

**“Happy Valley” Phan Rang AB, Vietnam  
...keeping the memories alive**

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Phan Rang AB News No. 123

**“Stories worth telling”**

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**Desperate Night Flight From Firebase Kate**

**Beret Captain Led Troops Out of Inferno**

**BU PRANG**, Vietnam (AP)—When the order came to abandon Firebase Kate, the American artillerymen raced from their bunkers, clawed through their own razor-sharp barbed wire and ran down the steep slopes.

Running with them through the night were scores of mountain tribe soldiers shrieking guidance to each other like jungle parrots.

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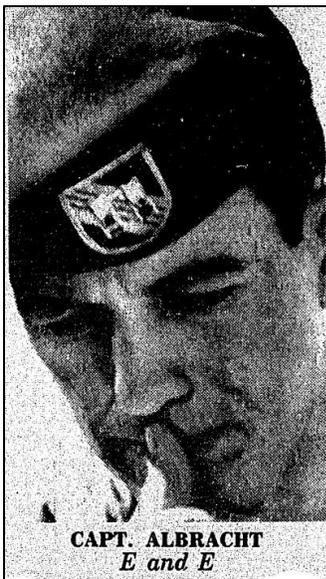
One hundred yards behind, North Vietnamese sappers were blowing their way up the hill and into the emptying camp.

Leading the desperate legion of Americans and Montagnards was a boyish-face 21-year-old Green Beret captain cast by circumstances into the dramatic role. He was William L. Albracht, from Rock Island, Ill., sent four days earlier to command the security force at Kate when a fellow Green Beret officer went on leave.

"If you were not religious when , you started that night you were when you got out," Albracht recalled with a tight smile Monday.

Communist guns buried in the hills of Cambodia began hitting Kate on Thursday with bull's-eye accuracy. The U.S. artillerymen on Kate, from the 1st Bn., 92nd Regt., took up the duel but in the end were out-gunned, losing one artillery tube after the other until all five were gone.

The third day of the onslaught, every man was permanently underground, huddling in bunkers hacked into the hard red clay of the hill. Everything above ground was leveled by the relentless pounding. The outhouses, the tents, the mess halls were gone.



Helicopters darted in with supplies but they did not land, tossing out the bundles to the men who scurried out of their holes to drag them inside.

Describing the last hours of Kate, Albracht said, "at three or four o'clock on Saturday afternoon we began taking airburst artillery, including fiery white phosphorous. It shook the hell out of the whole place.

"We knew then we had to get out. That is why I requested it in no uncertain terms," Albracht declared.

He added "if we had used helicopters, and they were shot down, we would have to walk out anyway. So I guess that's why we were told to go the way we did.

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"And night is the best time for E and E (escape and evasion.)"

At this point, Kate's defenders did not think of the dangers that may have awaited them outside the camp, and along the seven-mile march across jungled mountains to the safety of Bu Prang Special Forces camp.

The defenders knew that North Vietnamese troops were milling outside the camps. "Only the constant air attacks and artillery kept them off," Albracht said.

**By George, He Flew Right Into the Action**

*(Pacific Stars & Stripes, Monday, November 24, 1969)*

S&S Vietnam Bureau

**GIA NGHIA**, Vietnam — Air Force Maj. George R. Lattin volunteered for Vietnam because he wanted to get in on the action.

In just three weeks, he's seen enough to last a lifetime. Thirty minutes after Lattin stepped off the plane for his new assignment as a forward air controller with Air Liaison Advisory Team 32 here, he was circling in his tiny O1 Birddog over the ill-fated Fire Support Base Kate, directing jet air strikes and dodging enemy 37mm antiaircraft and machine gun fire.

Two weeks later Lattin was flying just east of Bu Prang when he saw VNAF A37 jets dive — bombing their own troops by accident. In a death defying maneuver, he flew his Birddog in front of the jets to warn them away before they could make another bombing run. This prevented further deaths, although more than 20 ARVNs had been killed.

Three days after that, Lattin's plane was shot up as he directed fire against enemy artillery shelling the Bu Prang Special Forces Camp 110 miles northwest of Saigon.

"Hawk. Hawk. I'm hit. I'm hit. I'm going down," Lattin screamed into his headset as bullets smashed into the cockpit, destroying most of his instruments and control cables.

"Hawk" is the call-sign Capt. William Albracht used at Kate before he led his men back to Bu Prang in a desperate night escape. The two men are good friends.

