**Tan Son Nhut Air Base**

*See* [*Tan Son Nhat International Airport*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tan_Son_Nhat_International_Airport) *for a post-war description of the airfield.*



Aerial Photo of Tan Son Nhut Airport / Air Base - Saigon - South Vietnam - June 1968

**Tan Son Nhut Air Base** was a South Vietnamese Air Force and [United States Air Force](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_Air_Force) base. It is located near the city of [Saigon](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saigon) in [South Vietnam](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/South_Vietnam). After the [Vietnam War](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vietnam_War), it has been operated as [Tan Son Nhat International Airport](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tan_Son_Nhat_International_Airport) ([IATA](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/IATA): **SGN**, [ICAO](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ICAO): **VVTS**).

**History**

**Tan Son Nhut Airport** was built by the [French](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/France) in the 1920s when the French Colonial government of [Indochina](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indochina) constructed a small unpaved airport, known as Tan Son Nhut Airfield in the village of Tan Son Nhut to serve as [Saigon’s](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saigon) commercial airport. Flights to and from [France](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/France), as well as within [Southeast Asia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Southeast_Asia) were available prior to [World War II](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_War_II). During World War II, the [Imperial Japanese Army](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Imperial_Japanese_Army) used Tan Son Nhut as a transport base. When Japan surrendered in August 1945 the French Air Force flew a contingent of 150 troops into Tan Son Nhut.

After World War II, Tan Son Nhut served domestic as well as international flights from Saigon. In 1952, the French Air Force moved the 312th Special Mission Squadron to TSN from [Nha Trang Air Base](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nha_Trang), consisting of French [Douglas C-47 Skytrains](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/C-47_Skytrain) and [Beechcraft Model 18s](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Beechcraft_Model_18) for carrying cargo and military passengers to support French forces.

**USAF Use of Tan Son Nhut Air Base**



Welcome to Tan Son Nhut - 1967.

The APO for Tan Son Nhut Air Base was APO San Francisco 96307

**Military Assistance Advisory Group**



In September 1961, the first permanent USAF unit, the **507th Tactical Control Group** from [Shaw Air Force Base](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shaw_Air_Force_Base) [South Carolina](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/South_Carolina) deployed sixty-seven officers and airmen to Tan Son Nhut to install radars and began monitoring air traffic and training South Vietnamese to operate and service the equipment. This organization formed the nucleus of what became a tactical air control system for a vast fleet of South Vietnamese and American aircraft.

During October 1961, four R[F-101s](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/F-101) and a photo processing unit from the **15th Tactical Reconnaissance Squadron** of the **67th Tactical Reconnaissance Wing**, Yokota AB Japan, joined the combat reporting post, with the reconnaissance craft flying photographic missions over [South Vietnam](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/South_Vietnam) and [Laos](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Laos) within a few days of their arrival. The 67th TRW was soon followed by detachments of the **45th Tactical Reconnaissance Squadron** of the **18 Tactical Fighter Wing**, Kadena AB Okinawa, which flew missions over Laos and South Vietnam, first from Thailand and then from Vietnam. These reconnaissance missions lasted from November 1961 through the spring of 1964.

During January 1962 a detachment of a dozen Fairchild [C-123](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/C-123) transports arrived in South Vietnam to deliver supplies to distant outposts, like those established by the Army Special Forces along the border with Laos, and to drop South Vietnamese parachute troops in operations against the Viet Cong. Called **Mule Train**, the unit operated ten C-123s from Tan Son Nhut Air Base and two from [Da Nang Air Base](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Da_Nang_Air_Base).

**The Dirty Thirty**



South Vietnamese Air Force DC-3 being flown with USAF markings by USAF "Dirty Thirty" pilots - 1962

Additional USAF personnel arrived at Tan Son Nhut in early 1962 after the VNAF transferred two dozen seasoned pilots front the 1st Transportation Group at Tan Son Nhut to provide aircrews for the newly activated 2nd Fighter Squadron then undergoing training at [Bien Hoa Air Base](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bien_Hoa_Air_Base). This sudden loss of qualified C-47 pilots brought the 1st Transportation Group's airlift capability dangerously low.

In order to alleviate the problem U.S. Secretary of Defense, Robert McNamara, on the recommendation of the **Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG)** Vietnam, ordered thirty USAF pilots temporarily assigned to the VNAF to serve as C-47 co-pilots. This influx of U.S. personnel quickly returned the 1st TG to full strength.

The Americans arrived at Tan Son Nhut during March and April 1962 and immediately began flying with Vietnamese crews. Unfortunately, problems arose between the Americans and Vietnamese and by August the situation had so deteriorated that the 1st Transportation Group commander. [Nguyen Cao Ky](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nguyen_Cao_Ky) urgently appealed for closer cooperation and understanding between the two groups. The situation seemed to gradually improve and although there were still problems, the two groups developed a closer working relationship.

Unlike the USAF **Farm Gate** personnel at Bien Hoa, the C-47 co-pilots actually became part of the VNAF operational structure - though still under U.S. control. Because of their rather unique situation, these pilots soon adopted the very unofficial nickname, **The Dirty Thirty**.

In a sense they were the first U.S. airmen actually committed to combat in Vietnam, rather than being assigned as advisors or support personnel.

