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Phan Rang AB News No. 152 "Stories worth telling"

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Rescue at Kham Duc 'Routine' Flight Is a Lifesaver

(Pacific Stars and Stripes, Tuesday, May 28, 1968)



DA NANG, Vietnam (AP)— Fire and smoke wreathed the Special Forces camp and the Viet Cong flag whipped from the old command bunker when the radio crackled that three Americans were still down there.

An old C123 twin-engine Provider lowered through the battle haze and gingerly touched down on the debris-strewn airstrip. The crew found no one, but on the takeoff run spotted three men waving desperately. The plane was going too fast, however, and was too low on fuel for another run.

Circling above, a ruddy faced, 45-year-old pilot listened to the radio. He snapped on his intercom and told his crew: "We're going in."

So began the last hazardous flight into Kham Doc, a mountain-ringed Green Berets' outpost

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some 40 miles southwest of Da Nang. Helicopters, four-engine Hercules turboprops and the smaller twin-engine Providers had already lifted out about 800 Americans, villagers and tribal irregulars. No one was supposed to be left.

The airstrip was littered with craters and the debris of destroyed helicopters. All day the evacuation transports had been taking hits. Enemy gunners shot down the Hercules.

Lt. Col. Joe Jackson put the old transport plane in a near dive.

It should have been a routine check flight. As commander of the 311th Air Commando Sq., Jackson normally doesn't fly much. This day he had arranged a flight with a check pilot, Maj. William Campbell 37, as his copilot.

Jackson was taking a periodic flight check when his C123 was ordered over embattled Khan Duc.

The idea was to get down quickly to avoid antiaircraft fire and at the same time to pull up and land slowly.

"I knew things were bad on the ground. You could see it," Jackson said. "We didn't have any trouble finding the base, it was all on fire. From the time we came in range, they opened up, firing from the bunkers and from below us as we approached."

"God, look at all those machine guns," yelled copilot Campbell.

Jackson threaded the plane down the runway while Campbell and two crew members scanned the smoldering fortifications for the three Americans. Near the end of the airstrip, the three ran out—an Air Force officer in a blue flight suit and two enlisted men in camouflaged fatigues. They were members of the Air Force combat control team that normality ran the control tower at the small post. How they got left behind, no one knew.

"As soon as they jumped on board, the loadmaster yelled 'on board, clear to go' and we sure went," Jackson recalls. "We got out of there without a hole in the plane, never understand it."

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The official record shows that Jackson's plane was on the ground no more than 120 seconds. "That was eternity," Jackson said.

As reported in the Pacific Stars & Stripes, August 12, 1967. During the evacuation of Kham Duc there is one flight that Air Force 70 Maj. Ray D. Shelton, a C123 Provider pilot with the 311th Air Commando Sq., Phan Rang Air Base, will never forget.

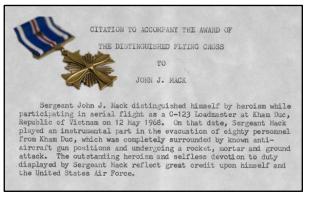
Shelton's C123 was called upon to aid in the evacuation of some 700 to 1,000 people from the Special Forces camp at Kham Duc, which was under heavy enemy attack. Approaching the camp, the major learned that one helicopter and one C130 Hercules had already tried to make a pickup without success. The helicopter was shot down and the C130's tires were shot out from under it by mortars.

The major brought his aircraft in to the strip under heavy ground fire.

Shelton's right ear drum was ruptured by a near miss, but they took aboard 65 Americans, 10 Vietnamese adults and 5 children.



John Joseph Mack was a crewmember of a C123 mission that aided in the evacuation of eighty personnel from Kham Duc.
Sergeant Mack was awarded The Distinguished Flying Cross for his participation.



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SP-4 Dennis K. Presnell Awarded Bronze Star Medal

Mr. and Mrs. Hyder Presnell of Route 1, Box 88-A, Relief N. C. have two sons in the service. Their names are Dennis K. Presnell and Kenneth Presnell.