"Don't worry, baby," shouted Albracht. "We're coming to get you if we have to send out a

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whole regiment."

But Lattin didn't need it. With only slight rudder movement for control, he brought his plane back to Bu Prang for what Air Force observers called one of the most astounding landings they had ever seen.

Lattin soared in through a rain of artillery and mortar fire as a heavy crosswind swept the dirt airstrip. He just missed a wire and wood barrier that frantic soldiers were struggling to pull out of his way. Albracht talked him down.

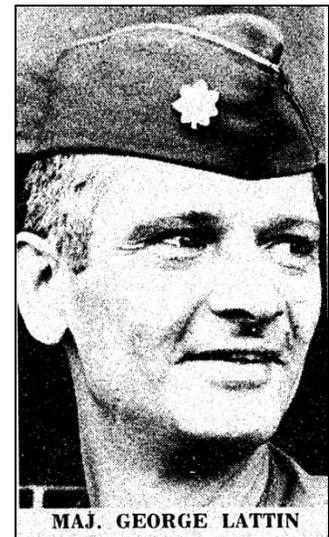
Lattin and his co-pilot, 2nd Lt. Walter C. Phillips, received only minor facial scratches in the action. Both are back flying over Bu Prang.

Lattin, 38, was born in Huntington, W. Va. He joined the Air Force as an enlisted man in 1948 and was commissioned in 1955 after attending Aviation Cadet School. He has more than 9,000 hours of flying time, mostly in troop transport planes. He served a six-month tour of duty in Vietnam flying a C47 transport with the 1st Air Command Group, the Air Force equivalent of the Special Forces, in 1963.

"I've never flown a jet," he said. "I always thought a plane without a prop was like a train without a smoke-stack." He specifically volunteered to fly the Birdog in Vietnam.

Lattin has also served in Okinawa, Japan, Korea and Laos. He last worked in a staff job in the Special Air Warfare Center at Hurlburt AFB, Fla.

Lattin said he has enjoyed his first three hectic weeks in Vietnam, even though he works a "25-hour day." "I fly all day, debrief at night, talk to the crew, drink two beers and hit the sack," he said.



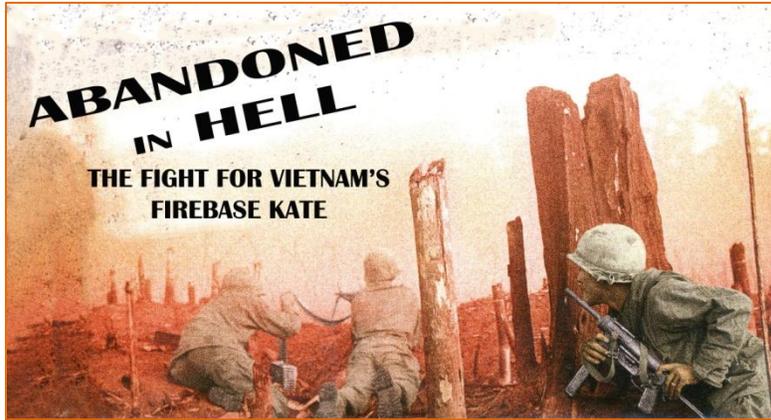
Lattin's home is now Dover, Del., where his wife and two sons await his return.

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*(Excerpts from the book “Abandoned in Hell: The Fight for Vietnam’s Firebase Kate”, used with permission of the author, William Albracht.)*

Outnumbered and outgunned, effectively surrounded by a vastly superior PAVN force later estimated at between 4,000 and 6,000, we would have been overrun that very day had not Lattin vectored fast-mover help to our tiny outpost. First in were the burly but surprisingly agile F-4 Phantoms from the 559th Tactical Fighter Squadron, call sign "Boxers," out of Cam Ranh Bay. Lattin then brought us swift and deadly **F-100 Super Sabres** from the **35th Tactical Fighter Wing**, (from Phan Rang AB) call sign "Blades."

We heard them coming before we saw them, but the Phantoms' banshee shriek bounced off so many hills that it was impossible to gauge the direction of their approach. I stood in the open with John Kerr and Kenn Hopkins, watching them swoop in, one or two at a time, barely off the jungle treetops, pale curlicues of water vapor dancing off their wingtip vortices, great metallic darts traveling at impossible speeds, the unearthly howl of their engines battering our ears, the wild wake of their passage bending and snapping the foliage—and then the elongated silver teardrops of napalm canisters tumbling end over end into the ravine below us. At once the fighter's nose rose and his afterburner boomed to life, shooting him skyward and battering us with earsplitting sound.