The **315th Troop Carrier Group (Combat Cargo)** and **8th Aerial Port Squadron** activated on [8 December](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/December_8) [1962](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1962), replacing the provisional transport units. The 315th Group had a strength of twenty-seven officers and twenty-one airmen, all of whom were on permanent assignment to Tan Son Nhut.

Although the 315th Group was an element of the **315th Air Division**, the group's responsibilities included developing tactics and techniques and providing technical advice on airlift matters. Operational command of the group rested with the Commander, MACV, who in theory exercised control through his Air Force component command, the 2d Air Division.

The original Dirty Thirty pilots eventually rotated home during early 1963 and were replaced by a second contingent of American pilots. This detachment remained with the VNAF until December 1963 when they were withdrawn from Vietnam.

**33d Tactical Group**



Air Vietnam Caravelle airliner on the ramp at Tan Son Nhut, with USAF 33rd Tactical Group RF-101 in side-view mirror of photographer's vehicle - 1964

On [8 July](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/July_8) [1963](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1963) the MAAG units were organized as the **33d Tactical Group**. The Group was equipped primarily with cargo aircraft , C-54, U-3B, VC-47, and VC-123. Its mission was to maintain and operate base support facilities at Tan Son Nhut, supporting the 2d Air Division and subordinate units by performing reconnaissance of Vietnam from various detachments flying RB-26, RB-57, and RF-101 aircraft.

The early months of 1964 were a time of expansion, training, and comparative quiet. By midyear, the South Vietnamese Air Force had grown to thirteen squadrons four fighter, four observation, three helicopter, and two C-47 transport. The South Vietnamese followed the practice of the U.S. Air Force, organizing the squadrons into wings, with one wing located in each of the four corps tactical zones at Can No, Tan Son Nhut, Pleiku, and Da Nang.

After the [Tonkin Gulf incident](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tonkin_Gulf_incident), the USAF response was to deploy twelve F-102s arrived in South Vietnam, their number divided between Tan Son Nhut and at Da Nang; eight F-100s joined the F-102s at Da Nang, and two squadrons of B-57 bombers landed at Bien Hoa.

**Rolling Thunder**



F-100D 56-3101 of the 429th TFS - 474th Tactical Fighter Wing - TDY at Ton Son Nhut Air Base - 1965

Attacks against Americans in South Vietnam continued. On Christmas Eve 1964, the bombing of a residence for American officers at Saigon brought the United States to the brink of bombing the North. The Johnson administration's reluctance to engage the North ended on [7 February](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/February_7) [1965](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1965), when the Viet Cong attacked an American detachment near Pleiku, killing eight and wounding 104 American soldiers.

President Johnson approved an operation called **Rolling Thunder**, a limited and carefully paced program of air strikes that more closely resembled the graduated response to the presence of Soviet missiles in [Cuba](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cuba) than the recommendations of the Joint Chiefs of Staff for a vigorous and extensive bombardment. Despite the reliance on gradual escalation, the Johnson administration struck directly at the North in an attempt to save South Vietnam unilaterally, regardless of the weakness or incompetence of the government at Saigon, abandoning a policy of partnership with the South Vietnamese that worked toward political stability and economic progress as conditions leading to a military victory in the South.

The Air Force now had four distinct air wars on the mainland of Southeast Asia, as the offensive against North Vietnam took its place alongside the attacks in South Vietnam and in northern and southern Laos.

The United States Air Force was not fully equipped, suitably trained, nor doctrinally prepared for the situation in Southeast Asia. The transition from massive retaliation to flexible response and the shift from nuclear to conventional weapons remained incomplete.

As a result, the Air Force dropped high-explosive bombs from aircraft like the [F-105](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/F-105) that had been designed for nuclear war and had to create and transport to Southeast Asia the stocks of conventional munitions needed for the conflict.

The first tasks facing the service, however, were to set up a workable organizational structure in the region, improve the area's inadequate air bases, create an efficient airlift system, and develop equipment and techniques to support the ground battle.

**6250th Combat Support Group**

Starting with the buildup in 1965, the Air Force, while continuing to conduct the four air wars, adjusted its structure in Southeast Asia to absorb incoming units. Temporarily deployed squadrons became permanent in November; a wing structure replaced the groups. On [8 July](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/July_8) 1965, the 33d Tactical Group was redesignated the **6250th Combat Support Group**

By February 1966, the reconnaissance force at Tan Son Nhut had grown to seventy-four aircraft of various types. Operational aircraft squadrons were assigned to the **460th Tactical Reconnaissance Wing** which was activated at Tan Son Nhut on [2 February](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/February_2) [1966](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1966). The **377th Air Base Wing** became USAF host base unit at Tan Son Nhut, replacing the **6250th Combat Support Group** in April.

The **834th Air Division** was established as the overall command organization for all USAF units at Tan Son Nuht, reporting directly to **Headquarters, 7th Air Force**, also at Tan Son Nhut.

**460th Tactical Reconnaissance Wing**



The **460th Tactical Reconnaissance Wing** was activated at Tan Son Nhut on [2 February](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/February_2) [1966](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1966). It's mission was to control and administer tactical recon-naissance resources in [Southeast Asia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Southeast_Asia). Assigned and attached tactical recon-naissance and tactical electronic warfare squadrons, and squadron-size detachments flew day and night visual, photographic, radar, thermographic, and electronic reconnaissance to meet the combat needs of 2d Air Division until April 1966 and for the Seventh Air Force thereafter. Divided reconnaissance in Southeast Asia with another wing in September 1966.



