

Phan Rang AB Newsletter

The History of Phan Rang AB and the stories of those who served there.
“Keeping the memories alive” Newsletter 204

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ANZAC DAY SERVICES IN THE UNITED STATES



I doubt that it’s widely known that ANZAC Day services are held in several places in the United States.



Australian Captain Paul McKay

One of these is **Saranac Lake**, New York, where young Australian Army Captain Paul McKay was found dead on Scarface Mountain in January 2014. McKay suffered from post-traumatic stress after a tour of duty in Afghanistan in 2011.

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Without telling anyone where he was going, McKay flew from Adelaide (*Adelaide is the capital city of the state of South Australia and the fifth-most populous city of Australia.*) to Saranac Lake and biked up into the mountains in the middle of winter. He had very little clothing or appropriate gear and he died of hypothermia during the night.

Now every year on 25 April, a group of Australians and members of the local community hold an ANZAC Day service to commemorate his passing.

Another service is held in **Fort Benning** (Pictured), where people gather at the 173rd Airborne Brigade Sky Soldier Memorial at the National Infantry Museum in Columbus, Georgia.

It is the only memorial in the US that lists the names of Australians killed in action. Listed are the names of 1RAR group members killed while serving with the 173rd Airborne Brigade (SEP) in 1965-66. [Click here to see that list.](#)

The sunrise service is organized and run by the Australian Army contingent on assignment at the Maneuver Center of Excellence and Fort Benning. Australian and U.S. soldiers served in battle together for the first time during WW1 at Hamel, France on 4 July 1918.

Note: The above article is from **Returned Servicemen League (RSL) magazine**. The Returned & Services League of Australia (RSL) was founded in 1916 to ensure a unified approach to address the lack of organized repatriation facilities and medical services available to those returning from service in the Great War. This included looking out for the families of those comrades who did not return. They also advocate for the best possible conditions for our serving men and women and for those who have served the Nation in the past. We foster respect and thanks from the Nation for all those who have made sacrifices in Australia’s name and we provide a strong voice on issues of National unity and security. **The definition of ANZAC Day:** Observed on 25 April each year, Anzac Day was originally devised to honor the members of the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps (ANZAC) who served in the Gallipoli Campaign, their first engagement in the First World War (1914–1918).

I was so taken by the story of Paul McKay that I would like to include his complete story even

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though there is no connection to Phan Rang AB other than a human connection and our enduring affection to our Aussie comrades who have been at our side for a hundred years starting with the Battle of Hamel during World War 1 and continue to stand shoulder-to-shoulder to support our causes. Paul’s last days reminds me of the story of Chris McCandless (“Into The Wild”) who died alone in the wilds of Alaska. I don’t think you will be disappointed if you take the time to read this emotional story.

The disappearing soldier - why Adelaide man Paul McKay died alone on a frozen mountain

ON the second-to-last day of 2013, when the glow of Christmas had passed and there was nothing to do but settle in for months of unbroken winter, a stranger arrived in Saranac Lake, a 5400-person mountain town 70 miles shy of the Canadian border. Set amid the patchwork of forest preserves and villages, Saranac Lake is the self-appointed “Capital of the Adirondacks”, a one-time best small town of New York, and the place I come from.

“..had been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder after returning from Afghanistan...”

The stranger was a 31-year-old infantry captain in the Royal Australian Regiment who had been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder after returning from Afghanistan two years before.

He arrived at 6 p.m. on the one bus that comes through town each day: an Adirondack Trailways coach that chugs slowly uphill from Albany, stopping in what seems like every town along the way.

To get to Albany, he’d taken a bus from New York City, and before that planes from San Francisco, Sydney, Canberra and Adelaide, his hometown, more than 10,500 miles away. He was male-model good-looking – wholesome and tidy, with intelligent eyes, though he’d recently grown shockingly thin and had cut his brown hair so close it was nearly shaved.

He’d been a battle captain in Afghanistan’s Uruzgan Province, just north of Kandahar, working as part of a NATO coalition force. But he had a medical review coming up in January and, his family would later tell the police, he feared he might be discharged.

