



Sgt Tony Arrigo, USAF
Crew Chief
F-4 Phantom
12th Tactical Fighter Wing
Cam Ranh Bay, Bien Hoa
Vietnam

First Person Account

Readying the F-4 For Combat

The horn blasted us out of our tents, a call for close air support. Infantry

heavily engaged, needing help. Our F-4 was prepped and armed. Time to fly.

Readying the F-4 Fighter

The **Assistant Crew Chief** climbs the ladder to the rear seat of the cockpit:

1. Harnesses up the Rear Seat Pilot
2. Pulls the last safety pin from the ejection seat (5 pins already pulled)
3. Slides up to the forward seat and harnesses up the Pilot.

The **Assistant Crew Chief** comes down the ladder, pulls the chock from the F-4's left wheel. There's no right wheel chock.

The **Crew Chief** hand signals the Pilot to start engines. The F-4 used a gunpowder cartridge to fire up each engine.

With both engines running, the **Crew Chief** hand signals the **Assistant Crew Chief** to pull the remaining chocks. Chocks pulled, the **Crew Chief** gives a **Thumbs up**

to the Pilot who taxis the aircraft to the runway and takes off — loaded with napalm and bombs, afterburners drowning the night with awesome, crushing power. The entire procedure from the horn blaring to takeoff was less than two minutes. We prided ourselves on our speed and accuracy.

I liked being on the Alert Pad, which was away from the flight line and its own little unit. Watching the afterburners at night heading off to "Kill the Cong" was as close to combat as us Airmen could get. We thought.

"Rocket City" 3rd Fighter Wing Bien Hoa Air Base

In February '67, there was a need for Crew Chiefs at Bien Hoa Air Base. I went TDY (temporary duty). Bien Hoa was the only Vietnamese Air Base in South Vietnam and the **Vietnam Air Force (VNAF)** flew out of there. It was in **III Corps** about 15 km northeast of **Saigon**. They flew the **F-100 Super Sabre**.

The F-100 was used extensively for close air support in **III Corps** and **IV Corps**. Some friends

"We prided ourselves on our speed and accuracy"

of mine at my **American**

Legion that were stationed in **IV Corps** thanked us years later for, as they put it, the "Huns that killed the VC."

The F-100, aka **THE HUN** or **Lead Sled**, flew more



F-4 Phantom

Rocket City and many nights. My hooch was hit (see photo below). I lost all my belongings including my high school ring. Bien Hoa was surrounded by a

7-square-mile rubber plantation owned by

Michelin. The VC would tunnel under the rubber trees and mortar or rocket the base at will, hoping to hit an aircraft which they did too often (see the story on the right about Noel Lovellette getting a Bronze Star). The Alert Pad at

combat missions than all of the other Fighter Jets combined. The F-100s flew 360,283 sorties (missions) during the Vietnam war. It is an extraordinary number and unknowable how many American lives it saved and how many enemy lives it took but, trust me...many.

Bien Hoa housed families of the VNAF as well as American GIs and it was an open base replete with stores, barber shops, and cat houses. It was not very secure. It was nicknamed



Tony's hooch after a Rocket attack

F-100 Super Sabre



F-100 On Fire

One night in June, during a rocket attack, an F-100 loaded with bombs got hit and caught fire. It was close to the bunkers where we were hunkered down. If it blew, forget about it.

Suddenly one of the Crew Chiefs, **Sgt Noel Lovellette**, left the safety of the bunker and ran to the burning **Hun**. He kicked the chocks, jumped in the cockpit, and taxied the Hun to a place far away from the bunkers. I heard about this the next day and thought it was cool.

Noel Lovellette was awarded the **Bronze Star w/Combat V** for his valiant actions that day.

— **Anthony Arrigo**



Bronze Star w/Combat "V"

Bien Hoa was a bit hairy since you were away from the main flight line and open to rifle fire or mortar and rocket rounds. If I wanted to be where the action was, I found it at Bien Hoa. **Knowing that our sorties were in support of ground troops who relied on us lent to the high morale of the place.** We knew that we were relatively safe on the base as compared to the men humping the boonies.

End of Tour

I ended my TDY in October '67 and flew back to Cam Ranh Bay for my processing and flight back to the states. My year in Vietnam was exciting, exhilarating, and scary.

I never compare it to the grunts (0311's) and know that they faced death everyday. However, being a Crew Chief in Vietnam and completing over 1,000 sorties to support the ground troops has given me a sense of pride that I still maintain.

We all had a job to do. Whether a ground pounder, a fly boy, or a REMF, it was one team, one fight. I'm 75 years old and as proud of my service as I was when I enlisted at 17.

Anthony Arrigo
Rancho Santa
Margarita, CA