The tumbling napalm canisters exploded, spilling liquid fire to boil across the dark green jungle. The heat warmed our exposed skin and the wind wafted the sharp, metallic taste of charred petroleum to bite deep in our throats.

When the Phantoms were done, the **Super Sabres** appeared, low and fast, flitting seemingly

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almost close enough to touch, sweeping across the ridge to our east. Black tail-finned bombs seemed to break loose of their own volition, slanting downward. The blasts, perhaps a rifle shot distant, hurled a concussion wave that seemed to bend the air before staggering us with invisible force.

It was great theater, truly an unforgettable performance.

...he was on his little handheld radio talking to these fast-moving jets that were dropping 750-pound bombs up and down this ridgeline—and the whole side of this hillside just blew up.

"Then the [pilots of the] jets demanded that Bill give them a body count. 'We can't stay on station without a body count,' they said.

"Bill said, 'This is extremely steep terrain going down into this gully, triple-canopy jungle—we're not going to go down and count noses.'"

Undaunted, the Air Force pilot insisted on his body count. The Pentagon needed numbers to keep score in what they viewed as a war of attrition. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara held an almost religious view of systems analysis, which demanded that every action be quantified; numbers from the battlefield convinced him that if we killed enough of their troops, the North Vietnamese would back off and end the war. There was, therefore, constant pressure from the top to get bomb damage assessments after every air strike. Decades later I would learn from one of the FACs who flew in support of Kate that while they were responsible for filing a BDA after every strike, they were rarely, if ever, able to get anything approaching reliable body count. So they usually omitted it completely. If forced, they merely made something up.

*It had not been often that I have found out that I helped in a specific action but I was at Phan Rang when this occurred. Ken Miller*

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... I grew up idolizing men like Davy Crockett, Jim Bowie, and William Travis. They stood their ground at the Alamo, sacrificed their lives, because they knew it would buy Sam Houston time to raise the army that eventually won Texas its independence. If holding Kate had meant saving others' lives or advancing America's cause, I would have died there. But Kate no longer served any purpose. So it came down to a simple choice: Do we stay and die in place, or do we attempt to escape and evade the enemy? It was clear to me that it was better to leave, better for my men, better for their families and loved ones, and better for my country if at least some of us lived to fight another day.

*The 35<sup>th</sup> Tactical Fighter Wing Super Sabers provided missions to help beat off the NVA, dropping iron and napalm. The 435th Munitions Maintenance Squadron provided these loads to the flight line and loaded the F100s. Other men provided the refuel and other functions, as well as coordination. We were a great team. We few, we band of brothers.* Ken Miller

We took advantage of the noise from Spooky's engines and miniguns to mask the sounds of our passage through thick jungle as we put space between us and Ambush Hill. When I thought that we were far enough north—more a feeling than any sense of the actual distance—I turned, and we began moving westward. I had a vague sense of where the rescue force was dug in—little more than a hunch, my guess of about where I saw the helicopters touch down, and a look at my map—but based on what I was told before leaving Kate, I still expected to find a Mike Force element in the immediate vicinity of our abandoned hilltop.

I know that the enemy was all around us; when I could no longer hear Spooky, I halted the column to listen. After several seconds, an almost infinitesimal change in air pressure, the suggestion of a phantom breeze, brushed my face. The tiniest of vibrations nudged the soles of my feet. Then came the faint, softly rhythmic scrape of feet treading hard earth.

I signaled DOWN! and we all fell forward, a row of dominos collapsing front to back. The sound grew louder. As I pressed my body into the earth, the vibration was more intense, but still

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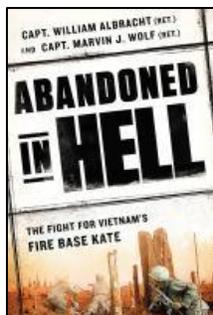
barely discernible.

To our left, through the foliage, was a darker darkness, movement where there should be none.

Men rushed by in the jungle only about ten meters away, moving eastward in a closely bunched column stretching several hundred yards and parallel to our column, following some hidden path cut, tunnellike, through the foliage.

