

**A2C MARVIN A. HELDERMAN**  
**Dec 4-5, 1966 Attack On Tan Son Nhut**  
**USAF Commendation Medal**

Shortly after midnight, in the early hours of 4 December 1966, a heavily armed Viet Cong force executed a disciplined, orderly and undetected penetration of the West perimeter fence of Tan Son Nhut Air Base, Republic of Vietnam, in an effort to destroy United States Air Force weapons systems, vital support elements and cause death and wreak havoc among the United States personnel station on the base.

At the time of the penetration A2C Marvin A. Helderman was performing duties as a sentry dog handler on the Western side of the base. His post was a six hundred yard length of dense jungle intersected with deep ditches.

Another sentry dog team, a link in the vital security chain, was the first to discover the Viet Cong. He alerted the base. The Viet Cong in turn, realized they were discovered, opened up with everything they had. It was immediately recognized in a very forceful way that this was a sizable force. But how big and where exactly where they was still a mystery. The dogs with their keen noses and super sensitive ears, together with their handlers were assigned the task of detecting and reporting the enemy. Airman Helderman, with another Air Policeman started checking a deep drainage ditch. There they observed a large Viet Cong force advancing toward their position along the ditch.

The following is taken from the official narration rendered by Lt Colonel Grove C. Johnson, Commander of the 377<sup>th</sup> Air Police Squadron: "Realizing the over whelming superiority of the enemy force, Airman Helderman constrained his co-worker to hold his fire until the Viet Cong were within a dozen yards to insure maximum effectiveness with the fire power available. Confronted with a force of unknown size but obviously ranging from five to twenty men, Airman Helderman, with conspicuous gallantry and at the risk of life above and beyond the call of duty, never the less dispatched his co-worker to notify the Central Security Control while he alone would engage the enemy force as long as he was able.

With the determination of a hard veteran, he assumed an intractable position and persevered, waiting for the encroaching enemy. His rapid and abrupt fire momentarily caught the enemy by surprise, scattering them; however, they soon surmounted this and brought heavy automatic weapons fire to bear on Airman Helderman's position. In a heroic effort, calculated to repel the enemy and gain valuable time, Airman Helderman repeatedly exposed himself to the assaulting

Viet Cong, in order to return their fire. He continued this action until the Viet Cong broke off the attack, either to seek a different route of approach, or to retreat, off the base.

This same report covering the action of all the Sentry dog teams read: "The gallant stand these nine Airmen in the face of a superior enemy force is in keeping with the highest military traditions of this nation. The brave and determined stand of these few men individually and collectively harassed and disrupted an overwhelmingly superior force and provided advance warning and precious time for the inner defense position to prepare for the attack. As a result of their actions, the main body of the Viet Cong attacking force was sharply blunted and the full impact of the attack was greatly reduced."

The Viet Cong suffered such a defeat that General Westmoreland had this to say, to the Commander of 7<sup>th</sup> Air Force: "Alert patrolling, rapid response and stout hearted defense put up by members of the Tan Son Nhut Security Force on 4 - 5 December are worthy of the highest praise. The 377<sup>th</sup> Air Police Squadron disseminated a strong infiltration force inflicting a severe defeat on the enemy and making him pay a heavy price, for minimum damage inflicted. Your brave Airmen fought with courage and distinction." Please pass on my hearty congratulation to all concerned."

In recognition for the part, Airman Helderman took in this defensive effort, he was awarded the Air Force Commendation Medal.