A1C Kenneth Presnell has been in the Air Force since Jan. 2, 1954 and was first stationed at Lackland Air Force Base, San Antonio, Texas. He was then transferred to Shaw Air Force Base, Sumter, S. C., and is now stationed at Phan Rang Air Base, Vietnam. He is married to the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Carl Cooper of Poplar and she lives in Taylorsville, N. C.

SP-4 Dennis K. Presnell was first stationed at Ft. Gordon, Ga., and Ft. Polk, La., and was sent to Saigon, Vietnam, Oct. 11, 1966, he has been wounded three times, Nov. 196 6, Jan. 13, 1967, and April 6, 1967. He has recovered from all wounds and is now back on the front line.

Dennis K. Presnell was awarded the Bronze Star Medal for heroism in connection with military operations against a hostile force. A copy of the award papers follows.

Kenneth met his brother, Dennis in Dian, Saigon on 31, 1967 and visited him three days.

Here are their addresses: A1C Kenneth Presnell, AF14840761, 35th Trans. Sq., Box 2046, APO San Francisco, Calif., 96321; SP4 Dennis K. Presnell, US 53 442987, H.H.C. 1st Inf. Div. APO 96345, San Francisco, Calif.

HEADQUARTERS 1ST INFANTRY DIVISION, APO San Francisco 96345

GENERAL ORDERS NUMBER 1446, 6 March 1967

AWARD OF THE BRONZE STAR MEDAL

1. TC 320. The following AWARD is announced.

PRESNELL, DENNIS K. US53-442987 PRIVATE FIRST CLASS E3 United States Army Company A 1st Battalion 28th Infantry. **Awarded**: Bronze Star Medal with "V" device

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Date of Action: 13 January 1967, Theater: Republic of Vietnam

Reason: For heroism in connection with military operations against a hostile forces. On this date, Private First Class Presnell was serving as a rifleman with his unit. The company was part of a massive search and destroy operation through a dense jungle area of the Iron Triangle region when they surprised a large force of Viet Cont. Immediate artillery fire was called to block Viet Cong escape routes. The momentum of this attach took Private First Class Presnell's unit into the insurgent positions at the same time that an intense barrage of artillery fire come in on the Viet Cong emplacements. Although wounded during the initial bombardment, Private First Class Presnell, with complete disregard for his own safety, moved along the line and rendered first aid to his wounded comrades. He refused medical treatment and evacuation until all of the causalities had been treated and safely extracted. Private First Class Presnell demonstrated courage and was undoubtedly instrumental in saving numerous lives. Private First Class Presnell's outstanding display of aggressiveness, devotion to duty and personal bravery is in keeping with the finest traditions of the military service and reflects great credit upon himself, the 1st Infantry Division and the United States Army.

Authority: By direction of the President, under the provisions of Executive Order 11046, 24 August 1962.

FOR THE COMMANDER;
OFFICIAL:
EDWARD B. KITCHENS, JR
Colonel, GS
Chief of Staff

As I sit here on my laptop thinking about Phan Rang I must admit that I really miss the people that I served with and how close I was with some of them after all these years I am still in touch with a couple of them! We all had a job to do and we done it well together! - Questard Bill

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Major Attends City's Civic Action Council

(Seventh Air Force News, January 26, 1970)

PHAN RANG -- Little is heard of how routine business is conducted by lower echelons of the Vietnamese Government. One such insight was recently obtained by an Air Force major assigned to the 315th Tactical Airlift Wing here.

Major Ben H. Swett, a navigator and civic action coordinator for the 315th TAW, attended a meeting of the Ninh Thuan Province Civic Action Council held in Phan Rang City.

The meeting was chaired by Nguyen Chu Hau, deputy province chief for administration, and attended by Air Force military civic action officers, Army advisors, the Civil Operations and Rural Development and Support (CORDS) officer, and representatives of the surrounding hamlets, schools and orphanages seeking civic action assistance.

"Of the nine projects presented, five were approved by Mr. Hau. I could not find fault in the grounds for a single decision," Maj. Swett reported.

"For example, one agricultural organization asked for a new building. After discussion with all parties involved, Mr. Hau replied, 'You have done well so far. You have many new crops and some fine animals, but your barracks are empty, and you have not yet trained any farmers. Therefore, when you have fulfilled your earlier promises, we will consider your request.'