*From my reading of the book by the commander of Kate, if not for the F110s, Spooky and Shadow from Phan Rang, and the choppers from the army providing support, the firebase would have been overrun by the NVA. Well done Phan Rangers. It is the first time I have read an account about how our teamwork saved the day. All the support personnel can, and should, feel proud. I was there on October 30 into November when this occurred and am proud to know I made a difference.* Ken Miller

(Note: It’s impossible to pick out just a few paragraphs from this book that would give you an idea of what the book is like, but that is impossible because every word, sentence and paragraph is so well researched and written that you will have to take a break because it is so intense. In the next Phan Rang News I will include the Foreward written by Joseph L. Galloway which pretty much gives an overview of what to expect in the book, but until then if you can get your hands on a copy of this book you will treasure it.)



**By William Albracht and Marvin Wolf**

**An astonishing memoir of military courage at a remote outpost during the Vietnam War—including a foreword by Joseph L. Galloway, *New York Times* bestselling coauthor of *We Were Soldiers Once...and Young*.**

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In October 1969, William Albracht, the youngest Green Beret captain in Vietnam, took command of a remote hilltop outpost called Firebase Kate held by only 27 American soldiers and 156 Montagnard militiamen. At dawn the next morning, three North Vietnamese Army regiments—some six thousand men—crossed the Cambodian border and attacked.



**Once Upon a Time...Fairy Tale Popularity Rises**

*(Seventh Air Force News, December 31, 1969)*

By TSgt. John B. Mahony

**PHAN RANG** — The tall, husky sergeant picked up "The Real Mother Goose," "Nursery Tales," and "Shirley Temple's Bedtime Book," left the library check-out counter and headed eagerly for his barracks to read.

"I'm just going to have to order some more children's bedtime story books," said a concerned Miss Lillian M. Walsh, base librarian here. "That fellow, like so many of the other officers and airmen, just loves to read things like 'Snow White,' 'Sleeping Beauty,' and 'Rumpelstiltskin.'"

This type of reading by grown men is peculiar to overseas libraries," said Miss Walsh. "Just look, there's another fellow browsing in the children's section."

Meanwhile, back in the barracks, our fairy tale reader was just finishing up another exciting adventure: ". . . and they lived happily all the rest of their days," he read aloud using careful articulation.

"Well, Danny, Nancy, your daddy is just about to run out of tape," the sergeant said into a microphone attached to a portable tape recorder next to his bunk, "but I promise to read 'The Wizard of Oz' on my next tape."

"I understand this fairy tale reading program for home tapes is really catching on throughout Vietnam with the servicemen," concluded the librarian.

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Miss Walsh had to return to work at this point as an air commando was eager to check out "The Real Mother Goose."



**Stinger Sinks 26 Sampans**

*(Seventh Air Force News, 7 January 1970)*

**PHAN RANG** — An AC-119 Stinger gunship crew from the 14th Special Operations here recently struck a group of enemy sampans in an inlet along a river bank 16 miles south-southeast of Saigon.

A forward air controller credited the gunship crew with destroying 26 enemy sampans.

Upon arrival over the target, the navigator, Maj. Eugene D. Miller, made radio contact with the FAC who briefed him on the situation and pointed out the target area.

After the FAC marked the target with smoke bombs, Maj. Richard A. Matzen, aircraft commander of the 18<sup>th</sup> Special Operations Squadron gunship, was cleared to open fire. The gunships minigun fire hit the sampans, causing many of them to sink.



**Two 120<sup>th</sup> Flights Blast Targets in Offensive Aid**

*(Phan Fare, The Happy Valley Weekly, February 13, 1969)*

Two flights of F-100 Supersabre fighter-bombers of the 120<sup>th</sup> TFS hit enemy base camps recently in support of the Toan Thang and Quvet Chien offensive and caused heavy damage to two Viet Cong base camps.

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**One Tragic Day In January 1969**

By Jack Anderson

*“January 13, 1969 was a tough day to be on the 8th Tactical Bomb Sq.  
Flight Line”*

January 13, 1969 was a tough day to be on the 8th TAC Bomb Sq. Flight Line. We lost two good men that night. Lt. Col. Norman D. Eaton was the pilot and Capt. Paul E. Getchell was the navigator of their B-57. The night prior they had both flown the plane I was crew chief on at the time, tail number 282. In fact they had flown my plane more than any other crew since my arrival on Nov 28, 1968. I knew them well.