RF-101C serial 56-176 of the 460th Tactical Recon Squadron - Ton Son Nhut Air Base - 1969



F-102 Interceptors of the 509th Fighter-Interceptor Squadron, Ton San Nhut Air Base - 1969

In October 1966, the Wing assumed depot-level aircraft maintenance responsibility for all USAF organizations.

Its attached squadrons were:

* 12th Tactical Recon: 2 Sep 1966 - 31 Aug 1971 (RF-4C Tail Code: AC)
* 16th Tactical Recon: 27 Oct 1965 - 15 Mar 1970 (RF-4C Tail Code: AE)
* 45th Tactical Recon: 30 Mar 1966 - 31 Dec 1970 (RF-101C Tail Code: AH)
* 360th Tactical Electronic Warfare 8 Apr 1966 - 31 Aug 1971 (EC-47N/P/Q Tail Code: AJ)
* 361st Tactical Electronic Warfare: 8 Apr 1966 - 31 Aug 1971 (EC-47N/P/Q Tail Code: AL)
* 362d Tactical Electronic Warfare: 1 Feb 1967 - 31 Aug 1971 (EC-47N/P/Q Tail Code: AN)

**Notes:** 12 TRS reassigned to 67 TRW [Bergstrom AFB](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bergstrom_AFB) Texas; 16 TRS reassigned to 475 TRW [Misawa AB](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Misawa_AB) Japan; 360th Tactical Electronic Warfare to 463 TAW [Dyess AFB](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dyess_AFB) Texas, 361/362d TEWS deactivated in place.

Decorations:

* [Presidential Unit Citation](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Presidential_Unit_Citation_%28US%29): 18 Feb 1966 - 30 Jun 1967; 1 Sep 1967 - 1 Jul 1968; 11 Jul 1968 - 31 Aug 1969; l Feb-31 Mar 1971.
* [Air Force Outstanding Unit Award](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Air_Force_Outstanding_Unit_Award) with Combat "V" Device: 1 Jul 1969 - 30 Jun 1970; 1 Jul 1970 - 30 Jun 1971.
* [Republic of Vietnam Gallantry Cross](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Republic_of_Vietnam_Gallantry_Cross) with Palm: 1 Aug 1966 - 31 Aug 1971.

The wing was inactivated on [31 August](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/August_31) [1971](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1971).

**315th Air Commando Wing, Troop Carrier**



The **315th Air Commando Wing** was activated on [8 March](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/March_8) [1966](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1966) and became responsible until [15 October](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/October_15) 1966 for all in-country airlift in the Republic of Vietnam, including control over all USAF airlift assets, aerial port squadrons, an aeromedical evacuation squadron, and a special air transport flight of the Royal Australian Air Force.

The Wing also performed C-123 airlift operations in Vietnam. Operations included aerial movement of troops and cargo, flare drops, defoliation missions, aeromedical evacuation, and air-drops of critical supplies and paratroops.

Squadrons of the 315th ACW/TC were:

* 12th Air Commando 15 Oct 1966 - 15 Jun 1967
* 19th Air Commando 8 Mar 1966 - 15 Jun 1967
* 309th Air Commando 8 Mar 1966 - 15 Jun 1967
* 310th Air Commando 8 Mar 1966 - 15 Jun 1967
* 311th Air Commando 8 Mar 1966 - 15 Jun 1967
* Det 1., HQ 315th Air Commando Wing, Troop Carrier 1 Aug - 15 Oct 1966
* Det 5., HQ 315th Air Division (Combat Cargo) 8 Mar - 15 Oct 1966
* Det 6., HQ 315th Air Division (Combat Cargo) 8 Mar - 15 Oct 1966
* Royal Australian Air Force Air Transport Flight, Vietnam 8 Mar - 15 Oct 1966.



C-123K Serial 54-0696 - 315th Air Commando Wing - April 1968. This aircraft was turned over to the South Vietnamese Air Force in 1972

The 309th ACW was responsible for [Operation Ranch Hand](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Operation_Ranch_Hand) Defoliant operations missions. Flying specially-equipped [C-123](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/C-123) providers, members of the squadron flew low and slow to reduce the risks to our soldiers on the ground and to expose the enemy. The [Agent Orange](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Agent_Orange) controversy later became both a political and veterans' issue. On [15 October](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/October_15) [1966](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1966), Ranch Hand became the mission of the 12th Air Commando Squadron.

In February 1967, Ranch Hand was ordered for the first time to fly missions over the De-Militarized Zone (DMZ) separating North and South Vietnam. These missions helped uncover infiltration routes from the north and expose stockpiles of supplies hidden in the DMZ. By June, 1967, the number of UC-123s had increased to 20.

The 315th ACW was transferred to [Phan Rang Air Base](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phan_Rang_Air_Base) on [14 June](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/June_14) [1967](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1967).

