

# Phan Rang AB Newsletter

The History of Phan Rang AB and the stories of those who served there.  
“Keeping the memories alive” Newsletter 196

---

**Fighter Pilot Extraordinaire - An Interview with Rich Buickerood**

**What did you do in the war daddy?**

**The Crash of a Phantom - I Saw it Happen**

**A Memorial to Dwaine Mattox and the crew of C-123K 55-4527**

**Goodbye my Friend - Paul Minert**

**Doug's Comments**

## **Fighter Pilot Extraordinaire**



### **An Interview with Rich Buickerood**

Colonel, USAF, retired

**This interview was conducted by Voices of Veterans for the Texas General Land Office. The program seeks to record the stories of Texas Veterans through their time in service and after returning home from combat.**

#### **Buickerood, Rich**

Col. Rich Buickerood served in the USAF from 1966 through 1992. During his career he earned two Distinguished Flying Crosses, saw action in Vietnam, and flew the F-100C, F-4, and F-16. He now resides in Lucas, Texas.

## “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. 196 “...keeping the memories alive”

---



### An Interview

**Transcription: Rich Buickerood**

*Today is Tuesday, November 16, 2010. My name is James Crabtree. Today I'll be interviewing Colonel Rich Buickerood. This interview is taking place by telephone. I'm at the General Land Office Building in Austin, Texas, and Colonel Buickerood is at his home in Lucas, Texas. Sir, thank you very much for taking the time to talk to us today. It means a lot for our program and it's an honor for us.*

***The first question, sir, that I always like to start out with is just to tell us a little bit about your childhood and your background before you entered the military.***

**Rich Buickerood:** Oh, all right. Well I was born and raised in New Jersey. My folks were just average working folks. I was the first in my family to make it to college, and when I was there, I was somehow fate led me to enroll in ROTC, so I spent four years in Air Force ROTC and came out with a commission as a second lieutenant, and quite frankly I don't know what I'd been doing if I hadn't signed up for ROTC. It wasn't one of those things I had planned to do when I went away to Rutgers. It just kind of happened. So you didn't have any influence really from your parents or any friends who had been in the service?

## **“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. 196 **“...keeping the memories alive”**

---

**Rich Buickerood:** Well, my dad, that’s kind of funny you asked that because my dad had been a PFC in World War II, and he and my mother both came from very large families there in New Jersey. My mother was in a big Hungarian family. My father was in a big German family, and all of her brothers and all of his brothers served in World War II. At college, my buddy and I got into the ROTC or into the registration line. I remember we got to the table where the ROTC guys were and we needed an elective, and so I didn’t even know what ROTC was, and they said well, it’s an easy credit and a half and you need something, because I was in the first class of chemical engineers there at Rutgers and so I said I know I don’t want to be in the Army because my father never talked very highly about it, so I guess I’ll sign up for the Air Force, and that was my big career move.

***But I guess over time you liked it enough that you stayed with it for all four years of school?***

**Rich Buickerood:** I did, I did. Back then, ROTC was mandatory apparently. I didn’t know that either. Apparently it was mandatory in state universities, and so we had a big contingent there and we also had a drill team, and I had never been a part of anything like that, so I got onto the drill team and we actually won the national championships a couple of times while I was there. So yeah, I stayed with it. Actually I was out of college for a while. I got mono and had to drop out for a year, so I was actually there five years, and the whole time in ROTC. Yeah, it was fun.

***And this was during the early to mid-60s?***

**Rich Buickerood:** Yeah, from ’60 to ’65.

***And during that time, do you think, was there a certain point during your time at ROTC that you decided you were gonna go ahead and get a commission?***

**Rich Buickerood:** Well, we had to make that choice between our sophomore and junior years and I remember apparently I wasn’t a very good cadet because I had to go back and I looked at my paperwork and I just barely squeaked into the junior class and somehow got a pilot slot, so my last two years that I was there, I knew I was gonna with some luck eventually go to pilot training. I guess I had always enjoyed airplanes. My parents and I didn’t live too far from Newark Airport and I can remember going up on Sundays when you used to be able to do such a thing and sit out on the observation deck and watch the planes take off and land. So a lot of

## **“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. 196 **“...keeping the memories alive”**

---

people had told me oh, you were always interested in flying, but I quite frankly didn't remember that strong of a calling because I was too busy working all through high school to make some money.

***So when you graduated, sir, you were commissioned and what year was that?***

**Rich Buickerood:** '65.

***'65, and was Vietnam or were you aware kind of what was going on?***

**Rich Buickerood:** Well there wasn't much, there were no, not really. On our campus we had Students for Democratic Society and we had another group called Students Against Nuclear something – it was banned, and most of the protests were anti-nuke protests and it was the beginning of the hootenanny-folk period on television. We were all pretty darn naïve if you ask me. I mean even when I went to pilot training, I remember driving from New Jersey to pilot training in Del Rio and I sat there on the highway on Highway 90 watching the airplanes land. I mean I wasn't even that up to speed on what airplanes I was going to be flying. So I kind of went into it pretty wide-eyed and naïve.

***So when you got commissioned, the first place you were assigned was to the Air Force Base down in Del Rio?***

**Rich Buickerood:** Yeah, Laughlin Air Force Base.

***Tell us a little bit about what that was like.***

**Rich Buickerood:** It was very competitive. We had a class of, I think we started with a class somewhere in the mid-60s, and you didn't realize how competitive it was until guys started not coming back to work the next day and they were getting cut. It turned out I was pretty good at it and I had no idea, but we went through the T-41 phase and we lost a few guys, and then we lost a few more through the T-37 phase. I remember that was very, very hot flying T-37's in Del Rio in the summer of '66. And we just kept, the farther along we got, the more fun it was, and when I got into an advanced phase in the T-38, it seemed like that was really my forte. I had always thought that I wanted to be a cargo pilot flying 141's around the world and being a

## **“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. 196    **“...keeping the memories alive”**

---

bachelor and all that sort of stuff. Then when I got into the advanced phase and we got into formation and formation acrobatics and I had a really good instructor who is a friend to this day quite honestly, and I didn't realize how good I could be, and so I wound up deciding I was going to be a fighter pilot instead, and I graduated close enough to the top of my class to be able to pick an F-100 to fly after pilot training.

***That's great. What do you think the biggest obstacle was for many of those in flight school that washed out?***

**Rich Buickerood:** Well, I had a roommate who ultimately was killed in an aircraft, but we always used to say that if everything went A to B to C to D, that he was fine. But if it went from A to E and skipped those interim steps, he couldn't handle it, and we had a lot of guys like that. One of my closest friends washed out because he couldn't handle spins during the T-37 phase. A couple of the guys washed out because they couldn't fly instruments very well. We lost a bunch of guys during the formation phase. So there were strong obstacles all through that period even though in retrospect we were ramping up for the Vietnam War.