You've heard of "Players Coaches", well these two were a "Crew Chief's Flight Crew." They always arrived early for their mission primarily to talk to the enlisted ground crew. I remember Col. Eaton worrying about a racial incident that had occurred on a Navy aircraft carrier a little while earlier and was concerned about similar incidents at Phan Rang. I told him I knew of none. They both always seemed concerned about our well being.

On this night I was helping the crew chief on 561. We helped Col. Eaton and Capt. Getchell into their seats and the two of us moved in front of the plane. The crew chief pointed to the #1 engine and raised his right hand with one finger pointing upward in a circular manner. This signaled the pilot that we were ready for him to start the engine. This he did. Immediately after starting, he shut it down and pointed to the engine telling us he had an engine fire warning light. We both went to #1 and started feeling the cowling while looking for fire and smelling for smoke. After a minute or two we came back beside the plane and I told them we couldn't find a

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fire.

He gave us a thumbs up, so we returned to the front of the plane and this time both engines started normally. We went into taxi protocol as the crew chief marshaled him out of the revetment into the shutdown area. The crew chief saluted them both as they taxied to the end of the runway where "Last Chance" was waiting for them.

Before pulling onto the runway for takeoff, he suddenly shut down both engines. He had another fire warning on #1. This time they dropped the cowling and found a broken wire on the sensor. Doing a quick field splice, they hurriedly replaced the cowling and went through startup procedures.

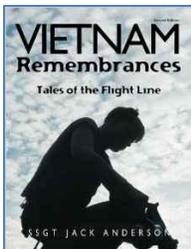
At this time, I don't believe he would have had any trouble aborting this mission. Perhaps Dennis W. Craig, another 8th pilot who belongs to this group could tell us for sure. Rather than aborting, he pulled onto the runway, took off and headed for Laos and his targets.

The Forward Air Controller reported heavy cannon fire at the bomb site as Col. Eaton put his B-57 into a bomb dive. The FAC said he saw an explosion as the plane neared the end of the dive. He didn't see any parachutes come from the plane.

Back at Phan Rang, we were all devastated by the news. I felt as if I had taken a punch to the gut. Two good men whom I considered friends were gone. It's hard for me to think of either of them without tears welling in my eyes to this day.

Matt Getchell is also a member of this Happy Valley group. Perhaps he can give more information.

Rest in Peace my warriors. Your country owes you a gratitude.



Jack Anderson is also the author of Vietnam Remembrances.

Vietnam Remembrances, Tales of the Flight Line takes place in Phan Rang, Vietnam in 1968 and 1969. Written by a man who was there, the author has captured the essence of a combat Flight Line. Some of the stories will lull you with tales of everyday occurrences and even fun and amusing times. Suddenly, the reader will be drug back to the realities of a real combat flight line with tales of terror and

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death. Vietnam Remembrances, Tales of the Flight line is a must for anyone who wishes to live or re-live an Air Force Flight Line in times of war.

(Another night to remember was 26 January 1969, a true life story by Joe Kaupa in Phan Rang Newsletter 99.)



**310<sup>th</sup> Assists Cham Village**

*(Phan Fare, The Happy Valley Weekly, February 13, 1969)*

Harassed and threatened by the Viet Cong, a group of Cham people abandoned their ancestral village “Long Houses” in the mountains several months ago and were given farming lands nine miles south of Phan Rang Air Base, Vietnam.

To make their transition easier and to assist them until the Chams had established themselves, members of the 310<sup>th</sup> SOSq, have “adopted” the village as their special civic action responsibility.

Taking part in a recent 310<sup>th</sup> delivery of clothes and food to the Chams were Staff Sergeants Henry H. Hedgecock and Samuel A. Sessel, and Sgt. Thomas Quintana.

They found the village, named Hoai Trung, rapidly gaining a look of permanency. Abandonng their traditional “Long House” or communal style of living, the Chams had built sturdy mud and bamboo family unit houses.

They had retained, however, some of their group methods when tilling the fields and harvesting the crops.

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310<sup>th</sup> SOSq members plan to continue their aid to the Chams refugees even though local terrorists recently destroyed a major bridge going directly to the village.



(**Note:** [Bob Tucker](#), Keeper of the Rolls, maintains the Phan Rang AB “Roll Call” a listing of people that were stationed at Phan Rang, listed by rank, full name, organization, and years in country. This list is constantly being updated and periodically posted on Facebook. If you do not have access to Facebook, you can request a copy from Bob and he will email you one and if you have any names to contribute, that would be appreciated as well.)