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The bus stopped in front of the shuttered Hotel Saranac, its six-storey bulk standing dark and silent over the town. From what police would later determine, the stranger probably walked down Main Street, past the fogged windows of bars, under the yellow face of the town hall clock tower, and then traced the curve of Lake Flower back in the direction from which his bus had come. He might have stopped in a liquor store and the shopping plaza at the edge of town, then walked a little farther down the road toward neighboring Lake Placid before turning around where the snow ploughs do, at the crossing of the old railroad tracks.

Somewhere around nine, he returned to one of the last motels he'd passed, a two-storey Best Western, and asked the clerk how far the woods extended past town. Hearing the answer – nine miles to Lake Placid – he said he'd stay the night. At 10, he emerged briefly to use the lobby computer.

The next morning, on New Year's Eve, he bought a shovel and a decorative fleece blanket at the shopping plaza and set off on foot. People would later say they'd seen him pass, dressed in snow pants and a black winter parka, and carrying a large, brown backpack as he walked toward the crossing.

The snow was spotty due to a pre-Christmas thaw, but weather was coming. Weather was coming to the whole country, in fact, as a polar air mass descended from the Arctic.

The railroad tracks cut through a marshy area, continued through the smattering of houses that make up the hamlet of Ray Brook, and past the gates of the federal penitentiary. At noon, two guards on their lunch break saw a man in winter gear walking steadily east.

Just beyond the prison was the trail to Scarface Mountain. Broad but not tall, with no real view, Scarface isn't majestic, but on the slope facing Saranac Lake there is a distinctive, rocky cliff – its eponymous scar. From the trailhead to the summit, it's a 3.5-mile climb that takes around two hours in summer. In late December, it would have been slower going, the route covered by snow, crisscrossed with misleading animal trails, and slick with ice. At some point, the man walked off the trail and into the woods.

On a shoulder just below the scar, he stopped, and beside a cluster of mossy boulders laid

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down his pack, took out his shovel, and began to dig in the frozen earth. With what had to be monumental effort, he cleared a narrow trench the length of a tall man’s body. In the rapidly cooling evening, he stopped to eat tinned beef stew. Perhaps just intending to rest, he covered himself with the thin moose-print fleece. One hundred feet ahead of him, the mountainside dropped off sharply. Beyond it, the sodium streetlights in town flicked on, glowing brown through the dampness that hangs in the air before a snow.

“...he wrote about what would happen if his body was never found.”

The snow came as predicted. Three days later, the news would hit the town paper: A young Australian named Paul McKay had gone missing in the North Country, last seen in Saranac Lake.

McKay’s father had traced an email his son had sent him back to the motel, and called the Saranac Lake police. In the email McKay said that everything was OK, but that he had some “housekeeping issues” to clarify. What followed was a two-page list, transferring all of his belongings, from his car to his Kindle account, to his father and he authorized his parents to access his civilian email account. Inexplicably, he wrote about what would happen if his body was never found.

Saranac Lake’s police chief at the time, Bruce Nason, contacted McKay’s banks for statements, urgently explaining that he might be missing in the wilderness, and that temperatures were 15 below zero and dropping. As the police knocked on doors in search of clues, the ink froze in their pens, and the people they interviewed were aghast at the idea of anybody being out in that cold.

McKay’s bank records led to an ATM at a Greyhound terminal in Albany, where security footage revealed an image of him leaning on a counter as he bought his ticket north using a fake name. When a family member went to his apartment in Canberra, they found his military dress uniform and medals laid out at neat right angles on his bed, his army sword to its side.

Just before McKay disappeared, his family learned, he’d created profiles on LinkedIn and Facebook. McKay hated social media.

On the LinkedIn page, he specified that he’d served in Afghanistan alongside soldiers from the

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US Army’s 10th Mountain Division, based out of Fort Drum, New York, three hours west of Saranac Lake. And he noted that he was the battle captain on duty during “Bloody Saturday,” the “green-on-blue” attack of October 29, 2011, when an Afghan coalition member opened fire on a group of 12 Australian soldiers and three of their interpreters on their shared base in Uruzgan, killing four and severely wounding nine.

“He mapped out a glorious life plan: to excel... in the law, to become a partner in a top firm by age 30.”

