming round and then return fire with my M-14. I could see the machine gun in the adjacent bunker was really working out. When a gun ship came in and started to fire directly over me towards the perimeter I decided to get out of there. I was afraid he was making to good of a target for the NVA so I went over to help the gunner in the machine gun bunker. I believe the machine gunner was fellow ADA man SP4 Gary Spainhower who I think came from Arkansas. We exchanged tracer fire "red for green" the rest of the night. We were both scared as hell and were happy to see daylight.

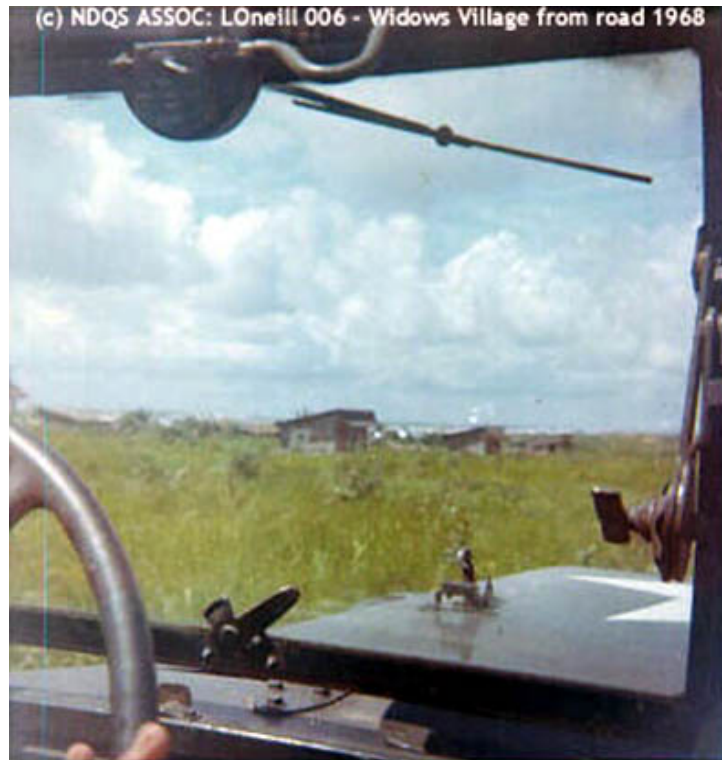


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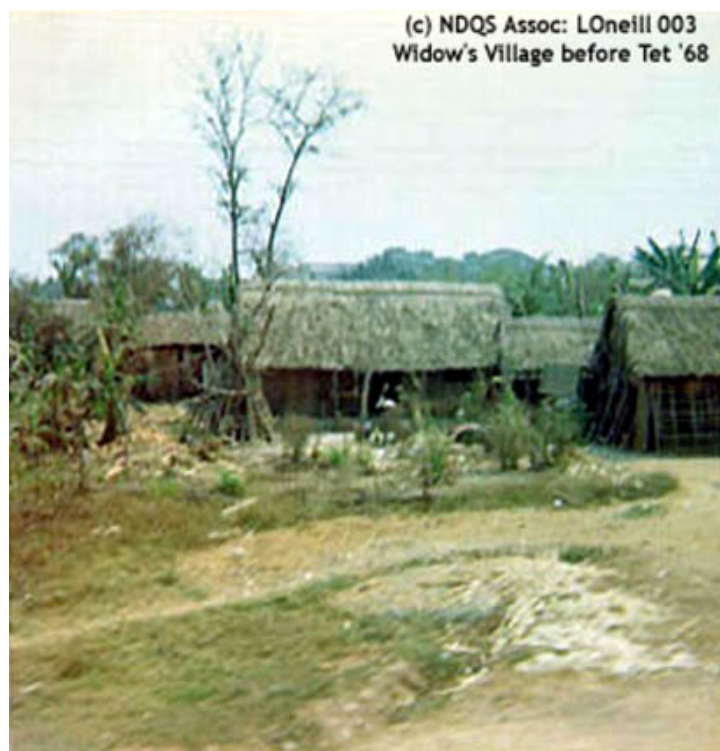
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The Battle At Widows Village



That morning (January 31st) a lot of people seemed to be involved in containing all the VC/NVA that were holed up in Widow's Village right next to our compound. I really don't think we their main objective since we were a pretty small compound. I am sure they could of overrun us easily if they had wanted to. The VC/NVA had been in the Village for a month or so from what I understand. Building up supplies and soldiers to hit Bien Hoa, Long Binh and Saigon. They were all over the place and the 1968 TET holiday truce was their cover.