***So when you graduate from the training program and you are assigned to jets, what do you go to next?***

**Rich Buickerood:** Well first they sent us to, I got my F-100 assignment which was at Cannon Air Force Base, but between graduating from pilot training in February of '67 and I think only

## **“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. 196    **“...keeping the memories alive”**

---

one in three of us actually graduated, and so I had to go to survival school first, and we went to land survival up in Spokane, Washington for a few weeks in March of '67, and God was that cold, living, making a tent out of a parachute and a bed out of pine bough. Then I went to, let's see, then I went to Cannon probably right after survival school and I was in Cannon during the summer because I got married in June of '67. We finished training in F-100's, and then we went to sea survival school down in Homestead in the fall, and then I moved my wife back to New Jersey where my parents still were, and then on Christmas Day, thankfully I don't think we do that anymore, but on Christmas Day of '67 I shipped out for Vietnam with a stop in the Philippines for jungle survival. So I got to, I picked up a case of pneumonia in the Philippines and wound up staying there an extra week I think it was and so I got to Vietnam a little later than my classmates from F-100 school, and the scary thing was one of my classmates had already died the very first week or two in country. He had killed himself in an F-100 and so that was kind of spooky.

### ***And you knew about that?***

**Rich Buickerood:** Yeah, you certainly heard about those kinds of things, and so I, by the time I got out of the hospital, I often look back and say I could've just gotten lost because nobody knew who I was, nobody knew where I was supposed to be, I had no orders, so I just hitchhiked on a C-130 to Saigon and I got to Saigon and then I hitchhiked a ride on a 123 up country and to my ultimate base at Phan Rang. I knew where I was supposed to be. And I eventually showed up there, I don't know, mid-January or, early January of '68 because I got there just in time to get checked out and fly in the Tet offenses.

### ***What were your thoughts on your way to Vietnam? What were you expecting?***

**Rich Buickerood:** Well you know, you really didn't know what to expect. We were all so young and bulletproof. You didn't ever think that anything was going to happen to you. You were confident in your skills and it was just an adventure. You never thought about any of the negative stuff. So you felt like you were prepared to do your job and that's the way I felt. I was going over there to do the job my country wanted me to do.

### ***Describe for us, sir, a little bit of your memories of the 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. 196 **“...keeping the memories alive”**

---

**Rich Buickerood:** Well it was a great airplane to cut your teeth on. It was single seat, single engine. It certainly had its share of aerodynamic problems. I think I was flying the C model which was just a big old beast. It was so heavy, and by the time we got to fly it with all the tanks and bomb racks and everything hanging from it, it wouldn't go supersonic anymore. It just, but you felt safe in it. A lot of guys took a lot of hits and brought the airplanes back. The challenge early on was it was getting so old that we had a couple of guys that actually had their wings snap. You'd make your dive bomb pass and you'd pull out of that and a portion of the wing would snap off. So we were shuttling the airplanes over to Formosa, or Taiwan to have the wings reinforced, and I got to take one of those trips after I'd been in country a few months and that was kind of fun. But it was a great airplane. Again, you look in retrospect, because I went, I ultimately flew the F-4 and then the F-16, and I used to kid with my students down at UT that in the F-100, we used to hit the bomb button and hope that the bomb fell off the airplane and hope that it actually hit the ground and hope that it actually exploded somewhere near what we were aiming at, and then the technology advances to the F-4 were significant and then technology advances to the F-16 were just phenomenal. But at the time, you just tried to be as good as you could be and do the job in support of the Army because those guys were down there with VC coming over the wire and we were there to provide close air support for them.

### ***Do you remember your first mission in Vietnam?***

**Rich Buickerood:** You know, I honestly don't remember my first mission. We had to fly in the back seat of the F model for a few times. Then we had to fly with an instructor. I think it was 10 missions, 10 or 20 missions before they let you out relatively unsupervised. What I do remember is about my 5th or 6th mission and seeing tracers coming up around the cockpit and thinking those SOB's are down there trying to kill me. And at one point I had thought about, in college at one point I had actually thought about going to the seminary and being a Methodist minister, and the day that those bullets came up and I realized they were trying to kill me, I kind of submerged any thoughts that I had of ethical issues or moral dilemmas or any of that sort of stuff. I just said OK. So I remember that mission and there are a few other missions that I remember, but I had a couple hundred of them and they kind of blur together after a while.

### ***Were there any that stand out in particular though that were more hair-raising or more memorable than others? Was there such a thing as a routine mission?***

## “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. 196 “...keeping the memories alive”

---

**Rich Buickerood:** Yeah, there actually were some things that were routine. We would leave Phan Rang and we'd take off and we'd rendezvous with a forward air controller someplace and he would send us to a target and we would try and find the target and he would try and talk us in to the target by giving us ground instructions – this road or that stream or that tree line or what have you – and we would try and do what he asked us to do. I remember I think it was Easter Sunday of '68 I think I got my first distinguished flying cross. We took off and I remember it was a beautiful day and I was listening to church music on Armed Forces radio, and we got down to someplace near Saigon and there were, and I was with a fella, Howard Hanson who is still up at University of Notre Dame in fact, and we got sent to this target, and a bunch of guys had gotten overrun by the VC or North Vietnamese or whoever they were, and then they had sent in a dust-off rescue helicopter, and the rescue helicopter got shot down. But we were in there providing cover for them to try and get these guys out and we dropped all of our bombs, and then we were strafing and there were guys down there running up and down the roads and we were after them, and we stayed on target for a long time until we were about to run out of gas, and apparently we saved a whole bunch of people and so that was the first mission for which I received some sort of recognition. I was just still just a wing man at the time, but that was pretty memorable. Of course you try not to remember the times you almost drove your airplane into the ground, or into the side of the mountains. Boy, doing a night mission up around Pleiku in the middle of the night, it was just so dark, and we just scared ourselves a few times. We had another mission later that year. I had been promoted to flight lead and I had a, I remember I had a crusty old colonel with me as my wing man, and we were out near the Cambodian border someplace, and got called in to support some troops and as we got closer and closer, the weather was terrible and we had to find a hole in the clouds and circle our way down to try and get under the clouds and we finally got under the clouds, maybe 800 or 900 feet above the ground, and we didn't have, our ordinance wasn't armed for that type of delivery. And so we had to do what we called bunt bombing where we would actually, I think it was a Special Forces camp or something, they were being overrun and we had to go in and actually put the nose of the aircraft on the target and then push forward on the stick to put negative G's on the airplane and call bunt bomb, and the bombs would come off and they'd actually kind of follow the airplane, and then we'd boom ourselves with the concussion and just hope that we didn't hit ourselves with shrapnel, and so we managed to pull that off and got a second Distinguished Flying Cross for that. That was interesting. But there were some routine missions that were kind of ho-hum, except at night or in the weather they were never ho-hum because you'd come back and your eyeballs were the size of saucers you were so tired from



## **“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. 196    **“...keeping the memories alive”**

---

trying to not lose the other plane because the thunderstorms over there were horrific. I thought West Texas thunderstorms were big until I saw the ones over there. So it was an experience.