The Facebook profile contained only photographs – McKay on training exercises, McKay as a tourist in Asia, McKay in his service dress uniform looking handsome, and, for his profile image, a shot taken from a distance: McKay sitting atop a mountain, facing away.

Many who heard about McKay’s disappearance inferred that he’d been present at the Bloody Saturday attack and had watched his colleagues die – that he had survivor’s guilt or felt he’d somehow failed to protect them.

But it wasn’t that simple, said two army colleagues who had been there. The attack had shaken every Australian in Uruzgan, they said, but McKay hadn’t been anywhere near the outpost where the Afghan soldier opened fire. The provenance of his PTSD was something more ambiguous.

McKay had grown up in Adelaide, attending the University of Adelaide, where he earned a double degree in law and commerce. He joined the Adelaide Universities Regiment of the Army Reserve in late 2004. While most reserve officers take two to three years to complete their training, McKay finished in just 13 months. He mapped out a glorious life plan: to excel in both the reserves and the law, to become a partner in a top firm by age 30, and to parlay that into a successful career in politics or business.

His friends believed he would do it. McKay was an over-achiever – exceptionally disciplined and very smart, retaining facts so well that he suspected he had a photographic memory. In a country of sports fanatics, he played almost every game. “Many people have celebrities they look up to,” said his childhood friend Peter O’Leary. “I looked up to Paul.”

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In 2009, McKay finished his law degree with honours and was admitted to the bar. And then, almost immediately, he quit.



Paul McKay

He shifted his focus to the military. In most circumstances, a reserve officer transferring to the regular army would be compelled to start anew, returning to military college for another 12 to 18 months. Only the most promising reservists were allowed to bypass the process, and at the time McKay applied, there were only two openings for direct transfers available. It surprised no one when he was chosen.

Saranac Lake seems to possess a sort of geographic anonymity, and the police were puzzled by the fact that McKay had even ended up there. He mapped out a glorious life plan: to excel in both the reserves and the law, to become a partner in a top firm by age 30 who helped with the search. The police thought if they could figure out why McKay had come, it might

help them get to him in time. They uploaded a missing person flyer onto Facebook, and within days the post was shared nearly 30,000 times. None of the leads panned out.

McKay’s friends in Australia began to write, too, telling a common story of an intelligent and driven man who’d dropped progressively out of touch. They worried that McKay might not want to be found.

People go missing every year, usually unprepared hikers or hunters who wander off the trail into the dark uniformity of the forest and can’t find their way back. More recently, rangers had

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seen a spike in the number of people who go into the woods not for recreation, but intending to do themselves harm. Nationally, suicide had become a leading cause of death in parks and open spaces. The pattern was striking enough in the Adirondacks that rangers had requested specialized training for approaching people in mental distress.

But McKay’s disappearance seemed to move people in town far more than other cases had. The newspaper printed his boy-next-door photo, and, in this community full of English and Irish surnames, he could have been anyone’s brother or son. Locals wrote letters to the editor wondering whether McKay had somehow been drawn by Saranac Lake’s peaceful mountains, or its kindly small-town ways. They referred to him with odd formality, as “Captain McKay” or simply “the Australian soldier”, a sort of everyman wounded warrior.

Uruzgan, Afghanistan, is mostly desert and jagged mountains cut through with lush stripes of valley – the Green Zone – where watermelons, pomegranates and wheat grow alongside the poppies. By April 2011, when McKay arrived, Australian military members were there primarily to mentor the fragile Afghan National Army and focus on Australia’s long-term plans for withdrawal.

McKay was stationed at Tarin Kowt, the central headquarters of Combined Team Uruzgan, working in modular offices of reinforced metal. He was a battle captain in the command centre.

For at least nine months, he worked the night shift. His whole job, said one close colleague, was sitting in the command centre and waiting for something to happen. Most of the time nothing did, and the team would pass the hours reading or watching television. But when something did occur – an attack on a forward operating base, soldiers killed – McKay was charged with making decisions about the initial response. He was “like an orchestra conductor,” said another friend, coordinating air traffic controllers, specialists in charge of supplies and artillery, ground forces, and medevac helicopters. It was a high-stress job.