Widows' Village was a small hamlet of shacks sitting just across the dirt road from the huge Long Binh Army complex and the Headquarters for II Field Force Vietnam. Reportedly, widows and children of deceased ARVN soldiers lived there, existing on small government pensions. From time to time we paid them to fill sandbags at our compound.



During the night and early morning, gun ships had shot up the village and got a lot of secondary explosions from some of the positions they rocketed. At 0800, Company B 4/39 Inf made a combat assault into the grass helicopter pad in a field opposite II FFV HQ. The LZ was hot, the unit quickly cleared the area and moved through the Widows Village along with a mechanized company and the recon platoon from 1st Platoon, Company B, 2-47th Inf (Mech), 9th Inf Division. They went through the village and encountered a battalion (augmented) of the 88th NVA Regiment and cleared it out at a heavy cost but prevented or delayed an enemy assault on the nearby II Field Forces Headquarters. More than 50 of the enemy perished in the heavy fighting at Widows' Village

There was a lot of indirect fire coming into our compound from both the NVA and the mechanized unit. We had to stay alert and undercover at all times to keep from getting hit. When we did see the VC/NVA outside our positions were would fire on them.

As the afternoon progressed, a company of the 2d/47th ran into heavy contact in the Ho Nai village, north of Highway 1. Action tapered off by nightfall and by that time more than 200 VC were killed, 32 detainees taken, more than 60 crew-served and more than 45 individual weapons captured. Four U.S. soldiers died in the action.

A detailed account of the battle at Widows Village can be found at: [Widows' Village: VC Graveyard.](#)"

IN THE LINE OF FIRE

My sergeant was SP5 Kenneth Casey from the northeast somewhere. He came and got me and said we were ordered to burn off some foliage from around the perimeter wire as the VC/NVA had been getting close to our perimeter and we needed to clear our fields of fire. We had tried to go out to the perimeter line a couple of times but the enemy ground fire was pretty intense and drove us back. He said we'd try it one more time but as the two of us went over the berm towards the wire Ken got hit. The bullet went through the top of his thigh and through his nuts and into his other leg. It didn't

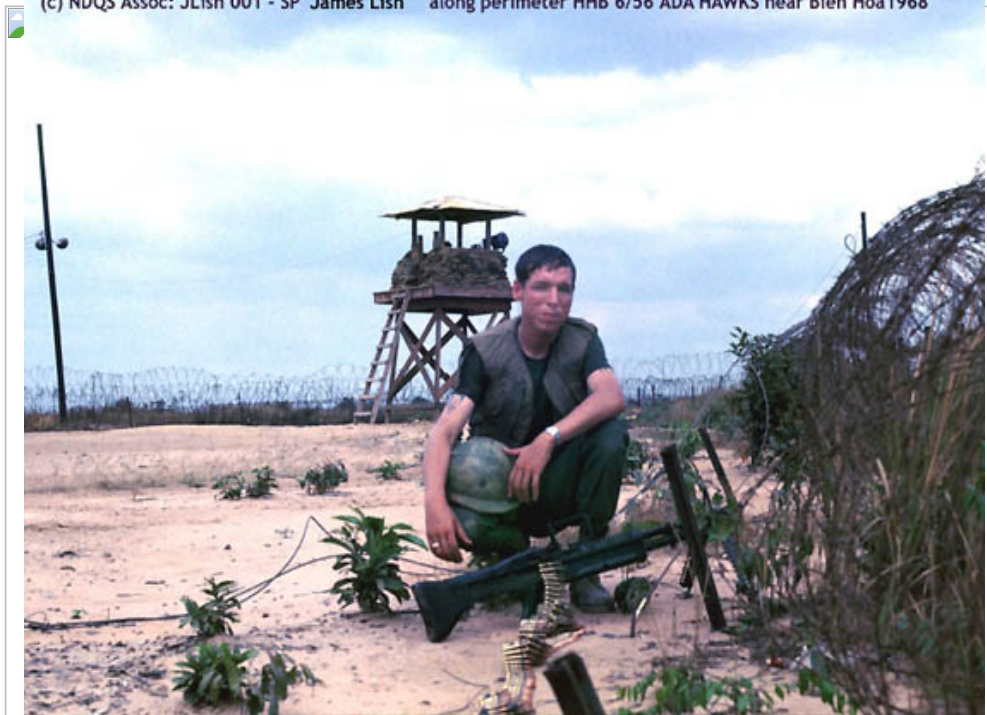
come out the other leg but it had the skin pushed out. The trauma of the bullet must have locked his legs as he didn't go down. Instinctively I hit his legs from behind to get him down out of the line of fire. He was a really big guy and I wasn't and since we were alone I had to roll him quite a ways to get him down below the berm to safety. We called the medics and they patched him up and his war was over. *(Note: SP5 Casey was really a great guy. He sent a letter back a couple months later saying he was doing good and thanked everyone. Fortunately they were able fix him up so he could still have kids.)*