***Did you ever have any contact with enemy aircraft?***

**Rich Buickerood:** No, not directly. I mean there were a couple of times when we were flying way up along the demilitarized zone or over near the Cambodian border that we'd get calls and say there were aircraft around, but I don't know that there were ever MIG's that far south, so I don't think they were ever a factor.

***In terms of flying those missions and I think a lot of people when they think of Vietnam and pilots, they think of prisoners of war, that sort of thing. Did you have comrades that were shot down and taken prisoner?***

**Rich Buickerood:** Oh yeah, in fact one of the guys here in my Lion's Club here in Dallas was a prisoner for a long time, and a couple of guys I knew from pilot training were shot down in F4's. Most of the guys that I knew that were shot down were F-4 guys, and on the F-100 most of the time we got to the point where we were losing about a pilot a month out of our wing, out of the F-100, and most of those were ground fire. I can't remember too many. We had one unfortunate fellow who actually bailed out of his airplane and he made it almost all the way back to the base before the engine quit and he bailed out and the seat came down and hit him in the head and killed him. And then very early on after my 100th mission, a good friend, my best friend over there, a fellow named Bill Canope from Indianapolis, he and I got sent on R&R and we went to Bangkok for a couple of days and we were back, within a couple of days of coming back we were put on the flight schedule, and he noticed that I was flying his airplane and he wanted to fly his own airplane, so we switched missions, and he took a golden BB right through the side of the plane up near Pleiku Air Base somewhere and killed him, and something I think about to this day. But the POW thing was, yeah, there were a lot of people I knew or have certainly since known that were up there.

***Was that, how did psychologically how did you deal with that sort of thing when you would go into a mission? Did you just try to not even think about the possibility of that?***

## **“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. 196 **“...keeping the memories alive”**

---

**Rich Buickerood:** That’s an interesting question because you had, between missions was the time for being fearful and apprehensive, and I was thinking about this before you called. We used to call it I think it was the three B’s. There was the Bible, there was Booze, and there was Bridge, the card game, and that’s what most everybody did at night after the missions was sit around. We lived in a hooch together, all of us, all the pilots in our squadron, we were in one building, and so there was usually a small poker game and there was a bridge game and there were the guys that were, every one of these hooches built a bar and there were guys over there getting **blotto** or there were guys like me and my friend who you’d go to chapel or you’d go to men’s fellowship or what have you, and that’s the way we dealt with it. Once you walked into that mission briefing room, you didn’t have time to be afraid. You were just focused on what your job was, where you were going, what you were going to do, thinking about what you needed to do next, and I would never, I don’t think I was ever afraid as I used to think, once the engine cranked, I didn’t have time to be afraid. I was too busy. But you sure thought about it between missions.

***What about your wife, since she was back home in the United States during that time, did you tell her about your missions?***

**Rich Buickerood:** Well I remember we had quite a letter writing campaign. Back then you couldn’t communicate other than with ham radio, and there was not a lot of access to that, so we used to just have to do it through letters, and she never kept any of the letters so I don’t think she was probably too happy about whatever it was I was writing.

***Did you tell her though many of the details or did you try to spare her from that?***

**Rich Buickerood:** No, I would not, it wouldn’t have been in my nature to tell her. In fact after I came back from Vietnam, I never ever talked about it until 25 or so years later when I was a professor down at UT and my cadets got me to talk about it, but other than that – when I had left for Vietnam, I had several good friends from college who saw me off or sent me telegrams or what have you, and then when I came back from Vietnam, I remember being, we had to travel in our uniforms and I remember people spitting and cursing, and my friends never talked to me again. So it was something that you kept, it was such an unpleasant war, and no political will, no national will, draft dodgers, all that sort of stuff, so it wasn’t something that I found, there was no comfort in talking about it unless you talked about it with somebody else who had

## **“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. 196 **“...keeping the memories alive”**

---

been there.

***Sure, yeah that's just, I think that's pretty unbelievable for those that had served before you and like myself and others that have served in the recent conflicts, I think luckily we've never had to endure that sort of direct hostility.***

**Rich Buickerood:** Yeah, you're right, I mean when I saw Desert Storm, I knew a lot of those people who conducted that war. I had worked for General Horner and I had worked for or with any number of those senior officers and I was so pleased with the way they conducted that conflict and the way that the troops were treated, and subsequent to that the way the troops are being treated, and it was so different for us and I think that's why we just, there was no way. When I came back, I became a T-38 instructor down at Randolph Field and our whole squadron was full of guys who had been, and we seldom if ever talked about it. We just wanted to forget it because we felt we had been, I guess we felt as though we had done our job and we had been betrayed. Phan Rang Air Base wasn't too far from the South China Sea, and the base had a quote unquote “beach” out there, and there was another one up at Cam Rahn Bay, but I remember going out to that beach one day and they would take us out on a big flatbed truck with guards and stuff, and I remember coming back from the beach one day and there were a whole bunch of villagers, and they were raising their fists and shouting at us and spitting at the truck as we went by. I said what the hell am I doing here? That was kind of a low point because those people were there, they were like the reeds of rice in the wind just kind of blowing and of course in retrospect you say OK the VC are coming in their village at night and scaring them half to death, they're killing them, and so it was hard for them to be too vociferous in their support of us I guess.

***Well of course some of them might have been VC, too. I guess you never know.***

**Rich Buickerood:** Oh God, after I left, I talked to some guy – while I was there, the South Koreans were our perimeter guard, and talk about tough dudes, and we never, we had rocket attacks, but we never had encroachment. Well I think that's right as I was leaving in December of '68, the rock (Koreans) left, and I heard right after that that the VC attacked the base and that one of the guys, I don't know if it's true or not, but they said one of the guys they found dead in the wire was the base barber. And I'm thinking this guy has been cutting my hair for a year with a straight razor and he's a VC, and I'm thinking wow, what a story that is.

## **“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. 196 **“...keeping the memories alive”**

---

***Yeah, I wouldn't doubt that though, there were so many of those types of stories and not knowing who you could trust. I've interviewed other veterans who have served in Vietnam and they have mentioned a lot of similar things in terms of the locals that work on base that had access and that sort of thing, and really never completely knowing. So sir, how long ultimately did you end up spending in Vietnam?***

**Rich Buickerood:** From January to December of '68.

***And during that time were you aware of what was going on back home in terms of all the unrest with the assassinations and the riots?***

**Rich Buickerood:** Yeah we were because a friend of mine was in Richter's Law School in Newark and he was telling me that you could hear gunfire at night and of course I think they had the riots in Detroit that year, and am I right, wasn't Martin Luther King killed that year?