With his colleagues, McKay was full of self-doubt, constantly pulling them aside to discuss decisions he’d made the night before, never sure he’d made the right call.

Then came the “Bloody Saturday” attack at Sorkh Bed Forward Operating Base. McKay was in the command post, manning the morning operations, and helped direct the evacuation

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helicopters dispatched within moments to the base. Shortly after 8am, as 12 Australians and their Afghan interpreters walked across the compound, they came under sudden, heavy fire from a four-year veteran of the Afghan forces. Ten Australian soldiers, plus three translators, were shot. Days later, McKay would gather in an airport hangar with fellow servicemen and watch as three coffins draped with the Australian flag were loaded onto a military transport.

McKay’s response to the pressure and anxiety was to work harder. While other nightshift workers tried to unwind, he pored over every intelligence briefing and situation report he could find. He shut himself away and returned to his military history books, searching for parallels between the situation in Afghanistan and ancient battles as though it was a puzzle he could solve.

By this point he was working 12- to 16-hour days, operating on little or no sleep. But change was coming. His unit was set to return home in February. In the third week of January, however, something happened and after a medical evaluation, he was placed on a cas-evac – a medical casualty evacuation – and flown to a hospital in Brisbane.

When he returned to Adelaide, he saw his oldest childhood friend, Peter O’Leary, and told him he wasn’t the same anymore. He said he’d been pumped full of drugs and they were making him feel worse. He was put on a restricted medical status and posted to Canberra where he continued to work.

One night in March, he sent a group text to a number of friends, saying he’d shamed himself and his unit; he seemed to be saying goodbye. His friends made panicked calls to each other, and one alerted McKay’s commanding officer. The CO called McKay’s phone, McKay answered, and he ended up in the hospital. To a friend who visited him there, he lamented that his career plans were ruined: Why would the army want him now? It was hard to pinpoint why he felt he’d shamed his unit. While many in the Australian media, and even his friends, would later believe he blamed himself for the losses at Sorkh Bed, one US officer said there was nothing about McKay’s job that could conceivably leave him at fault.

“Another snow came to Saranac Lake...”

Another snow came to Saranac Lake, followed by another thaw, eclipsing any hope that the

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search might be as easy as spotting a set of footprints leading off into the woods. McKay had been missing for five days when, on January 5, 2014, the Saranac Lake police briefed two forest rangers on the case. Ranger Scott van Laer, who lived just off the railroad tracks in Ray Brook, was appointed case section chief, setting the terms of the search. State Police helicopters were sent to hover overhead while rangers walked the tracks where McKay had last been seen.

Eric Olsen, who ran Saranac Lake’s veterans’ program, told the police McKay wouldn’t have stayed on the tracks but would have cut off at the first trail he’d seen.

“An Australian news crew had flown over to film the effort”

“Being a ‘man of action,’” Olsen explained, “McKay would try to move through his depression. He would not stop until he was out of the manic mood or otherwise incapacitated.” He would go to extremes. Olsen told the searchers to look up high.

January 15 was Scott van Laer’s day off, but he had been mulling over an idea that he just couldn’t shake. Maybe McKay hadn’t followed the Scarface trail at all. Large-scale searches had been going on for five days, with upwards of 30 volunteers, largely regional veterans, working their way up and around the mountain. An Australian news crew had flown over to film the effort. Every day searchers went out in groups of 10, following assigned paths and marking off search blocks with string. They found surprisingly few clues: one day a sock, another the remains of a campfire, neither convincingly tied to McKay.

Van Laer knew there was an ice floe on one side of the mountain covered so thickly with evergreens the searchers in police helicopters wouldn’t have been able to see through. He walked out his backyard, up into the woods, and worked his way toward the floe.

“When I started out that day I didn’t believe I was going to find him; I thought there was no chance,” he recalls. At first he thought that he’d come upon an illegal hunting camp. “And then I got closer and I thought, ‘Oh. We’ve ended the search.’”

