

“Happy Valley” Phan Rang AB, RVN

The History of Phan Rang AB and the stories of those who served there.

Phan Rang AB News No. 190 “...keeping the memories alive”

In this issue:

The Mystery Surrounding the Disappearance of Taco 81 and 82

Australia Day Celebration 1970

Awards Received For Flight Safety

The Wells at Phan Rang

Phan Rang 1st Sergeant Gets Air-Dropped ‘Stripes’

Obituaries

- James E. Caskey Sr.

- Don Brewer

Looking for Chuck McLeish

Doug’s Comments

The Mystery Surrounding the Disappearance of Taco 81 and 82



My initial research of the deaths of Maj. Neeld and Lt. Lane just showed that they both were from the New Mexico Air National Guard and attached to the 188th Tactical Fighter Squadron, 31st Tactical Fighter Wing at Tuy Hoa AB. The best that I could gather is that Maj. Bobby Neeld was piloting F-100C tail number 54-2057 and Lt. Mitchell Lane was piloting F-100C tail number 54-2030. On 4 January 1969 while flying 22 miles N-NE of Phan Rang, Ninh Thuan Province (The Coffelt Database lists the province as Khanh Hoa for both individuals, however The Vietnam

“Happy Valley” Phan Rang AB, RVN

The History of Phan Rang AB and the stories of those who served there.

Phan Rang AB News No. 190 **“...keeping the memories alive”**

Veterans Memorial ‘The Wall’ lists the place of death as Ninh Thuan Province), radar contact was lost and the event states that it was a mid-air collision and neither body was recovered and no mention of discovering the crash site. I recorded their deaths along with others from Phan Rang AB (Phan Rang Newsletter 155) because the criteria used for the report was anyone that was assigned to Phan Rang AB and any person that lost their life in Ninh Thuan Province.

...and then this information was submitted to me

On 3 January 1969, then Major Bobby G. Neeld and 1st Lt. Mitchell S. Lane departed Tuy Hoa Airfield, South Vietnam, on a 2-aircraft flight that was forced to divert to Phan Rang AB, Ninh Thuan Province, South Vietnam due to adverse weather conditions. Phan Rang AB was approximately 100 miles southwest of Tuy Hoa Airfield

The next day, 4 January 1969, Maj. Bobby Neeld was the pilot of the lead aircraft, call sign “Taco 81;” and 1st Lt. Mitchell Lane was the pilot of the #2 aircraft, call sign “Taco 82;” that comprised a 2-aircraft flight on a Troop Assault Preparation mission against enemy positions near a landing zone (LZ).

Taco flight departed Phan Rang AB at 0717 hours on the briefed mission and was to return to their base afterward. However, after completing the strike mission, Taco flight was again diverted to Phan Rang AB by Tuy Hoa Operational Control due to deteriorating weather conditions. At the time Taco flight changed flight paths, Maj. Neeld had a fuel load of 5400 lbs. and 1st Lt. Lane had 5000 lbs. The fuel requirement for the flight from Tuy Hoa to Phan Rang was 1750 lbs. As Maj. Neeld and 1st Lt. Lane prepared to depart Tuy Hoa airspace, they requested an in route descent to VFR condition which was disallowed. At 0825 hours, Taco flight was given a vector of 160 degrees and radar monitoring was discontinued by the control center. Radio contact was established with Bobby Neeld and Mitchell Lane when they were over rugged jungle covered mountains approximately 73 miles southwest of Tuy Hoa, 11 miles west-northwest of Cam Ranh Bay Air base and 11 miles west of the coastline.

Weather conditions included winds from 330 degrees at 2 knots, visibility of more than 6 miles. Broken stratus clouds had bases from 200 feet with tops at 3000 feet. There was also a solid cloud overcast layer with its base at 9000 feet along with occasional light rain from the north and with lower visibility in that direction. At the time of their last contact, there was no

“Happy Valley” Phan Rang AB, RVN

The History of Phan Rang AB and the stories of those who served there.

Phan Rang AB News No. 190 “...keeping the memories alive”

indication of trouble with either aircraft. By 1045 hours Taco flight had not landed at Phan Rang Air Base and all other airfields in South Vietnam and Thailand were contacted in the hope they had diverted to one of them instead.