***Yeah, he and Robert Kennedy were assassinated in '68. The Democratic Convention had a huge riot in Chicago and all sorts of unrest it seems like.***

**Rich Buickerood:** Yeah, I remember that and that was interesting because several years later, in one of my other tours that we haven't talked about, I was a speech writer and I wrote a speech, I was in Virginia writing a speech for a general down here in Texas, and it turned out that after I wrote the speech I didn't realize, he invited me to go to San Diego with him to hear him present the speech, and I did, and he told me that he had been one of the military advisors to President Nixon. So we drove to San Clemente and met the president and his wife, and Nixon commented, you know, how interesting it was that all the draft protestors stopped as soon as they stopped the draft, and all the war protestors stopped as soon as they stopped the draft. And I remember meeting a guy at UT that was giving some of my students a hard time and he had been a draft dodger. There's still people on my list of the Jane Fonda list, the Bill Clinton list, the people who ran away. So anyway, that's kind of inside.

***And then they granted amnesty I believe it was Ford or Carter, I think maybe it was Carter granted amnesty to all of them to come back from Canada or wherever they ran to.***

## **“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. 196 **“...keeping the memories alive”**

---

**Rich Buickerood:** Yeah, that’s a hell of a deal.

***Yeah, I think that was, I wasn’t alive then but from what I’ve read probably the lowest point in American history when Saigon fell and then shortly after that you had amnesty for the draft dodgers.***

**Rich Buickerood:** Yeah, I worked for a general at one point that was on the roof of the embassy in Saigon when that happened and he was never the same after that. He was bitter and upset. I mean that whole debacle. So it’s any wonder that most of us I think didn’t talk about it. I was just thankful that I was as detached from it as I could be flying airplanes. I just, over the years I just could not have imagined being a 17, 18, 19-year-old kid on the ground in the jungle staring at that stuff every day and the drugs and the lack of leadership in the Army at the time. I mean I was, when I think about, you know in the Air Force the pilots are the warriors, and we’re all older and we’ve got degrees and many of us are married, and I just think it was a lot easier for us to deal with that than those young kids who were on the ground over there. It’s any wonder so many of them have post traumatic stress. It’s just a horrible thing.

***Was there ever any point during all that that you thought of getting out of the service, or were you always in your mind going to be in for a career?***

**Rich Buickerood:** No, I think I had a six-year commitment, so I knew coming back that I’d have to have another assignment or two, and then they just kind of, I enjoyed it so much they just kind of drifted together. I didn’t really think about getting out until I had been in a little over 10 years and I was coming up on major, and that seemed like a good time to think about pursuing something else. I did that for a little while, pursued it for a little while, and decided no, I like what I’m doing.

***I guess obviously your wife was supportive of you remaining in the Air Force?***

**Rich Buickerood:** She really liked it, too. We were very fortunate. When we talk about our 26 years in the military, we’re both very fond of it. I had a lot of good jobs and we enjoyed the lifestyle. Obviously there were negatives, but they were far outweighed by the positives. Clearly never made any money at it, but it was something we both enjoyed doing and we both miss it very much even after all these years.

## “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. 196 “...keeping the memories alive”

---

### *What was your favorite duty assignment during your entire tour?*

**Rich Buickerood:** Let me think about that. My very favorite – there were probably two. I don’t know that I could narrow it down to one. I spent three years in the Pentagon in foreign military sales, and I traveled all over the world as the government spokesperson for selling F16’s and F-20’s.



**Wow.**

**Rich Buickerood:** And I actually got to fly the F-20, one of the few people that got to fly the F20, and I spent three years doing that, and I used to just pinch myself saying you know, here’s a kid from the wrong side of the tracks in New Jersey and I’m flying around the world and meeting presidents of countries and sheiks and that was a phenomenal job. And then right after that I got sent to California and I got a command of a flying organization and spent two years as the commander, and that was a fabulous job. I had about 100 something pilots and 400 or 500 enlisted troops and that was one of the highlights of my life.

## **“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. 196 “...keeping the memories alive”

---

***Sure, I can imagine, absolutely. What base were you assigned to?***

**Rich Buickerood:** That was George Air Force Base in Victorville, California.

***Sir, I've been there and I know isn't that like a big civilian kind of freight type of –***

**Rich Buickerood:** Yeah, we were gonna stay there. We loved it. My wife hated it when we first moved there from Virginia to there, and oh God, it's all brown and dead and dry and ugly, and by the time it was time to leave we were thinking well, why don't we retire and stay here? And then they decided they were gonna close the base, so we had to move on.

***We were there for at least a week and then down to March Reserve Base, but in each case we used the old base housing for urban combat training, and I'm sure if anyone had ever lived there, it would be really –***

**Rich Buickerood:** Oh, you're one of those guys. In fact we drove through there a summer or two ago and we went, we lived at 3 Mercury Avenue, and we went back to look for our house and that housing area was so destroyed we couldn't even find where our house had been.

***Yeah, it was kind of surreal because you knew that at one point families had lived there. It was big base housing, in each case, March and also at George. The streets were still there. You'd go through all the buildings and there are still light fixtures in there and toilets and stuff, but other than that they are just all blown apart and torn up.***

**Rich Buickerood:** Yeah, I agree, it was definitely surreal when we went through there and we couldn't figure out, we thought we found our house but we weren't sure.

***Yeah, and they put up all sorts of barricades and turned parts of it into little villages and things of that sort. It's great for training, but it's definitely a strange environment. I know they have a lot of signs all around there warning people not to trespass, it's a training area, and then there was also warning signs for asbestos and things of that sort. That's interesting, but I definitely know where that is and I know that they also seemed to have a whole ton of airplanes out on some of the flight lines just kind of mothballed out there, too, which I thought was interesting, tons of them sitting out there.***

## “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. 196 “...keeping the memories alive”

---

**Rich Buickerood:** Yeah.

*Well sir, how did you end up coming ultimately, I guess UT was kind of your last assignment as an instructor?*