**377th Air Base Wing**



The **377th Air Base Wing** was responsible for the operation and maintenance of the USAF portion of the facility from April 1966 until the last USAF personnel withdrew from [South Vietnam](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/South_Vietnam) in March 1973. In addition, the Wing was responsible for housing numerous tenant organizations including Seventh Air Force, base defense, and liaison with South Vietnamese Air Force.

Units assigned to the 377 ABW were:

* 834th Air Division (T-39, C-54, C-47, C-118, C-130)
* HQ, 7th Air Force (C-47, C-123 and C-54)

The unit was responsible for [Binh Thuy Air Base](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Binh_Thuy_Air_Base) [12 May](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/May_12)-[1 July](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/July_1) [1970](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1970). In addition, the Wing operated a Combat Crew Training School at [Phu Cat Air Base](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phu_Cat_Air_Base), with [C-7](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/C-7) aircraft, [15 March](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/March_15) - October 1972.

In 1972 deactivating USAF units throughout South Vietnam began to administratively assign units w/o equipment or personnel to the 377th ABW:

* 8th Special Operations Squadron 15 Jan - 25 Oct 1972
* 9th Special Operations Squadron 21 Jan - 29 Feb 1972
* 21st Tactical Air Support Squadron 15 Mar 1972 - 23 Feb 1973
* 310th Tactical Airlift Squadron Jan-Jun 1972 and Mar-Oct 1972 (C-123, C-7B)
* 360th Tactical Electronic Warfare Squadron 1 Feb - 24 Nov 1972

**Notes:** 8th and 9th SOS transferred from [Phan Rang Air Base](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phan_Rang_Air_Base); 21st TASS transferred from [Cam Ranh Air Base](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cam_Ranh_Air_Base), and 360th TEWS transferred from [Phan Rang Air Base](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phan_Rang_Air_Base) all w/o personnel or equipment. Units deactivated at Ton Nhut.

An operating location of the wing headquarters was established at [Bien Hoa Air Base](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bien_Hoa_Air_Base) on [14 April](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/April_14) [1972](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1972) to provide turnaround service for [F-4s](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/F-4) of other organizations. It was replaced on [20 June](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/June_20) 1972 by Detachment l of the wing headquarters, which continued the F-4 turn-around service and added [A-7](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A-7_Corsair_II) turnaround service on [30 October](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/October_30) 1972.

The detachment continued operations through [11 February](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/February_11) 1973.

The 377th ABW phased down for inactivation, Feb-Mar 1973, transferring many assets to the South Vietnamese Air Force.

Decorations:

* [Air Force Outstanding Unit Awards](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Air_Force_Outstanding_Unit_Award) with Combat "V" Device: 8 Apr 1966-31 May 1967; 31 Jan-31 Mar 1968: 1 Apr 1969-31 Mar 1971: 17 Jan 1972-28 Feb 1973.
* [Republic of Vietnam Gallantry Cross](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Republic_of_Vietnam_Gallantry_Cross) with Palm: 1 Apr 1966-28 Jan 1973.

**505th Tactical Air Control Group**



USAF Cessna O-1 (L-19) "Bird Dog"



An O-2 Skymaster dropping leaflets over Vietnam



OV-10 Bronco aircraft firing a [white phosphorus](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/White_phosphorus) smoke rocket to mark a ground target.

The **505th Tactical Air Control Group** was assigned to Tan Son Nhut on [8 April](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/April_8) [1964](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1964). The Unit was primarily responsible for controlling the tactical air resources of the US and its allies in [South Vietnam](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/South_Vietnam), [Thailand](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thailand), and to some extent [Cambodia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cambodia) and [Laos](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Laos). Carrying out the mission of providing tactical air support required two major components, radar installations and forward air controllers (FAC's).

The radar sites provided flight separation for attack and transport aircraft which took the form of flight following and, in some cases control by USAF Weapons Directors. Forward Air Controllers had the critical job of telling tactical fighters where to drop their ordinance. FAC's were generally attached to either US Army or ARVN (Army of Vietnam) units and served both on the ground and in the air.

Squadrons of the 505th were located as follows:

* The 619th Tactical Control Squadron at Tan Son Nhut Air Base.
* The 620th Tactical Control Squadron with responsibility from Pleiku to the DMZ, located at **Monkey Mountain Army Airfield**.
* The 621st Tactical Control Squadron which supported tactical air operations in Thailand, located at [Ubon Royal Thai Air Force Base](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ubon_Royal_Thai_Air_Force_Base), and later at [Udon Royal Thai Air Force Base](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Udon_Thani_International_Airport).
* The 19th TASS which operated mainly from the Central Highlands south, located at [Bien Hoa Air Base](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bien_Hoa_Air_Base).
* The 20th TASS based at [Da Nang Air Base](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Da_Nang_Air_Base).
* The 21st TASS headquarter at [Pleiku Air Base](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pleiku_Air_Base).
* The 22nd TASS based at [Binh Thuy Air Base](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Binh_Thuy_Air_Base).
* The 23rd TASS based at [Nakhon Phanom Royal Thai Air Force Base](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nakhon_Phanom_Royal_Thai_Air_Force_Base).

The TASS units flew either the O-1G Birddog, O-2 Skymaster, or OV-10 Bronco.

