

# Base Security Was Criticized

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BIEN HOA, S. Viet Nam.

U. S. officers yesterday criticized inadequate defense measures for Bien Hoa air base, following a destructive 20-minute Communist Viet Cong mortar shelling shortly after midnight Saturday. They were disturbed by the seeming impossibility of eliminating future attacks.

One battalion of Vietnamese troops responsible for securing the base's perimeter was 20 per cent under strength, two U. S. officers advising base security said. One said he had recommended that mortars for counter-firing be added for security, but these were never received.

The Viet Cong are believed to have crept to within two miles of the base to launch their fire. They apparently escaped without serious losses.

The officers said the 21 damaged B-57 jet fighter-bombers were parked too close together on the runway and were not protected by the usual sandbagged revetments.

The officers did not criticize their Vietnamese counterparts. Neither did Gen. William C. Westmoreland, U. S. commander, who came here with Ambassador Maxwell D. Taylor and Maj. Gen. Nguyen Khanh, Vietnamese commander in chief, to inspect the damage.

"A lot of energy had gone into securing the air base, but obviously these measures were not fully successful," Gen. Westmoreland said. But he "was not, under any

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**'I FELT THIS WOULD COME . . . AND IT HAS'**

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circumstances, critical of the base commander or the Vietnamese armed forces" assigned to guard the base, he said.

Reliable sources in Saigon said an official report made for the U. S. Air Force a year ago stated that the eight major air installations in Viet Nam were vulnerable to Viet Cong mortaring, but "nothing was ever done about it."

Observers have long considered the Viet Cong capable of overrunning provincial capitals and major installations. But it was felt they would do so only when political and psychological impact was needed in their campaign to effect a U. S. withdrawal, turning Viet Nam first neutralist and then Communist.

The Bien Hoa base, 15 miles from Saigon and surrounded by thick jungle, was on special alert because of the National Day observance of the first anniversary of the overthrow of the Ngo Dinh Diem regime. The Viet Cong were expected to "celebrate" the occasion with attacks and displays of terrorism.

Gen. Westmoreland said the base was protected by an arc of Vietnamese government artillery fire, which he described as more effective than mortars. He said the artillery counter-fired at the Viet Cong 10 minutes after the attack began a few minutes after midnight Saturday.

Asked if one battalion was enough for security on the perimeter of the base, he replied that one patrol was in the area near the Viet Cong mortar squads and fired 60-mm mortars at them.

He also said one Vietnamese marine battalion and one Vietnamese airborne battalion were in Bien Hoa in reserve.

But when asked why it took seven hours for the two battalions to counter-attack, Gen. Westmoreland replied: "It was a question of communications and location of minefields."

The mortars used by the Viet Cong—perhaps U. S. made—have a range of two miles.

The only thing that can stop a mortar attack is more men or a counter-mortar attack," one of the U. S. security advisers said. "Even then there's no total defense against it. It's a lethal and accurate weapon if used by experts—and the Viet Cong are experts."

The adviser said the 20 per cent understrength battalion outside the air base was made up of regional forces—provincial troops paid and trained less than the regular army.

"We needed counter-mortar fire," he said. "But even then we could shoot only in the general direction but not accurately. And even if we had a division of troops in those hills—even a division of American Marines—still we could not guarantee it would stop mortar attacks.

"A static position is always vulnerable to mortars and there's so much territory out there it would take an army to cover it all."

He pointed out that the perimeter around the base is 10 miles and that patrolling for a two-mile radius beyond that would be necessary to protect against future mortar attacks.

There appeared to be an exceptionally complex chain of responsibility for security of the base, which is operated by the Vietnamese High Command and used by both Viet Nam and the U. S. The Vietnamese Air Force was responsible for on-base security, assisted by U. S. Army advisers. This on-base security consisted of Vietnamese Air Force enlisted men, plus U. S. enlisted men around U. S. aircraft, Gen. Westmoreland said.

However, outside the base and around its perimeter security was delegated to the region force battalion responsible to the chief of the province—who is both civilian and military head of the Vietnamese subdivision. The chief is assisted by U. S. advisers.

Gen. Westmoreland said the ammunition used by the Viet Cong probably was from old American supplies left over from the French Indochinese War 10 years ago or from the Korean War.