**Rich Buickerood:** Well it was one of them. We left Victorville and decided that the general officer was probably not in the cards, and so I thought well, what would be a fun thing to do? And so I applied to ROTC and I guess with my record I was lucky enough to get picked to be the Professor of Air Science down at UT Austin. So we came there in '88 and that was fabulous. My wife and I both just loved working with the cadets, and we had a good-sized program and we grew it a little bit while we were there. And then my boss who was the region commander of ROTC at the time I think was nationally divided into six regions, and my boss decided to retire and asked me if I would take his place. So I agreed and we reorganized down into four regions I think and I wound up surprisingly having to leave Austin and move to San Antonio. They moved the offices down to San Antonio. So I spent about a year in San Antonio. We lived on base at Randolph again, which is kind of full closure from starting out at Randolph right after the war and ending up at Randolph. Then I want to say that was the Clinton era and every year I was having to tell colonels and lieutenant colonels who had done an outstanding, I had 27 colleges and I don't know, 70 or 80 high schools within my 9-state region. I had the southwest region from Louisiana to Hawaii. And every year I was having to tell one or two of these guys that their services were no longer required, and I hated that. And so I started wondering, OK, what am I gonna do? Well then the Air Force made my mind up for me. They called me up and said look, colonel, you're the longest tenured – I'm trying to think of how they said it – I hadn't been overseas in a long time and I was the top guy on that list – and they said well how about we send you to Bogota, Columbia to be the Air Attache? And I said eh, no. I wanted to be an Air Attache, but I didn't want to go to Bogota. So then they called me a couple of months later and said well, how about you go back to Korea? And it was a good job. I knew where it was at Camp Casey in Korea, and they said your wife can stay in base housing and we'll bring you back to Randolph. And I said to do what? Well, we don't know. And when I talked about it with my wife, she said no, two remotes is enough. I had a remote in Vietnam and I had another one in Korea in the mid-70s, and said that's enough. So I started looking around to come out of the Air Force. It was kind of funny because my boss at ROTC, a fellow named Tornow, I had asked for an extension to give myself time to find a job and he had gotten me an extension. Then I found



## **“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. 196 **“...keeping the memories alive”**

---

a job, and I had to ask him to help me get out early. So I wound up getting out in January of '92, and I think with my terminal leave it was almost 26 years to the day and I moved up here to Dallas to become the zoo director.

***Oh that's great, wow. So you're at the Dallas Zoo now?***

**Rich Buickerood:** Well I was. I got hired again in '06, and so I spent almost 15 years as the zoo director there at the Dallas Zoo.

***Wow, that's great.***

**Rich Buickerood:** Yeah, it was great.

***How did you make the jump into going into the zoo from the Air Force?***

**Rich Buickerood:** There was no plan. A head hunter found me and I was doing all the usual stuff, looking for jobs in all the journals and federal governments, city government, county government – you name it, I was looking, and then one day out of the blue I got a letter from the Retired Officers Association and I think it's called MOAA now -

***That's right.***

**Rich Buickerood:** They sent me this thing about a job as a zoo director in Texas, and I had no idea where it was. I said well, it sounds like it might be fun. So I applied and I interviewed over the course of the next six months or so, and then in December, right before Christmas of '91 they offered me the job.

***That's great, yes sir.***

**Rich Buickerood:** The previous guy had quit and they were looking for, the head hunter had actually recommended they hire somebody from outside the zoo industry because the zoo really was very poorly organized, and so I had my MBA by then and a lot of, I had been in senior management positions in the Air Force for 10 or 15 years, so it seemed like a good fit and it turned out to be a good fit.

## **“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. 196 **“...keeping the memories alive”**

---

***That’s great. And so then you decided just to stay in the Dallas area.***

**Rich Buickerood:** Yeah, we really like Texas and this way I can see the Cowboys every week, play golf year round, so we enjoy it here. I’ve got a son here and his grandbaby here, and so that makes, at least we’ve got, I’ve got two older daughters and they’re both scattered in Seattle and Las Vegas, so at least we’ve got one child here.

***That’s great. Do you still keep in touch very much with the ROTC program at UT?***

**Rich Buickerood:** Not with the program, but I hear from a lot of my cadets all the time which really makes me feel good. It’s hard to imagine some of them are lieutenant colonels and majors, and any day now I’ll hear that one of them has been promoted to colonel, and that makes me feel real old. It’s nice that they remember their old guy.

**Rich Buickerood:** I went back to attend a function about 5 or 10 years ago I guess and they had a formal event for the wing there in Austin. My wife and I drove down and that was kind of fun. A lot of my cadets were there. Talk about funny, I do some of my financial stuff through Fidelity and I, long story short, about three years ago I walk into their office here in Dallas and to meet with my new advisor, and the young man introduces himself to me and he says hello Colonel! And I said hello? OK, people don’t usually call me colonel anymore. He said you don’t remember me, do you? I said no. He said I was in your ROTC program. I was a freshman when you were leaving the program. And he’s been handling my finances now for three or four years now. What a funny path that was.

***Well sir, now that we’re kind of wrapping it up, as I mentioned before we started this interview that we do these interviews for posterity with the hope that people are listening to this potentially hundreds of years from now. Is there anything that you would want to say to anyone listening to this interview about your time in service or just anything just in general?***

**Rich Buickerood:** Well, I’ve always felt that one of the greatest things you can do with your life is give service to your country and I’m very proud of that.

***Yes sir.***

## “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. 196 “...keeping the memories alive”

---

**Rich Buickerood:** Too much is made these days of self indulgence and I’m a firm believer in personal responsibility and looking after your family and protecting your family and protecting your country. On my gravestone it’s not gonna say zoo director, it’s gonna say fighter pilot.

*Yes sir. Well sir, it’s been an honor today to be able to interview you. I know everybody here at the Land Office from Commissioner Patterson who is also a Vietnam veteran on down, everyone here is thankful for your service to our country and hopefully this program is just one small way of saying thank you for your time serving our nation.*

**Rich Buickerood:** Well thank you very much, James. You have a great day.



## “Happy Valley” Phan Rang AB, RVN

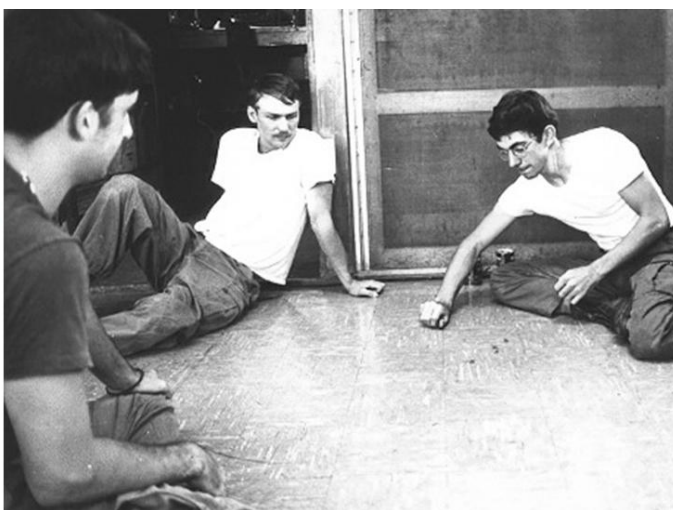
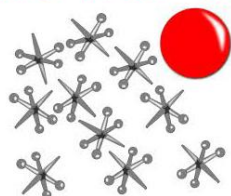
The History of Phan Rang AB and the stories of those who served there.