"I don't know about other provinces," the major concluded, "but what I saw at this council meeting could serve as an example of true democratic process in action."

"...Guerrilla mortar squads slammed 75 rounds into Phan Rang air base 165 miles northeast of Saigon on the central coast. Damage to the jet fighter-bomber base and casualties were termed "light.""

(The Valley Independent, The Oaily Newspaper of the Mid-Monongahela Valley area, Saturday, February 22, 1969)

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ESTABLISHING AN AUSSIE PRESENCE AT PHAN RANG

Only four months separated the Australian Government 's announcement in mid-December 1966 that No.2 Squadron Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) was to be transferred from its forward base at Butterworth in Malaysia to South Vietnam, before its Canberra bombers flew their first fragged bombing missions from Phan Rang on 23 April 1967.

Early 1967 saw the height of the dry season, as 70 members of Detachment B of the RAAF's No. 5 Airfield Construction Squadron, assisted by the USAF's 554th ("Red Horse") Civil Construction Squadron, endured very harsh, dusty conditions in creating a small Aussie village on Phan Rang Air Base.

Because of a shortage of US construction workers and material, coupled with a backlog of work urgently needed by the USAF at Phan Rang, the Aussies had no option but to send in their own team and carry out the bulk of the construction by themselves. However, under Colonels Mix and Carey, the Red Horse graciously offered accommodation and messing to the new, temporary residents.

In just three months, using works plant, vehicles and pre-fabricated buildings shipped from Australia, a bare patch of earth just below the small hill at Phan Rang known as Nui Dat was rapidly transformed into suitable accommodation to house and feed 250 RAAF personnel. A complete stainless steel-aluminum kitchen arrived in March 1967 and not only were purified water reticulation and hot water installed, but No. 2 Squadron was the envy of the base when it became the first unit on Phan Rang to feature a sewerage system with flushing toilets.

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No. 2 Squadron personnel, in the early days of 1967, found much of their spare time devoted to finishing off their new dwellings and surrounds to make them more livable. Of course, due attention was given to the high priority of ensuring that the airmens, sergeants and officers messes were all equipped with refrigeration systems to keep their beloved VB beer cold.



RAAF domestic quarters in 1969

Not far away, a two-story headquarters was built for operations, communications and administrative staff.



Headquarters, No. 2 Squadron RAAF, Phan Rang Air Base

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It was a rare occurrence for an Aussie flying squadron to function as a fully self-sufficient unit, covering all trades from pilots through to cooks, pay and postal clerks, but this is what happened at Phan Rang.

In addition, No.2 Squadron's Air Defence Guards (ADGs), who were primarily tasked with the unit's security on the base, also undertook night-time patrols with Korean Army troops outside the Phan Rang perimeter, thus contributing to everyone's safety on the base.



Judging by the photo, these ADGs took things far too seriously when they decided to protect "Aussie national territory" from invading Americans, but it was only a fun incident. (The sign says: "Border Zone, Keep Left (as Aussies drive on the left-hand side of the road), Australian Territory, Beware of Kangaroos" (In the nation's capital, Canberra, each year on the roads there are around 1,000 vehicle collisions with kangaroos)

Later arrivals helped put in an all-ranks swimming pool and the Phan Rang Opera House, built for visiting entertainment groups, many who came over from Australia to entertain US and allied troops around Vietnam. It was nothing like the iconic Sydney Opera House which was then under construction back home in Australia before being officially opened by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth in October 1973.

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RAAF Phan Rang Opera House and Swimming Pool

On the southern tarmac, not far from revetments for the Canberras provided by the USAF, a British-designed Bellman pre-fabricated maintenance hangar was erected for RAAF technicians to work on their aircraft and equipment under shelter on a 24-7 basis.



In front of No. 2 Squadron's maintenance hangar, RAAF pilot Flight Lieutenant Merv Lewis gets the obligatory hose-down following his last combat mission.