**Pfc. George M. Duke**

**PHAN RANG, Vietnam** — Pfc **George M. Duke**, son of Mr. and Mrs. Matthew Duke of Coalport, arrived here last month with his unit, the 529th Transportation Company. The company, previously located at Ft. Eustis, Va., will provide transportation for Headquarters, Phan Rang Sub Area Command Pvt. Duke, a truck driver in the company, entered the Army in November 1965 and completed basic training at Ft. Jackson, S. C. (*The Altoona Mirror, Altoona, Pa., Friday, February 10, 1967*)

Airman /1C **Arthur C. Nielson**, whose mother is Mrs. Rita Benforte of Middletown, is on duty at Phan Rang AB, Vietnam. Nielson, an aircraft loadmaster, is a member of the Pacific Air Forces. Before his arrival in Southeast Asia, he was assigned to Travis AFB, Calif. The airman attended Middletown High School and completed requirements for his diploma after entering the service. (*The Time Herald Record, Friday, November 10, 1967*)

**Promoted.** Former Airman **Richard H. Yaun Jr.**, son of Mr. and Mrs. Richard H. Yaun, 29 Yaun Ave., Liberty, has been promoted to airman first class. The airman is stationed at Phan Rang Air

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Base in Vietnam. He is a graduate of Liberty Central School and attended Clarkson College of Technology at Potsdam before entering the Air Force in 1965. (*The Time Herald Record, Friday, November 10, 1967*)

(Note: Richard is also a member of the Happy Valley Facebook group.)

**In Vietnam** Airman/1C **Gene R. Elliott**, son of Mr. and Mrs. Harvey A. Elliott of R. D. 3, Sussex, is on duty at Phan Rang AB, Vietnam. Elliott, an aircraft mechanic is a member of the Pacific Air Forces. Before his arrival in Southeast Asia, he was assigned to Williams AFB, Ariz. The airman is a graduate of Sussex High School. (*The Time Herald Record, Friday, November 10, 1967*)

**Barronet** Major **Jack W. Graf**, son of Mr. and Mrs. George R . Graf, Rt. 1, is a member of the 35th Tactical Fighter Wing at Phan Rang AB, Vietnam, that has been honored by the Vietnamese Armed Forces. He is a maintenance staff officer. (*Eau Claire Leader-Telegram, Tuesday, June 1, 1971*)

**Neillsville** Staff Sergeant **William A. Perrine**, son of Mr. and- Mrs. William H. Perrine, 2204 Black River Road, is a member of the 35th Tactical Fighter Wing at Phan Rang AB, Vietnam, that has been honored by the Vietnamese Armed Forces Sergeant Perrine is an aircraft maintenance technician. (*Eau Claire Leader-Telegram, Tuesday, June 1, 1971*)

**Owen** Technical Sargeant **William R. Krach**, son of Mr. and Mrs. J. Krach, is a member of the 35th Tactical Fighter wing at Phan Rang AB, Vietnam that has been honored the Vietnamese Armed Forces. Sergeant Krach is an aircraft maintenance technician. (*Eau Claire Leader-Telegram, Tuesday, June 1, 1971*)

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**Letters**



Doug

The most recent Phan Rang Happy Valley Newsletter was great as usual. Thanks for the work you do on this.

Jim Greenleaf

Doug

Thanks for the memories.

Percy (Mike) Floyd

Doug

Very good Doug, I remember the construction well. The plywood on the floor used to curve the top of the bar. Capt. Tom Risan had a lot to do with that work but as Bud Mechling said, everyone got a piece of it.

Joseph O'Neil

Doug

Thank you sir. This is a good read.

Buddy King

**I hope that you enjoyed this issue of the Phan Rang Newsletter. It's not often that we hear stories from people that were actually affected by sorties flown by Phan Rang based aircraft, but William (Hawk) Albracht's book "Abandoned in Hell: The Fight for Vietnam's Firebase Kate" gives us the human side and a different perspective of the battle. His story is the kind that will stick with you for the rest of your life. I was very moved by this story, as was everyone that has read it, that I'm going to present more of it in the next newsletter. In another note, I've always used dashed-lines to separate stories, but I thought it would be interesting to use cropped group pictures as dividers and they do not necessarily relate to the articles unless by coincidence. This newsletter was compiled and published by [Douglas Severt](#). Previous issues of the Phan Rang Newsletter are available [here](#) for download.**