Maintenance support was provided by the 505th Tactical Control Maintenance Squadron first based at Tan Son Nhut and later at [Bien Hoa Air Base](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bien_Hoa_Air_Base)

**[**[**edit**](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Tan_Son_Nhut_Air_Base&action=edit&section=10)**] 619th Tactical Air Control Squadron**



The 619th Tactical Control Squadron was responsible from the [Mekong Delta](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mekong_Delta) to Ban Me Thuot in the Central Highlands. Detachments of the 619th TASS were located as follows:

* Det 1, 619th Tactical Control Squadron [Da Nang Air Base](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Da_Nang_Air_Base): [8 April](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/April_8) [1964](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1964) - [22 December](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/December_22) [1965](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1965)
* Det 1, 619th Tactical Control Squadron **Duong Dong Army Airfield**: [15 August](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/August_15) [1967](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1967) - [20 December](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/December_20) [1968](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1968)
* Det 2, 619th Tactical Control Squadron [Ubon Royal Thai Air Force Base](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ubon_Royal_Thai_Air_Force_Base): [8 April](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/April_8) [1964](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1964) - [22 December](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/December_22) [1965](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1965)
* Det 3, 619th Tactical Control Squadron **Can Tho Army Airfield**: 8 Apr 1964-30 Jun 1972
* Det 4, 619th Tactical Control Squadron [Udon Royal Thai Air Force Base](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Udon_Thani_International_Airport): 18 Oct 1964-22 Dec 1965
* Det 5, 619th Tactical Control Squadron [Nakhon Phanom Royal Thai Air Force Base](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nakhon_Phanom_Royal_Thai_Air_Force_Base): 10 Aug-22 Dec. 1965
* Det 6, 619th Tactical Control Squadron (Green Hill, Thailand): 10 Aug-22 Dec 1965
* Det 7, 619th Tactical Control Squadron **Tay Ninh Army Airfield**: 10 Aug 1965-15 May 1968.
* Det 8, 619th Tactical Control Squadron **Ca Mau Army Airfield**: 10 Aug 1965-15 May 1968.
* Det 9, 619th Tactical Control Squadron **Ban Me Thuot Army Airfield**:1 Oct 1965-29 Feb 1972.
* Det 10, 619th Tactical Control Squadron [Pleiku Air Base](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pleiku_Air_Base): 1 Oct 1965-8 Nov 1966.
* Det 11, 619th Tactical Control Squadron [Nha Trang Air Base](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nha_Trang_Air_Base): 22 Dec 1965-29 Feb 1972.
* Det 12, 619th Tactical Control Squadron **Qui Nhon Army Airfield**: 22 Dec 1965-8 Nov 1966

The unit was deactivated in place on [15 March](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/March_15) [1973](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1973).

**SVNAF Use of Tan Son Nhut Air Base**



Tan Son Nhut Air Base - 1962. The uncrowded flight line reflects the level of USAF/SVNAF activity which would increase drastically after the [1964](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1964) [Gulf of Tonkin Resolution](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gulf_of_Tonkin_Resolution).

In 1953, Tan Son Nhut started being used as a military air base for the fledgling Vietnamese Air Force. However was not until 1956 that the headquarters for the SVNAF was moved from the center of [Saigon](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saigon) to Tan Son Nhut Air Base. But even before that time French and Vietnamese military aircraft were always in evidence at Tan Son Nhut.

On [1 July](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/July_1) [1955](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1955) the South Vietnamese Air Force (SVNAF) was established as a separate and distinct military unit. The SVNAF consisted of 58 aircraft and about 1,300 personnel. The French had made no effort to expand the SVNAF to a force able to defend South Vietnam. Aircraft consisted primarily of C-47s, and [Grumman F8F Bearcats](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/F8F_Bearcat). In May 1956, by agreement with the South Vietnamese government, the [United States Air Force](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_Air_Force) assumed some training and administrative roles of the VNAF. Teams from [Clark Air Force Base](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Clark_Air_Force_Base) began in 1957 to organize the SVNAF into a model of the USAF when the French training contracts expired.

By [1960](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1960) Tan Son Nhut Air Base was growing with more and more SVNAF aircraft arriving from the United States such as [North American T-6 Texans](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/T-6_Texan), [Douglas A-1 Skyraiders](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A-1_Skyraider), [Cessna L-19 (O-1) Bird Dogs](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cessna_L-19_Bird_Dog), and [Sikorsky H-19](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/H-19_Chickasaw) Helicopters.

Starting in the early 1960s, the build-up of the SVNAF caused air units to became very visible on the base. On [4 January](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/January_4) [1964](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1964) the SVNAF **3311th Wing** was organized at Tan Son Nhut, and the number of air units grew rapidly. By the mid-1960s Tan Son Nhut Airport was reported as the busiest airport in the world, with a mix of air traffic that approached chaotic proportions.

**Command And Control Center**



Douglas DC-6B VIP Transport - SVNAF 314th Special Missions Squadron - Tan Son Nhut Air Base

As the headquarters for the South Vietnamese Air Force, Tan Son Nhut was primarily a command base, with most operational units using nearby [Bien Hoa Air Base](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bien_Hoa_Air_Base). At Tan Son Nhut, the SVNAF's system of command and control was developed over the years with assistance from the USAF. The system handled the flow of aircraft from take-off to target area, and return to the base it was launched from. This was known as the Tactical Air Control System (TACS), and it assured positive control of all areas where significant combat operations were performed. Without this system, it would not have been possible for the SVNAF to deploy its forces effectively where needed.