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Most of No. 2 Squadron's logistic support – fuel, rations, clothing, engineering stores, bombs - were either shipped from Australia, or purchased from the USAF, as Australia was believed to be the only US ally to pay its own way in the Vietnam War.

Even the Commanding Officer's car was an Aussie made (General Motors) Holden sedan which came by sea from Australia.



No. 2 Sqn CO's Aussie-made GM Holden car, with Nui Dat in the background.

No. 2 Sqn CO also had his own air-conditioned hooch.



No. 2 Sqn CO's air-conditioned hooch

Establishing an Aussie Presence at Phan Rang was provided by Wing Commander **Bob Howe**, RAAF (Retired)

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Munitions Men Put Sting in Wing

(Phan Fare, The Phan Rang Weekly, August 2, 1967 and The Phan Rang Weekly, August 9, 1967)

Millions of pounds of bombs, rockets, and cannon shells are expended by the tactical fighters and bombers of this base each week, and the 435th Munitions Maintenance Squadron handles every single found of them.

"We are equipped to meet those daily frags," said CMSgt. Paul N. Thiebaud, 43, from Pittsburgh, Pa., the squadron's maintenance superintendent. "That's our daily existence and they haven't missed one yet."

He was referring to the planed missions (frags) of the F-100 Super Sabres and B-57 bombers which are the business end of the 35th TFW.

Each aircraft is assigned a specific configuration of bombs, rockets and shells for every combat mission, the munitions men supply the specific ordnances required for each mission many hours before the aircrafts are scheduled to take off.

Commanded by Lt. Col. Frank Martinjak, 50, the squadron has close to 200 enlisted men, a handful of officers, and more than 70 Vietnamese workers.

They assemble bombs and rockets, store vast amounts of munitions in the squadron bomb storage area, and deliver all ordnance to the flightline.

"You don't see any fat ones (munitions specialists", Sergeant Thiebaud commented. "They really get in shape here...They stay in shape too."

The munitions maintenance and storage area is in the hands of the hardest workers I've seen in

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a long, long while, "said their boss, CMSgt. John P. Patterson, 46, from Philadelphia, Pa.

Eleven crews of enlisted men work in the area, and each crew is determined to outdo all the other crews in the speed and efficiency with which it builds up and handles the ordnance.

Presently the crew of A1C Earl Bootier, a former squadron airman of the month, was selected as the **435**th **MMS Munitions Maintenance Crew of the Month**. This crew includes A1C Steven V., Michelson, A2C John Asher, A2C **James H. Kucipeck**, A2C Harold O. Ottwell, A2C George R. Howell, A2C Stephen J. Stubita, A2C Robert G. Wells, A2C Walter Wiener, and A3C Richard A. Conner.

Safety briefings and inspections are held daily, said Sergeant Thiebaud.

Cranes, rough-terrain forklifts, ten-ton tractors, and 25 and 40-foot trailers are the "bread and butter" of the win's munitions handles are they assemble ordnance and rush it to the flightline.

The ordnance is delivered directly to the fighter aircraft six to ten hours before take-off time, and bomber ordnance is delivered to a special storage area for the bombers 10 hours before their take-off time.

Sergeant Thiebaud could recall no instance of a munitions accident at Phan Rang, accenting the 435th MMS mission of providing "safe and reliable munitions" for the wing's aircraft.

The munitions men work at their exacting jobs on a round-the-clock schedule, and munitions convoys are constantly on the move, shuttling between the bomb dump and the flightline, which is even miles away. The ordnance is delivered to the bomb storage area by Army vehicles, and from there on it is the munitions workers' 'baby'.

They take bombs out of crates and add fins and boosters to bombs ranging from 250 to 1,000-pounders.

They put rockets together by attaching the rocket heads to motors and then inserting the products into rocket launchers made of cardboard and metal.

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It takes a lot of time and muscle to do all this, Twenty tons of trash consisting of such things as bomb crates and fin protectors are removed from the bomb storage area each day as the ordnance is put into shape for action.

Fighter aircraft pylons have to be cleaned and inspected and repaired. These pylons serve as the fighters' bomb racks.