Over the next 3 days as weather conditions improved, extensive visual and electronic search and rescue (SAR) efforts were initiated over land and water adjacent to their last known location. These efforts were terminated the evening of 6 January 1969 because of forecasted poor weather conditions in the search area. At the time the formal SAR effort was terminated, both Bobby Neeld and Mitchell Lane were listed Missing in Action.

Additional Insight

Both were New Mexico Air National Guard pilots assigned to Tuy Hoa AB. They had recovered or diverted to Phan Rang (PRG) from a strike mission out of their home base the day before. Their fatal mission originated at Phan Rang by happenstance or planning, I'm not sure which. In any event, off they flew on another strike mission and if my understanding is correct, they were scheduled to recover at Tuy Hoa, but weather prevented this and they were directed back to Phan Rang.

According to at least two write-ups I have found they were in-between positive control points meaning they were not in radar contact with either air traffic or mission control. They had requested to recover VFR (Visual Flight Rules) and this request was denied by mission control due to IFR traffic in the area meaning they had to contact “someone” (I don't honestly know who had control for IFR (Instrument Flight Rules) for clearance back into PRG. Prior to leaving “control” (probable Tuy Hoa Control Center, a military control authority - or a “SkyCap” airborne control center) they gave their fuel remaining in pounds and had plenty of fuel to reach PRG. At that point they were somewhere north and probably west of Cam Ranh Bay (CRB). CRB at that time was “approach control” for both CRB and PRG. Saigon Center would have also had IFR authority in that area as well, depending of their actual location. For simplicity, think of air traffic control authority this way. A base (PRG) is like a city, it has control of a limited amount of territory - in the case of PRG a GCA (where I worked) unit which owned from the surface to 3,000 within a 20 mile radius of PRG for IFR traffic coming into and departing PRG - and, we had a control tower which controlled VFR traffic in that same general area. Cam Ranh is like a state - it owned airspace from the surface up to 9,000 within a 40 mile

“Happy Valley” Phan Rang AB, RVN

The History of Phan Rang AB and the stories of those who served there.

Phan Rang AB News No. 190 “...keeping the memories alive”

radius of CRB, excluding that airspace controlled by other facilities - PRG for example - and Saigon Center, which is like a country and owed everything else.

OK, but now back to the F-100s.

Without going into more details about other facilities, suffice to say that one of those mentioned when we were discussing the F-105 (Phan Rang News 189) incident had a similar counterpart which controlled strike missions up in our area. Our flight of two broke off contact with the control center and were instructed to contact the IFR control agency for the area. Not sure if this was Saigon or CRB. They may or may not have actually been identified (by radar) by the facility, but they did make radio contact and gave a general request for IFR pick-up and clearance to PRG. That is how the search area was determined to be 11 miles WNW of CRB.

I don't know what the tops of the clouds were but the bases were reported to be “broken” (meaning between ½ to ¾th of the horizon is covered in clouds) at 2000 to 3000 ft (above the ground) - not super bad, but not super good either. Logically, the 100s would have been in the clear as they were making contact with the control facility. They might have been cleared to a point at a specific altitude or been told to proceed VFR to a point and call again. USUALLY, when a flt KNOWS it is going to descend into IFR conditions the facility will radar identify them while they are still VFR and break them up into separate flts, and get IFR separation standards (3 miles or 1000' vertically) BEFORE having them descend into IFR conditions. The position of 11 miles from CRB could have been based on a pilot position report of a “fix” where they were supposed to report. In any case, that is more or less how the point is established. I have seen nothing which indicates they were positively radar identified. Had they been, it is far more likely they would have been found, even in heavy foliage. 50,000 pounds of metal crashing in a area where you KNOW they are is hard to hide. Since they didn't have positive radar contact, the wreckage wasn't found when it was only a very short distance from Phan Rang, my best guess that it's very likely that they collided and ended up in the South China Sea. All of this occurred in the province which is listed as the location of the crash. Na Trang is the province capital and CRB is located in the same province - it abuts PRG's province of Ninh Thuan.

Your info indicating they had been involved in a mid-air is probably based on “a logical conclusion”. When two aircraft both go down and there is no distress call, the assumption is they hit. Another possibility (which I tend to discount) is they elected to penetrate the clouds

“Happy Valley” Phan Rang AB, RVN

The History of Phan Rang AB and the stories of those who served there.