The TACS was in close proximity to the headquarters of the SVNAF and USAF forces in South Vietnam, and commanders of both Air Forces utilized its facilities. Subordinate to TACS was the [Direct Air Support Centers](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Direct_Air_Support_Center) (DASC) assigned to each of corps areas (I DASC - [Da Nang Air Base](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Da_Nang_Air_Base), DASC Alpha - [Nha Trang Air Base](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nha_Trang_Air_Base), II DASC - [Pleiku Air Base](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pleiku_Air_Base), III DASC - [Bien Hoa Air Base](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bien_Hoa_Air_Base), and IV DASC - Can Tho Air Base). DASCs were responsible for the deployment of aircraft located within their sector in support of ground operations.

Operating under each DASC were numerous Tactical Air Control Parties (TACPs), manned by one or more SVNAF/USAF personnel posted with the ARVN ground forces. A communications network inked these three levels of command and control, giving the TACS overall control of the South Vietnamese air situation at all times. Additional information was provided by a radar network that covered all of South Vietnam and beyond, monitoring all strike aircraft.

**Recruiting Center**



SVNAF Women's Armed Forces Corps (WAFC) personnel with USAF Captain Mary A. Marsh, June 1968. Captain Marsh would eventually retire as a USAF Brigadier General on 1 May 1986. General Marsh was the first Air Force woman assigned as an adviser to the Vietnamese air force.

Another function of Tan Son Nhut Air Base was a South Vietnamese Air Force recruiting center. Unlike the ARVN, the SVNAF was an all-volunteer service, remaining so until its demise in 1975. Recruits were given a screening test, followed by a physical examination. Basic requirements for service in the SVNAF was to be a Vietnamese citizen; at least age 17; minimum age 25 for flight training; no criminal record; the equivalent of a US 9th grade education for airmen; 11th grade for those entering pilot training or a 12th grade for non-rated officer.

If a volunteer met all the qualifications, the recruit was then sent to basic training at the ARVN training base at Lam Song. NCO training was held at Bien Hoa. After two months of training, or four months for aviation cadets, the recruit was given an aptitude test and progressed to specialized technical training. From there, he was sent to one of the ARVN wings for journeymen training. Aviation cadets pursued three additional months of specialized training after completing their initial four-month training course. Some were sent to the United States for advanced pilot training while non-rated officers pursued training in South Vietnam for their non-flying assignments. This training lasted about nine months, whereupon a cadet served in an operational unit for about a year before receiving a commission as a second lieutenant.

Women also served in the SVNAF. The Women's Armed Forces Corps (WAFC) was formed to fill non-combat duties beginning in December 1965. Women were assigned to SVNAF wings, Headquarters, the Air Logistics Wing, performing duties as personnel specialists, secretaries and other administrative roles.

**1968 Tet Offensive**

Tan Son Nhut Air Base was the target of major communist attacks during the 1968 [Tet Offensive](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tet_Offensive). The attack began early on [30 January](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/January_30) with greater severity than anyone had expected. When the communists attacked much of the SVNAF was on leave to be with their families during the lunar new year. An immediate recall was issued, and within 72 hours, 90 percent of the SVNAF was on duty. Over the next three weeks, the SVNAF flew over 1,300 strike sorties, bombing and strafing communist positions throughout South Vietnam. Transport aircraft from Tan Son Nhut's 33d Wing dropped almost 15,000 flares in 12 nights, compared with a normal monthly average of 10,000. Observation aircraft also from Tan Son Nhut completed almost 700 reconnaissance sorties, with SVNAF pilots flying O-1 Bird Dogs and [U-17 Skywagons](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cessna_180).

The SVNAF effectively contributed to the defense of their nation during the Tet Offensive. It took the offense to the communists, supported ARVN ground units capably and achieved a high level of strike performance.

**Vietnamization and the 1972 Spring Offensive**



SVNAF C-47s of the 413th Transportation Squadron on the very crowded flight line at Tan Son Nhut.



C-119Gs of the SVNAF 819th Transport Squadron - Tan Son Nhut Air Base

In 1970, with American units leaving the country, the SVNAF transport fleet was greatly increased at Tan Son Nhut. The SVNAF 33d and 53d Tactical Wings were established flying [Fairchild C-123 Providers](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/C-123_Provider), C-47s and [De Havilland C-7A Caribous](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/De_Havilland_Canada_DHC-4_Caribou). By November 1970, the South Vietnamese Air Force took total control of the DASCS at Bien Hoa, Da Nang and Pleiku. At the end of 1971, the SVNAF were totally in control of command and control units at eight major air bases, supporting ARVN units for the expanded air-ground operations system. In September 1971, the USAF transferred two [Fairchild C-119](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/C-119_Flying_Boxcar) squadrons to the SVNAF at Tan Son Nhut.

In 1972, the buildup of the SVNAF at Tan Son Nhut was expanded when two [Lockheed C-130 Hercules](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/C-130_Hercules) squadrons were formed there. In December, the first SVNAF C-130 training facility was established at TSN, enabling the South Vietnamese to train its own Hercules pilots. As more C-130s were transferred to the SVNAF, older C-123s were returned to the USAF for disposal.