Maj. Felix E. Elliott Jr., 46, is the unit's popular maintenance supervisor and "he makes the whole thing go," according to Sergeant Thiebaud, who has been in service for 25 years and flew 12 combat missions as a B024 bomber gunner in World War II.

TSgt. Charles E. Haskins, 37, from Panama City, Fla., is the enlisted supervisor of munitions services, which includes the gun ship, pylon shop, and weapons release section.

The long hours of toil at the bomb storage area are relieved by a weekly visit by Red Cross recreation center assistants. The girls bring kool-aid, start group quiz games and deliver 'puzzler' pamphlets filled with quizzes and brain-teasers of all kinds.

Two bomb dump mascots, a pair of dogs named Bullet and Ammo, also help in keeping up the morale of the tireless men whole munitions put the sting in the 35th Tactical Fighter Wing.

C-123 Pilot Who Hates Day Off Sets Record of Combat Sorties

(Phan Fare, The Phan Rang Weekly, April 17, 1968)

Capt. **Jesse L. Crowell Jr.**, of Houston, Tex., who hates to have a day off, has flown 1,602 combat sorties, the highest number flown by any C-123 transport pilot in the 315th Air Commando Wing.

Assigned to the 311th ACS, he has been carrying out troop and cargo airlift missions to Free World Forces throughout South Vietnam for the past 14 months, including 20 combat sorties in support of U.S. Marines at the embattled outpost of Khe Sanh near the demilitarized zone.

Captain Crowell practically begs the squadron scheduling officer to let him fly every day, and

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complains when he is given a day off.

He landed at Khe Sanh during encirclement by enemy troops to deliver troop reinforcements and supplies to the Marines on ten occasions, and also carried out ten air drops at the scene. Every time his C-123 landed, it was subjected to enemy ground fire, and three times the aircraft was struck by enemy bullets.

During on-loading and offloading operations, at Khe Sanh, he recalled "everybody did thier job perfectly" aboard the aircraft. "You're moving the entire time," the C-123 commander noted, pointing out that C-123s of the air commando wing stayed on the ground at Khe Sanh for as little as 43 seconds during the hectic airlift operations carried out before the siege of the Marine outpost was lifted early in April.

In addition to carrying out troop and cargo supply operations, Crowell and his crew have flown many medical evacuation missions, to airlift battle casualties to hospitals. He is particularly proud of these mission, including one flown at Dong Ha, eight miles from the DMZ.

Wounded men, he recalled have been rushed to hospitals aboard the C-123 "almost immediately after they've come out of the field."

Crowell estimated that he has landed at 75 of the approximately 300 air strips available to air commando C-123 crews in South Vietnam, and he has kidded his fellow crew members about his ambitions of landing at all of them before ending his combat tour in Vietnam.

The indefatigueable pilot hopes to complete 2,000 combat sorties by the time he wraps up his Vietnam tour in three months.

(If anyone has any additional knowledge of Jesse Crowell Jr. please share with me so that I can share with the group. I wasn't able to find any on this very ambitious individual.)

Thom Meyer wrote on Facebook about the reunion: "And all you heroes in the same hotel! The stories will be great, embellished, but still great."

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11 Super Sabre Pilots Get Air Medal At Four-Nation Flagpole Ceremony

(The Phan Fare, The Phan Rang Weekly, May 9, 1971)

Twelve Phan Rang airmen received medals in an awards ceremony conducted at the base's four-nation flagpoles April 27. Col. Cregg P. Nolen Jr., 35th Tactical Fighter Wing (TFW) commander, made the presentations.

Eleven pilots were awarded the Air Medal for meritorious achievement while participating in combat flights over Southeast Asia. They were cited for their outstanding airmanship and courage in the successful accomplishment of important missions under extremely hazardous combat conditions.

Those receiving Air Medals were Lt. Col. Leland A. Schmoker, 35th TFW; Dr. (Maj.) Donald E. Novicki, 35th USAF Dispensary' Capts. Harold M. Cochran, 615th Tactical Fighter Squadron (TFS): Charles W. Friend, 352nd TFS; Lesley L. Seymore 615th TFS; Gary H. Silence, 614th TFS; Allen A. Struthers, 612th TFS; Richard S. Wizenegger, 614th TFS; and First Lts. William S. Madsen 614th TFS; and Kenneth R. Alm, 614th TFS.