Phan Rang AB News No. 196 “...keeping the memories alive”

---

Rich Buickerood, Profile of a Patriot - Photo top left, Hickam AFB, Hawaii; top right Air Force ROTC training; bottom left posing with his F-4 Phantom aircraft; bottom right flight testing F-16; bottom center with his wife at his Air Force retirement and Center photo is commemorating his last flight at Phan Rang AB, RVN in the F-100 Super Sabre.

What did you do  
in the war daddy?



**JACKS? Yes that’s what they were really doing!** Joe Calbreath is on the left, Bob Tucker (yes, that’s the Bob Tucker of “Keeper of the Rolls”) in the center and Tim Liguori on the right playing some Jacks outside the copper room. This is around August ’70. When Joe and Tim went on R&R to the Phillipines, we stayed with some girls who had a couple younger siblings with them. They were playing Jacks. We joined in and brought a set back to Phan Rang.

The real funny thing is when we had a layover at Cam Ranh terminal. To pass the time, we started playing some Jacks. Before long, there was a crowd around us with some wanting to join in. That was quite a sight. People longing for home, longing for the return to our childhood. The crowd broke up and we all went on our way.

## “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. 196 “...keeping the memories alive”

---

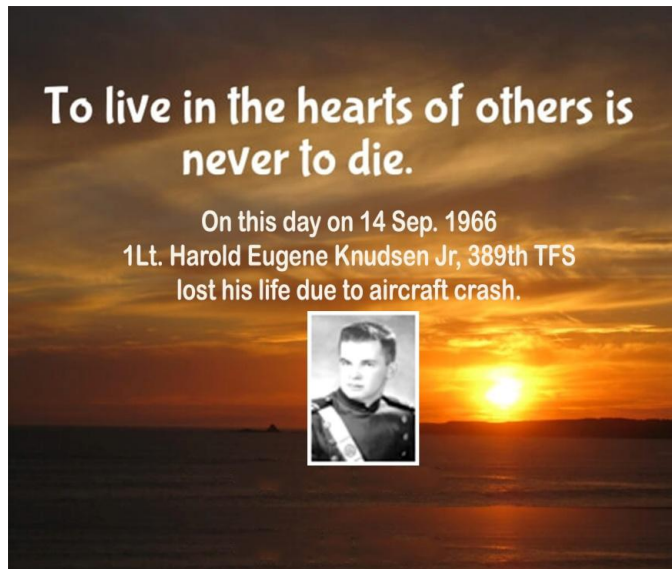
### The Crash of a Phantom - I Saw it Happen

By David W. Helmke, 389<sup>th</sup> Tactical Fighter Squadron

**A Phantom crashed in Ninh Thuan province, South Vietnam due to a flight control failure. One crewman ejected but 1Lt Knudsen was killed.**

#### I was there, I saw it happen

I was serving as an F-4 crew chief on the day Lt. Knudsen went down at Phan Rang. I saw his aircraft bank shortly after takeoff and it went behind a hill and then a boom and a large cloud of black smoke rising. The pilot got out but Lt. Knudsen did not.



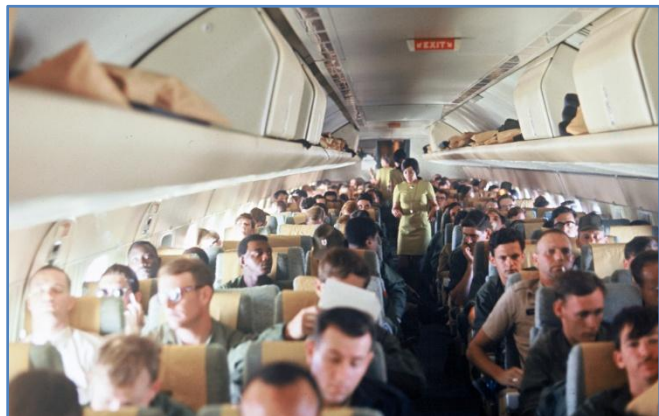
1st Lieutenant Harold E. Knudsen, Jr., was killed on 14 September 1966 while on a strike mission in South Vietnam. The F-4C aircraft he was piloting crashed shortly after takeoff from Phan Rang AB. His aircraft was joining their formation when a flight control malfunction caused the aircraft to roll inverted. When attempts to right the aircraft failed, both crew

members tried to eject. Knudsen was unsuccessful and was killed when the aircraft crashed.

#### HEADED HOME

50 years ago I caught a C-123 from Phan Rang to Cam Rhan Bay (CRB). I then boarded a Flying Tiger airliner that departed CRB at 12:30 PM. With stops in Japan and Alaska we arrived at McChord AFB at 12:00 noon. **I WAS BACK IN THE WORLD!**

*Ernest Peters*



## **A Memorial to Dwaine Mattox and the crew of C-123K 55-4527**

**By John Anthony Ward**

### **A MEMORIAL**

Dwaine and I both arrived at Phan Rang Air Base in the month of June, 1970. We both had at least a year's prior experience piloting Air Force aircraft stateside. Now it was our turn to serve a 12 month tour of duty in Vietnam, the war zone. Air Force policy at that time was that most newly minted pilots out of pilot training would be sent to Vietnam whenever their number came up.

Since we had prior flight experience, we were both designated to be in the Aircraft Commander upgrade program soon after our arrival. That meant we would be given training to fly the left seat as commanders of our C-123K Provider cargo aircraft, the equivalent of a Captain on an airliner.

That program involved both of us flying alternating legs in the left seat with an instructor pilot in the right seat. We would fly between 8 - 10 flight segments a day, hauling personnel and or supplies into remote airstrips all around South Vietnam. It was quite challenging, what with monsoon weather and metal matting (PSP-Pierced Steel Planking) or hard clay runways as short as 3,000 ft long in the midst of the jungle. This dual training went on for a week, after which we were split up.

Dwaine was to continue his training with the instructor for another week to be checked out as A/C (aircraft commander) Then it would be my turn the following week to do the same. The first day they flew together, I was scheduled to fly as copilot with a regular A/C.

Upon returning from our mission that day, I learned that the squadron had lost an aircraft that day. While on final approach to Cam Ranh Bay, a C-123 had experienced a broken flap hinge and crashed into the bay. The only survivor was the loadmaster, Robert Agrifoglio. Both pilots perished in the crash. They were the A/C trainee, Lt. Dwaine Mattox, and the instructor pilot, Maj. Grant R. Waugh. I have carried this memory all these years, and now feel it right to memorialize their sacrifice.