As the buildup of the SVNAF continued, the success of the Vietnamization program was evident during the [1972 Spring Offensive](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Easter_Offensive). Responding to the communist attack, the SVNAF flew more than 20,000 strike sorties which helped to stem the communist advance. In the first month of the offensive, transports from Tan Son Nhut ferried thousands of troops and delivered nearly 4,000 tons of supplies throughout the country.

The spring offensive also resulted in additional deliveries of aircraft to the SVNAF under **Project Enhance**. New SVNAF units came about with the introduction of Fairchild C-119K gunships at Tan Son Nhut, along with [Boeing CH-47](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/CH-47_Chinook) helicopters, along with additional C-130 transports and numerous O-1 and O-2 observation aircraft. Also, fighter aircraft arrived at Tan Son Nhut for the first time in the [Northrup F-5A/B Freedom Fighter](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/F-5_Freedom_Fighter) and the F-5E Tiger II. The F-5s were subsequently transferred to Bien Hoa and Da Nang.

**1973 Cease Fire**

The [Paris Peace Accords](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paris_Peace_Accords) of 1973 brought an end to the United States’ advisory capacity in South Vietnam. In its place, as part of the agreement, the Americans retained a Defense Attaché Office (DAO) at Tan Son Nhut Air Base, with small field offices at other facilities around the country. The technical assistance provided by the personnel of the DAOs and by civilian contractors was essential to the SVNAF, however, because of the cease-fire agreement, the South Vietnamese could not be advised in any way on military operations, tactics or techniques of employment.

It was through the DAO that the American/South Vietnamese relationship was maintained, and it was primarily from this source that information from within South Vietnam was obtained. The SVNAF provided statistics with regards to the military capability of their units to the DAO, however the accuracy of this information was not always reliable.

From the Spring Offensive of 1972, it was clear that without United States aid, especially air support, the ARVN would not be able to defend itself against continuing communist attacks. This was demonstrated at the fighting around [Pleiku](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pleiku), [An Loc](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/An_Loc) and [Quang Tri](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Quang_Tri) where the ARVN would have been defeated without continuous air support, mainly supplied by the USAF. The ARVN relied heavily on air support, and with the absence of the USAF, the full responsibility fell on the SVNAF. Although equipped with large numbers of [A-37](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cessna_T-37) and F-5 attack aircraft, to conduct effective close air support operations, during the 1972 offensive the USAF relied on the heavier [McDonnell Douglas F-4 Phantom II](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/F-4_Phantom_II) supporting ARVN forces dealing with those targets.

In 1973, the SVNAF had a force geared to a level of combat similar to the 1968 Tet Offensive, under the belief that a major cease-fire violation by the communists would result in USAF intervention from its bases in [Thailand](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thailand).

The decision to equip the SVNAF with A-37s and F-5s was made under the belief that if the SVNAF was given heavier and more sophisticated aircraft, there would be a temptation to initiate direct combat with the [North Vietnamese](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/North_Vietnam). That would result in large-scale warfare. So by not equipping the SVNAF with sophisticated aircraft, the potential for keeping any fighting would be at a low-level and the outlook for a final political settlement would be increased.

**Capture Of Tan Son Nhut Air Base**



NVA troops overrunning the base area of the 429th Transport Squadron at Tan Son Nhut air base - 30 April 1975. A C-47 with tail code MJ can be seen, indicating it is an EC-47D belonging to the 716th Reconnaissance Squadron.



Lockheed C-130A-45-LM Hercules Serial 57-460 of the South Vietnamese Air Force. The aircraft served with the SVNAF from October 1972 to April 1975. During the fall of Saigon, it was flown from Tan Son Nhut Air Base to [Singapore](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Singapore), carrying about 350 Vietnamese to freedom.

Returned to USAF service in August 1975, it was assigned to the 16th Special Operations Squadron (SOS) at [Korat Royal Thai Air Force Base](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Korat_Royal_Thai_Air_Force_Base), [Thailand](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thailand), then used by the United States Air Force [Air National Guard](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Air_National_Guard) for many years before being retired in 1989.

Today, this aircraft is part of the [National Air and Space Museum](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Air_and_Space_Museum), given its historic past.

In early 1975 [North Vietnam](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/North_Vietnam) realized the time was right to achieve its goal of re-uniting Vietnam under communist rule, launched a series of small ground attacks to test U.S. reaction.

On [8 January](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/January_8) the North Vietnamese Politburo ordered a major People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) offensive to "liberate" South Vietnam by NVA cross-border invasion. The NVA general staff plan for the invasion of South Vietnam called for 20 divisions, because, by 1975, the Soviet-supplied North Vietnamese Army was the fifth largest in the world. It anticipated a two year struggle for victory.

By [14 March](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/March_14), South Vietnamese President [Nguyen Van Thieu](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nguyen_Van_Thieu) decided to abandon the Central Highlands region and two northern provinces of South Vietnam and ordered a general withdrawal of ARVN forces from those areas. Instead of an orderly withdrawal, it turned into a general retreat, with masses of military and civilians fleeing, clogging roads and creating chaos.