Phan Rang AB News No. 190 “...keeping the memories alive”

while still joined based on an IFR clearance of some sort and something went terribly wrong. There is an instrument approach where a “procedure turn” is executed, or an arc is flown on a TACAN. If, flight lead screws it up and they are too close to terrain he might lead his wingman right into the terrain because the wingman’s job is to fly on his wing and not pay attention to the navigation aspect to what is going on.

Expert analysis and insight provided by Jim Lombard

AUSTRALIA DAY CELEBRATION 1970



The HMS Endeavor sails again at Phan Rang AB.

While Aboriginal peoples had been living for more than 60,000 years on the continent we now know as Australia, the “discovery” of the continent in 1770 by Captain James Cook, Royal Navy, sailing in **His Majesty’s Ship (HMS) Endeavour** saw the eastern half of the continent claimed for Great Britain as New South Wales (NSW).

On 26 January 1788, Captain Arthur Phillip, commander of the First Fleet of eleven convict ships sent out from Great Britain, and who became the first Governor of New South Wales (NSW), arrived at Sydney Cove and raised the Union Jack to signal the beginning of the colony.

By the early 1800s, 26 January was being referred to as First Landing Day or Foundation Day and in Sydney, celebratory drinking, and later anniversary dinners became customary. It later became known as Australia Day and to this day it remains a public holiday. It was the day on which beauty competitions were held to find “Miss Australia” for the year.

“Happy Valley” Phan Rang AB, RVN

The History of Phan Rang AB and the stories of those who served there.

Phan Rang AB News No. 190 “...keeping the memories alive”

Of course, to the Aussies of No.2 Squadron at Phan Rang, unable to take the day off while conducting combat operations on 26 January 1970, there was still time to celebrate.



This included, as shown in the accompanying photos, a travelling boxing troupe and the design and construction of a replica of Captain Cook’s ship “Endeavour” by the guys at No. 2 Squadron’s workshops.



“Happy Valley” Phan Rang AB, RVN

The History of Phan Rang AB and the stories of those who served there.

Phan Rang AB News No. 190 **“...keeping the memories alive”**

And pilot John Kennedy got a great surprise when he arrived back from his combat mission to be greeted by Phan Rang’s “Miss Australia”.



Needless to say a good time was had by all.

Awards Received For Flight Safety

(Pacific Stars and Stripes, August 18, 1971)

PHAN RANG AB, Vietnam - A fighter pilot who made a perfect wheels-up landing with a disabled jet has been presented the Pacific Air Forces Order of the Able Aeronaut Award.

Maj. Richard J. Ebel, formerly a pilot with the 35th Tactical Fighter Wing, and now a senior duty controller at Tan Son Nhut AB, Vietnam, won the award for saving his F-100.

“Happy Valley” Phan Rang AB, RVN

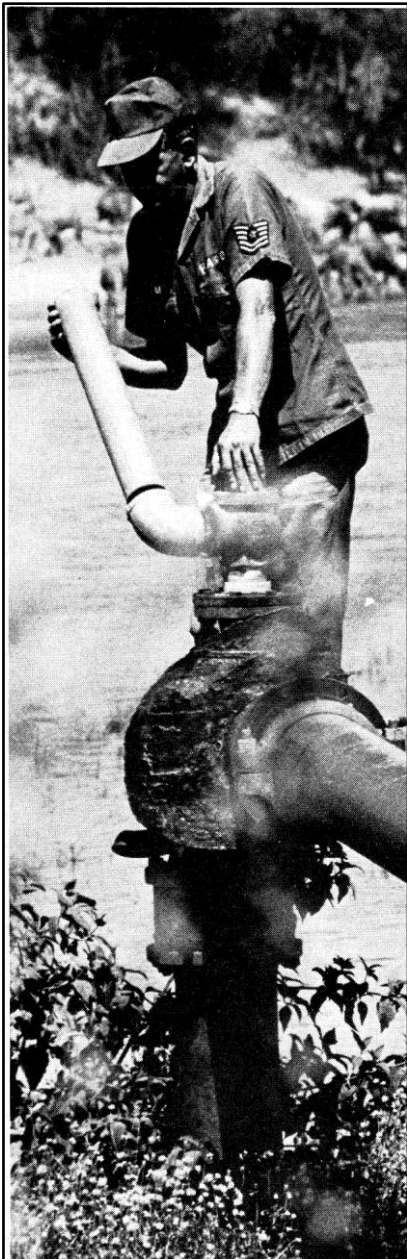
The History of Phan Rang AB and the stories of those who served there.