**“Happy Valley” Phan Rang AB, RVN**

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

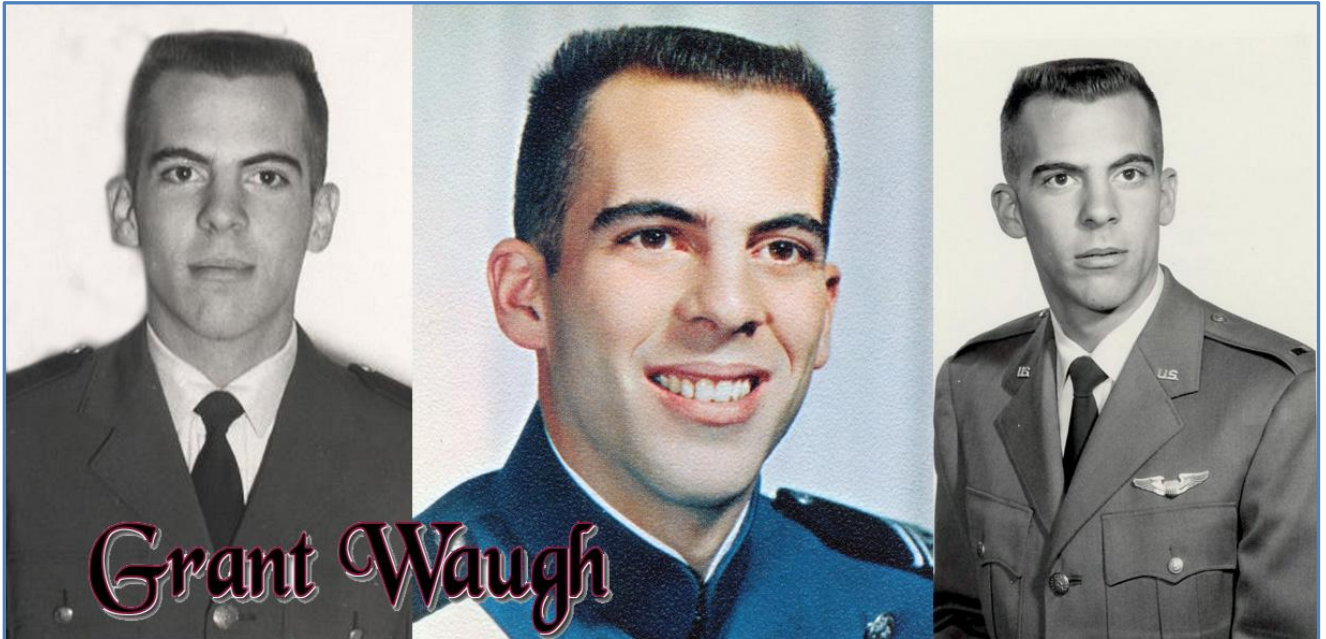
Phan Rang AB News No. 196 “...keeping the memories alive”

---

# Dwaine Mattox



## Maj. Grant Reed Waugh



*Grant Waugh*

### Additional Comments:

**Dean Delongchamp:** I was in that unit and was a very good friend of Major Grant “Reed” Waugh. He was an AFA graduate and on the fast track. He was a great guy and a great pilot. He was near the end of his tour. My roommate, Pat Stajdel, encountered the same broken flap incident high enough on final to kick the opposite auxiliary jet on and counterbalance the flap

## “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. 196 “...keeping the memories alive”

---

on the failed side and land without rolling over. Waugh and Mattox weren't so lucky. RIP guys.

**John Anthony Ward:** Dean I knew Pat Stargell and think I flew with him. I had a broken flap hinge about a week later while descending through a hole in the cloud layer over Ban Me Thout, around 5000 ft. My IP in the right seat quickly retracted the flaps and we recovered and made a no flap landing at Cam Ranh AB.

**Dean Delongchamp:** John I'm still in touch with Pat. Small world! When did you leave? Were you still there when they lost the two planes two days apart going through the pass in late November of '70? I believe they stood the planes down after those three broken flap hinges and addressed that issue. You had a lot of losses in your first six months in country. Did you know the 310<sup>th</sup> chief Nav, Ernie Servetas? He took my fini flight for me in late May before you arrived and they were shot down and managed to crash land somewhere on the outskirts of DaNang. They all were wounded, but they all survived. If you did know him, he died in a KC-135 tanker crash in Spain in 1971.

**John Anthony Ward:** Dean Delongchamp I was there until June, 1971. In November, I was next in line to takeoff after the flight ahead of me took off for Cam Ranh. He chose to fly through the pass, in the clouds, I chose to go feet wet since the overcast was at 500 ft. When I arrived on approach at Cam Ranh, they were doing a radio search for the aircraft<sup>1</sup> ahead of me. It took four days before the weather improved enough to find the wreckage, a few hundred ft. below the ridge line (4000 .ft) A tragedy caused by radar controller error, and situational awareness by the crew. I think 27 souls were on board, most to catch the Freedom Bird home out of Cam Ranh. I was there #1 for takeoff when a Ranch Hand bird requested a high speed pass down the runway and a pull up at the end to a downwind. (His fini flight) The pull up was such that I could see the whole top profile of the A/C. He stalled on the rollout and spun into the ground, a fiery explosion. That image is engraved in my memory.

**Dean Delongchamp:** If memory serves me right the aircraft was on his fini-flight and had some friends along for the fini-flight. The only ones we lost were Clyd Clem landing short on Gia Gnia, that mountain top air strip. One Army passenger onboard for a fun day with a crew member friend was killed. We also lost one on take off from Rach Gia in the Delta, I believe. Lost the whole crew. May have been shot down.

---

<sup>1</sup> See Phan Rang Newsletter 155 “Casualty list for Phan Rang AB Assigned Personnel and Ninh Thuan Province” and Phan Rang Newsletter 197 “Chronological List of Phan Rang AB Air Losses. C-123K hit mountain 15 miles southwest of Cam Ranh Bay in bad weather.



## **“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. 196 “...keeping the memories alive”

---

**Dean Delongchamp:** The other one went down going through the pass two days later and about 72 souls on board were lost, about 40 of them Vietnamese paratroopers. I believe two U.S. enlisted were discovered buried alive when the wreckage was found 4-5 days later. It's amazing you were so closely involved with three of the four major losses during your year. That's a lot of baggage to carry.

**John Anthony Ward:** Dean Delongchamp The co-pilot on that fini flight was a Lt. O'Keefe, who was the son of the Commander of PACAF, Gen. O'Keefe. Heads rolled, and they stopped telling us when our fini flight was.

**Dean Delongchamp:** John Anthony Ward that's what I heard. Good move to not assign fini-flights. Too much hot dogging going on. I didn't have much luck with mine. I had already had my fini-flight when the squadron put me on the schedule for another flight two days before I was leaving. Maj Servetas thought it “looked interesting” and took it for me. Result, shot down. Next assignment, deja vu. Had already had my fini-flight and my boss, the head of Wing Stan Eval asked me to take one more flight. Ended up with one landing gear hung up. Finally got them both up mechanically and crashed landed about 2:30 am after burning off most of our fuel. Ruined a streak of 700,000 hours without an accident for the Wing! On my next flying assignment I didn't let the crew or the plane know it was my fini-flight. I let everyone know after we landed!! I wasn't taking any more chances.