On [30 March](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/March_30) 100,000 South Vietnamese soldiers surrender after being abandoned by their commanding officers. The large coastal cities of Danang, Qui Nhon, Tuy Hoa and Nha Trang are abandoned by the South Vietnamese, yielding entire northern half of South Vietnam to the North Vietnamese.

As the war in South Vietnam entered its conclusion, the pilots of the SVNAF flew sortie after sortie, supporting the retreating South Vietnamese Army after it abandoned [Cam Ranh Bay](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cam_Ranh_Bay) on [14 April](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/April_14). For two days after the ARVN left the area, the Wing Commander at [Phan Rang Air Base](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phan_Rang_Air_Base) fought on with the forces under his command. Airborne troops were sent in for one last attempt to hold the airfield, but the defenders were finally overrun on [16 April](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/April_16) and Phan Rang Air Base was lost.

The last of the 2d Air Division abandoned the airfield with the remaining flyable airplanes, leaving four A[C-119s](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fairchild_AC-119) which had flown in from Da Nang and two [A-37s](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cessna_T-37) to the North Vietnamese.

On [22 April](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/April_22) [Xuan Loc](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Xuan_Loc) fell to the communists after a two week battle with South Vietnam's 18th Army Division which inflicted over 5000 NVA casualties and delayed the 'Ho Chi Minh Campaign' for two weeks. With the fall of [Xuan Loc](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Xuan_Loc) and the capture of [Bien Hoa Air Base](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bien_Hoa_Air_Base) in late April 1975 it was clear that [South Vietnam](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/South_Vietnam) was about to fall to the [North Vietnamese](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/North_Vietnamese) Army.

At dusk on [28 April](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/April_28), three captured A-37s, flown from Phan Rang bombed Tan Son Nhut destroying a number of aircraft on the flight line. There are conflicting stories about who was actually flying these aircraft. One source insists they were VNAF pilots who were communists, another says they were VNAF pilots who were forced to fly the mission in return for the safety of their families, and NVA General Van Tien Dung claimed the A-37s were flown by North Vietnamese Air Force pilots.

Whatever the case, the A-37s escaped. despite being pursued by several SVNAF F-5s. Although the physical damage to Ton Son Nhut was not extensive, the threat of further air strikes eliminated Ton Son Nhut AB for fixed-wing evacuation flights, further lowering what little morale remained in the capital.

[Saigon](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saigon) was now surrounded by thirteen NVA divisions and most Vietnamese realized it was only a matter of time until the entire country was in communist hands. On [29 April](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/April_29) [President Ford](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/President_Ford) ordered OPERATION FREQUENT WIND, the helicopter evacuation of Saigon.

Vietnamese pilots now began flying themselves and their families out of the country in anything that could get off the ground. Some headed for the American rescue fleet just off the coast, while others flew to [Thailand](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thailand).

On [30 April](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/April_30) the last desperate combat sorties flown by the SVNAF were carried out in defense of Tan Son Nhut. An AC-119 Shadow gunship, which had spent the night defending the base perimeter, landed for fuel and ammunition. After refueling and rearming, the Shadow took off again. The gunship orbited the air base firing on advancing NVA troops and was soon joined by a pair of A-1s. The Skyraiders made repeated runs over NVA positions until NVA gunners downed one with an SA-7. The second A-1 pilot continued his attacks until his fuel and ordnance were used up. All the while, the AC-119 kept its fire directed on advancing enemy forces.

About 7 AM the Shadow's luck ran out. Another SA-7 scored a direct hit and the AC- 119 fell in flames. Three crewmen managed to bail out, but one chute became entangled in the flaming debris and carried its wearer to a flaming death.

In the final evacuation, over a hundred SVNAF aircraft arrived in Thailand, including twenty-six [F-5s](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Northrop_F-5), eight [A-37s](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cessna_T-37). eleven [A-1s](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A-1_Skyraider), six [C-130s](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/C-130_Hercules). thirteen [C-47s](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/C-47_Skytrain), live [C-7s](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/De_Havilland_Canada_DHC-4_Caribou), and three [AC-119s](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fairchild_AC-119). Additionally close to 100 VNAF helicopters landed on U.S. ships off the coast. although at least half were jettisoned. Two [O-1s](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cessna_L-19_Bird_Dog) managed to land on the [USS Midway (CV-41)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/USS_Midway_%28CV-41%29), one of which was also jettisoned. On [30 April](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/April_30) [1975](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1975), [Saigon](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saigon) fell and all remaining South Vietnamese forces were ordered to surrender.

For the SVNAF thirty-five long years of war had come to an end.

**Known SVNAF Units At Tan Son Nhut (June 1974 Table Of Organization)**

Tan Son Nhut Air Base was the **Headquarters of the South Vietnamese Air Force**. It was also the Headquarters of the SVNAF **5th Air Division**.

**33d Tactical Wing**

* 314th Special Air Missions Squadron VC-47, U-17, UH-1, DC-6B
* 716th Reconnaissance Squadron R/EC-47, U-6A
* 718th Reconnaissance Squadron EC-47
* 429th/431st Transport Squadron C-7B
* Det H 259th Helicopter Squadron Bell UH-1H (Medevac)

**53d Tactical Wing**

* 819th/821st Combat Squadron AC-119G
* 435th/437th Transport Squadron C-130A



**Vietnamese Air Force Unit Emblems At Tan Son Nhut Air Base**