- MSG Larry F. O'Neill

Next: [Rubber Plantation](#)

Rubber Plantation

(c) NDQS Assoc: JLish 001 - SP James Lish along perimeter HHB 6/56 ADA HAWKS near Bien Hoa 1968



PFC Jim Lish who was with us at the 6/56th remembers that there was a rubber tree plantation on one side of our base camp. The VC would get in there every night and raise hell with us and anyone that went down the road. They finally had to clear it out using Rome plows.

(c) NDQS Assoc: JLish 002 - Roan plows clearing rubber trees adjacent to HHB 6/56th ADA HAWKS near Bien Hoa 1968



One of the biggest things I'll remember about TET '68 is when the ammo depot at Long Binh exploded. I swear it looked just like the Atomic Bomb when it went off. In fact I could hear a few guys saying "Oh my God they dropped the Atomic Bomb". You could feel the heat and concussion effects of it all the way over to where we were. The ammo dump burned for days and exploding ordnance was flying everywhere.

We remained on alert in the perimeter bunkers for several days but finally I got a chance to go back to my hootch to try and get some rest. We called our compound "Hawk Hill" and that was where we had the HAWK radar equipment for tracking aircraft. It was at a higher elevation than the rest of the unit. Next to it was a counter mortar radar team from the 246th FA (attached to 97th Arty Gp) who did a great job of locating NVA rockets that were being fired at us. They passed on the coordinate information to our units to return fire on them. I wasn't in my hootch more than thirty minutes when there was a really loud explosion the whole wood-frame and metal roof came crashing in. After the dust settled and we were sure we were still in one piece we stared looking around. A large shell casing, from a 155 mm flare round, came through our roof and had landed at my feet and near the head of another guy. That was too close for me so I went back up to the bunkers and stayed there until it was over.

- MSG Larry F. O'Neill

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Epilogue

It was just really a crazy week with little or no sleep and fighting going on everywhere. It's just hard to describe all the noise and confusion and explain the fear you feel not knowing what is really happening around you. Communications were frantic at times and rumors were running rampant. We even fixed bayonets one time as they had told us the whole North Vietnamese Army was coming down on us. At times it seemed like it was true. It's just a good thing a lot of them passed by.

(c) NDQS Assoc: LOneill 004 - Perimeter of HAWK Compound east of Bien Hoa, infiltration route for VC/NVA during TET '68



I was with HHB 6/56th from 4 July 67 until around March 68 when I went down to D BTRY 6/56th ARTY until I went home. I'm proud of my service and know of at least four times I could have been killed or wounded. Maybe we weren't Infantry 11B but we held our ground when it counted.



HHB 5/69th ADA HAWKS were awarded the Vietnam Gallantry Cross with Palm Unit Citation for valorous combat achievement, which is as close as we could get to being recognized for serving in combat like the Infantrymen's Combat Infantry badge CIB. They said then it was as good as a Combat Action Ribbon but it is unfortunate that artillerymen, especially air defense artillerymen were never give credit for the close ground support role we played in Vietnam.

The RVN Gallantry Cross was established by the Vietnam Government by Decree No. 74-b/Qt, dated 15 August 1950 and Decree No. 96/DQT/HC, dated 2 May 1952. It was awarded by the RVN to units for valorous combat achievements during the Vietnam conflict (01 March 1961 through 28 March 1974). The ribbon is red with a wide yellow center stripe. The yellow stripe has 8 very thin double red strips. The ribbon is enclosed in a rectangular one-sixteenth inch gold frame with laurel leaves.



I am still in the National Guard and I won't be retired until 15 Dec 2007. I work full time for The Army Guard here in Phoenix, Arizona. I served with 855 MP; 153rd FA Bn and the 258th Combat Engineer over the past 30 years. I now work for the State Area Command (STARC).



MSG LARRY F. O'NEILL
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SUBSISTENCE & AMMO
MANAGER AZARNG

- MSG Larry F. O'Neill