**Dean Delongchamp:** I was one of those extremely lucky navs making Colonel. My MAJCOM was MAC also, but my successes were in the rated supplement.

**Donald Poirier:** So sad about the C123 that crashed. I was at Phan Rang early 1971 when we lost 5 crew members when a C123 crashed while spraying. A anecdote: when I in processed at Cam Rahn, and then took a hop on a C123 to Phan Rang: while in flight the pilots began arguing, then appeared to put on parachutes and yelling, "We're outta here" ...us newbies were petrified...they then laughed and said, "Gotcha" ...funny to them, but not to us.

**Dean Delongchamp:** Donald Poirier we pulled stuff on Army troops all the time. If we had 20-30 onboard we'd tell them we were having problems with the hydraulics and needed help steering. The loadmaster would roll out two big ropes and tie them inside the cockpit and then

## **“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. 196 “...keeping the memories alive”

---

pull one down each side of the plane where they were sitting. We'd then holler left or right and those guys would pull as hard as they could and we'd turn in the direction they were pulling. Scared the heck out of the troops! We had to have some fun on those long days.

**Tom Reiter:** I changed fatigue shirts with the load master one time. We had a big argument in front of the troops. The load told me if I thought I could fly it better to go ahead. After a couple of false starts we got in the air. The load and I changed shirts and had a good laugh. The grunts remained confused.

**Patty Anderson:** Newbies always paid for being in country as cherries but it went by fast and then we all could not wait for the next of newbies so could seek our revenge in good faith. One of the favorites was the dining hall was packed, naturally newbies were sitting together eating when the siren would blast sending them all to the floor seeking cover while the rest us watch them and continue to eat. We all were a little jumpy when first coming in-country.

### **Sgt Robert Agrifoglio**

Bob was the Loadmaster and the only survivor.

Robert (Bob) D. Agrifoglio, 73, passed away on December 22, 2017. Bob was born in Chicago, Illinois.

Bob is preceded in death by his mother, Annie Agrifoglio. He joined the U.S. Air Force on his 17th birthday, spending 17 ½ years in the service before being medically retired as a result of a plane crash in Vietnam. Bob was the only surviving member of the crew. He then went on to serve his country in the U.S. Government for another 17 ½ years.

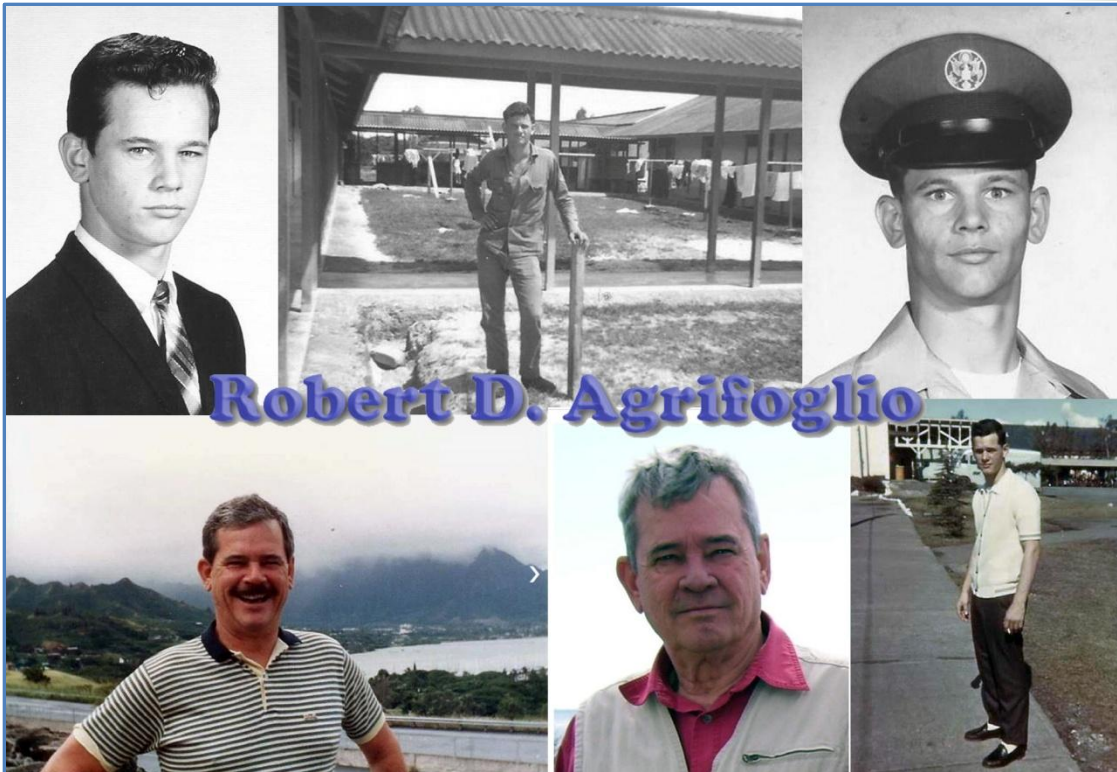
He was well liked as he helped so many people in this community as well as other places he had lived.

He is survived by his wife, Marie, daughter, Christine Brown, son, Robert and stepson Stephen Hubbard, and numerous grandchildren and great grandchildren.

**“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. 196 “...keeping the memories alive”



**Robert D. Agrifoglio**

**Note:** Additional information about this incident can be found in *Phan Rang Newsletter 155* “Casualty List for Ninh Thuan Province”, *Phan Rang Newsletter 197* “Chronological List of all Aircraft Losses for Phan Rang AB” and *Phan Rang Newsletter 143* “AF Plane Crashes at Cam Ranh AB”.

**Goodbye our Phan Rang Brother, I thank you for your part in my journey.**



## **“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. 196    **“...keeping the memories alive”**

---

**Paul Minert** along with his twin brother Kirk was instrumental in providing the impetus for the Phan Rang Newsletter. After our first encounter both brothers provided me with an astounding number of issues of the *Phan Fare*, the 35<sup>th</sup> TFW weekly newsletter, many issues of the *Seventh Air Force Newspapers* as well as many issues of the *Pacific Stars and Stripes* from the time they were stationed at Phan Rang. Because of their sharing of the *Phan Fare* and other doing so as well, we have since amassed the largest collection that I know of. Also included was other memorabilia that I felt had to be shared with the rest of the Phan Rang community, or be lost forever, so I started the Phan Rang Newsletter.

**Doug’s Comments:** I hope that you enjoyed this newsletter and if you have a story to tell, please write it down and send to me so that your unique experiences can be saved for posterity. This newsletter was composed and all graphics by Douglas Severt unless otherwise stated. To see a list of all previous newsletters click [here](#). To unsubscribe to Phan Rang News, mailto:mailto:[dougsevert@cox.net](mailto:dougsevert@cox.net) and put ‘unsubscribe’ in subject line.