Phan Rang AB News No. 190 “...keeping the memories alive”

He was attempting a landing after a combat mission when he was unable to get his right landing gear down. Continued efforts failed, so he decided to go in main gear up-nose gear down and try to catch one of the aircraft arresting barriers on the approach end of the runway.

The runway was foamed. Major Ebel touched down in the foam just short of the first barrier and his tail hook engaged the barrier. Total damage to his \$650,000 fighter: \$320.

THE WELLS AT PHAN RANG AB



To the people at Phan Rang AB, Vietnam, the small, fortified compound nestled against the muddy Kinh Dinh River is known simply as "The Wells." The uncomplicated name belies its importance. But the sleeve of concertina wire, the six foot chain link fence and the gun carrying guards protecting the compound's three steel-and-concrete structures provide a few clues to its pertinent function.

The Wells, located a mile south of main base, supplies the troops at Phan Rang with one thousand gallons of safe water a minute, a necessary, vital commodity in this semiarid region of Vietnam.

TSgt. Earl H. Blake and SSgt. **Jack W. Craft** of the 35th Civil Engineering Squadron are responsible for the operation of The Wells, a responsibility that extends to the water treatment plant and storage facilities at the Vietnam base.

"Four pumps are submerged in the river," says Sergeant Blake, "and each one is filled with gravel to help in filtering out sand, dirt and other small particles of debris." Two of the 500-gallon-perminute capacity pumps are kept operating at all times to supply water for the base.

"Happy Valley" Phan Rang AB, RVN

The History of Phan Rang AB and the stories of those who served there.

Phan Rang AB News No. 190 "...keeping the memories alive"

One of the three airmen shift workers who maintain the manmade power plants that keep electricity surging into the water pumps is AIC **Donald L. Edwards**, an electrical power production specialist.

"One generator is operated full time to supply power for the pumps," Airman Edwards explains, "and at night a second one is used to light the perimeter for the air policemen who guard the area."

His words jolt an observer back to reality. Along the normally calm waters of the Kinh Dinh River it's too easy to forget momentarily that a hostile enemy may be stalking you. "During the day we watch the children playing in the shallow, quiet river while the adults labor on the banks," said Sgt. **Erwin A. Kamrath**, a security policeman who pulls duty at The Wells. "But at night," he said, furrowing his brow, "we keep a constant watch for any signs of enemy activity that might threaten Phan Rang's primary source of water."

—Sgt. **Douglas L. Christy**



Vol. 5, No. 12

March 19, 1969

Phan Rang 1st Sergeant Get Air-Dropped 'Stripes'

By Sgt. Steve Monk

PHAN RANG - Like most Air Force sergeants, MSgt **James J. Rooney**, Camp Spring, MD., likes prompt daily delivery of his Star and Stripes to his office here.

Things got a little out of hand recently, thought, when two bundles of the newspaper were air dropped from an altitude of several hundred feet onto the doorstep of his orderly room in the 35th Avionics Maintenance Squadron.

Witnessing the unorthodox air delivery was A1C **Gary N. Gillett**, Vernon, Colo., who

“Happy Valley” Phan Rang AB, RVN

The History of Phan Rang AB and the stories of those who served there.

Phan Rang AB News No. 190 “...keeping the memories alive”

commented, :I had just driven up in the first sergeant’s truck when I heard a thump behind me. I turned around and there were two wired bundles of newspaper lying where I’d been standing just seconds before.

“I looked up, saw an Army chopper, and when the waved, I waved back.”



James E. Caskey, Sr.



Chambersburg, PA - James E. Caskey, Jr., age 73, of Chambersburg, PA passed away on Tuesday, September 4, 2018 at the Chambersburg Hospital. Born December 15, 1944 in Gettysburg, PA, he was the son of the late John W. & Dorothy Jane (Fridinger) Caskey, Sr. Mr. Caskey was a veteran of the United States Air Force serving for fourteen years during the Vietnam War. He served many years as a security officer with 1st Data at Citi Corp. in Hagerstown before his retirement and previously served as a prison guard at the Adams County Prison for many years. Mr. Caskey was a member of the Bethel Assembly of God Church in Chambersburg, PA.