SSgt. Harry Overend Jr., 35th Field Maintenance Squadron, was awarded the Air Force Commendation Medal during the same ceremony for meritorious service as assistant noncommissioned officer in charge of the Airframe Structural Repair Shop at Kelly AFB, Texas, from July 14, 1969 to February 26, 1971.

(Col. Nolen Jr. conducted a similar event at the four-nations flagpole. See "Five Super Sabre Pilots Honored During Flagpole Retreat Ceremony" in Phan Rang News 88.)

"Pilots called it the 'CRANBERRY', to the USAF it was the B-57. (Warren E. Thompson, Cold War Warriors)

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Dad Does Oath Honors Three Times for Son

(Seventh Air Force News, September 17, 1969)

By Maj. Ed Lindberg

PHAN RANG-Lt. Col. Harold D. Farris, a C-123 Provider aircraft commander from the 311th Special Operations Squadron here, is a self-made expert on swearing-in ceremonies.

In 1967, Colonel Farris administered the oath of enlistment to his son, Richard H., who joined the Army and underwent helicopter pilot training. Upon Private Farris' completion of school, the Colonel read the oath to his son again when he was commissioned a warrant officer.

Recently, at Chu Lai, under the direct commissioning program, Colonel Farris administered a third oath of office to Richard, making him a second lieutenant.

After pinning on his son's gold bars, the Colonel decorated him with the Distinguished Flying Cross, which he earned for heroism while flying a supply mission just 13 days after arriving in the Republic of Vietnam.

"...Did we ever really go to Viet Nam. Are we sure it wasn't a dream. Did we enter some sort of time warp and then come back from it? Well, as a non-rocket scientist, I don't have a clue but well, we have lots of pictures."

(Michaelangelo Rodriguez)

Phan Rang Noncoms Get Airman's Medal

(Seventh Air Force News, September 17, 1969)

PH AN RANG - Staff Sergeants Victor L. Flores and Donald L. Hanshaw received the Airman's Medal for heroic actions at the scene of an aircraft crash at Da Lat.

TSgt. Leon E. Gibson who also participated has returned to the United States and will receive his medal at Travis AFB, Calif.

The men, all assigned to the 310th Special Operations Squadron were waiting to onload cargo into their C·123 Provider aircraft when a light-aircraft crashed on the runway.

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Sprinting to the scene, they found an unconscious and badly injured U.S. Air Force pilot and a Vietnamese observer trapped in the cockpit.

Despite the danger of the live smoke rockets, spilled fuel, and sparks arcing from the electrical system, the men pulled the pilot and the observer from the aircraft.

Sergeant Hanshaw slashed away his parachute, survival vest and seat belt and bandaged the pilot's wounds, while Sergeant Flores smashed out the windshield and freed the pilot's legs from the control stick. Sergeant Gibson in the mean- time isolated the power source to stop the arcing wires from setting off the gasoline, by disconnecting the cables from the battery.

They treated the pilot for shock until the rescue helicopter arrived.

Sergeant Flores noticed the observer entering the early stages of shock. He immediately covered and comforted the man until a med-evac helicopter arrived.

Both medals were presented by Col. L. J. Campbell Jr. 315th Special Operations Wing commander

Doug's Comments

For those of you headed to the reunion in Nashville in October please consider bringing your memorabilia for show and tell. Looking through old pictures or just a lighter, a piece of uniform, newspaper or anything from the era always is very popular and always a conversation starter. Copies of the Phan Fare, Seventh Air Force Newspapers and even Star and Stripes help bring back memories. If you have pictures that need to be digitized, we can help you out with that as well. If you have home movies that have been digitized and are on a DVD please let me know in advance so that we/I can be prepared to show them.

If you received this newsletter from a friend or found it on the Internet you might want to get on the Phan Rang mailing list. Just write me and I will add you so you receive it regularly.

This newsletter was compiled and published by <u>Douglas Severt</u>. Previous issues of the Phan Rang Newsletter are available <u>here</u> for download.