**Sgt. James E Caskey, 35th Security
Police Sq. Phan Rang 1967**

He is survived by his wife of 39 years, Ruby E. (Lippy) Caskey, nine children; Debra Isenberger, Stacy Murphy, Mark A. Brown, W. Brooks Caskey all of Chambersburg, James E. Caskey, Jr. of Fairfield, Jami D. Caskey of Orrtanna, PA, Matt T. Brown of Gettysburg, PA, Christina S. Marrow and James L. Rhodes both of West Virginia, thirteen grandchildren, 8 great grandchildren, a sister, Doreen E. Owen of Florida, three brothers; Kenneth E. Caskey of Florida, Thomas W. Caskey of Chambersburg and Douglas R. Caskey of Gettysburg. He was predeceased by his twin

“Happy Valley” Phan Rang AB, RVN

The History of Phan Rang AB and the stories of those who served there.

Phan Rang AB News No. 190 “...keeping the memories alive”

brother, John, Jr. and two sisters; Patricia and Jean.

Col. Donald Ray Brewer (Ret.)

Colonel Donald Ray Brewer, Ret., age 83 of Grant, Alabama passed away Friday, December 27, 2019 at his residence.



Funeral services will be held at 2 p.m. Tuesday, December 31, 2019 at Grant Church of Christ with David Powell and Clayton Tuggle officiating. Burial with military honors will follow in Panquin Cemetery. The family will receive friends from 6-8 p.m. Monday at Grant Memorial Chapel.

Col. Don Brewer is a native of Grant, Alabama, the son of J. L. and Dollie Foster Brewer. He graduated from Kate Duncan Smith DAR High School in 1954, worked for the FBI in Washington, DC as a fingerprint specialist for a time, and enlisted in the DC Air National Guard. Called to active duty with the Air Force during the Pueblo Crisis, he remained in

the Air Force until retirement with over 38 years of service.

His educational background includes a Master of Business Administration Degree from the University of Maryland. He is also a graduate of the Squadron Officer School, Air Command and Staff College, The Industrial College of the Armed Forces, and the Air War College. His decorations include the Bronze Star Medal for service in Vietnam, and the Legion of Merit.

During his military career, Col. Brewer held every rank in the Air Force from Airman Basic through Senior Master Sergeant, and from 2nd Lt. to Colonel. He says the highlights of his career were commanding the military air terminal at Kadena AB, Okinawa, service in the air terminal at Rhein Main AB, Germany, and as Director of Air Transportation for the Pacific Theater while stationed at Hickam AFB, Hawaii.



LT Don Brewer, Phan Rang AB, RVN

“Happy Valley” Phan Rang AB, RVN

The History of Phan Rang AB and the stories of those who served there.

Phan Rang AB News No. 190 “...keeping the memories alive”

He and the former Jean Kirkland, daughter of late Homer and Ruth Kirkland of Grant, were married for 64 years. Together, they raised three children: Roger (Jo Donna) of Grant, Jennifer of Huntsville, and Renee of Seattle, Washington. They also had three grandchildren: Christa Frangos of Huntsville, Chelsea Brewer Hagen (Mat) of Dothan, and Chandler Brewer (Sidney) of Montgomery. Along with his parents, he was preceded in death by 5 brothers and 4 sisters.

Doug’s Comments: I’ve known and communicated with Don for at least 41 years, but I’ve never met him, which is my great loss, but I knew that he was a special person. The reason I say that is because over the years I’ve heard so many accolades about him that I suspect that anyone who ever had the privilege of working for him or even knew of him admired and loved him and that included his wife Jean. I’ve heard many Aerial Porters over the years singing his praise. One guy wrote that Don was his boss on the MAC IG, and without a doubt the best I ever worked for. He was calm, insightful, knowledgeable, and he always took care of the band of merry reprobates who were on the team at that time.



Looking for Chuck McLeish

Russ Williams received a request from a gentleman who is writing a tribute for the electronic wall to Lt. **Chuck McLeish** who was shot down and killed Aug 12, 1970. Chuck and I were in the same F-100 class at Luke and arrived at PRAB together. I was assigned to the 614th and Chuck the 612th. If there are any 612th or other PR pilots out there who may have any specifics on his loss please let me know. Chuck was a great guy, skilled pilot and good friend. I miss him.

Doug’s Comments: This newsletter was composed and all graphics by Douglas Severt. To see a list of all previous newsletters click [here](#). To unsubscribe to Phan Rang News, mailto:dougsevert@cox.net and put ‘unsubscribe’ in subject line.