McKay’s body was lying on the ground next to a boulder, his hands in his pockets, just beside a shallow trench. His belongings were tucked between the rocks, and the shovel lay nearby. Staff at the complex in Ray Brook had become accustomed to the sound of helicopters moving back

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and forth over the mountain. But that afternoon, as they looked out their windows and saw a helicopter return bearing a litter, **they knew Paul McKay had been found.**

The local coroner determined McKay’s death was a suicide, due to intentional hypothermia and emaciation. Saranac Lake Mayor Clyde Rabideau announced the news on Facebook that afternoon. Within hours, the post was viewed and shared thousands of times. Locals wrote to express their sorrow, to say how they’d felt that they’d somehow known McKay. Australians commented in droves, thanking Saranac Lake for treating a stranger as one of their own. Others wrote with more bitterness: “RIP Paul, another soldier let down by the system.”

A State Police escort was arranged to accompany McKay’s body to New York City, from where he was flown home. At 7.30 on the frigid morning of January 23, with thermometers hovering on 20 below, some two dozen locals lined the streets of Saranac Lake and Ray Brook to see him off.

The reception in Australia wasn’t as warm. There was no ceremony to welcome him home, as would have been the case if he’d died in combat. His name wouldn’t be engraved outside the Hall of Memory at Canberra’s Australian War Memorial so that visiting children could participate in the ritual of placing a plastic poppy alongside it.

At the funeral reception, McKay’s friends speculated over why he’d gone where he had. To his mother, a devout Anglican, it seemed that he was on a religious quest, like the biblical wise men, following a star he didn’t quite understand. Other friends thought it must have been the proximity of the 10th Mountain Division, which was in Afghanistan, or just the appeal of a completely foreign environment. Or maybe something as simple as a postcard he’d once seen or something he’d read in a book.

What stuck with van Laer was the unmistakable impression that McKay had wanted someone to look for him, and one day to be found. “But why would he want there to be a search?” he asked. To Australian veterans, the answer was obvious.

Since 2000, estimates suggest that nearly three times as many active Australian soldiers and nearly five times as many veterans have committed suicide as have died fighting in Afghanistan. But before McKay, almost none had been nationally recognized.

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“He could have easily died in Australia,” said Troy Rodgers, a veterans’ assistance worker. “Obviously he had a clear thought in his mind that he’s going to do it and do it in a way that will make some noise.”

John Bale, CEO and co-founder of Soldier On, a national veterans’ support group based in Canberra, agreed. Before McKay’s death there had been a near blackout on news of the growing number of soldier suicides in Australia. It wasn’t so much that McKay changed the conversation, said Bale: “It didn’t exist in conversations before this. **It does now.**”

On April 25, 2014, Saranac Lake declared its first-ever observation of **Anzac Day**, and a procession of local and Australian authorities climbed up Scarface Mountain to where the forest rangers had constructed a small stone cairn and a wooden cross, to which one of them tied a poppy while another poured a can of Foster’s on the ground. McKay’s parents came that summer, bringing their son’s ashes to the mountain and scattering them above the cairn.

Why McKay did what he did will probably remain a mystery. Perhaps his unforgiving drive and perfectionism set him up to come apart in the face of the horrors he saw in Afghanistan. Perhaps he needed more help than he got reintegrating into society after serving in a war zone. Perhaps it’s wrong for a civilian like me to even speculate.

What does seem clear from the clues he left behind is that McKay struggled to operate under the weight of his experiences. Those who knew him best described their sense of no longer really knowing him.

One close Australian colleague visited Scarface and sent a note to McKay’s parents, along with a photo of the cross and the cairn in the shadow of the boulder. “It was a very quiet spot,” he wrote. “Sadly I didn’t find Paul there. I think I lost him a long time ago.”

“He disappeared like he had disappeared off the face of the Earth,” recalled Reverend Brian Douglas, McKay’s pastor back in Canberra. “But really, he had disappeared before he actually left. He had gone to another place emotionally, which you couldn’t reach.”

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Long before he ever set foot in Saranac Lake, Paul McKay was already gone.

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A1C Bernard Francis Ford Discussion about his death

Date of Birth: 01/09/1934 **Date of Casualty:** 07/05/1967

35th Security Police Squadron

A1C Ford was patrolling with his dog in the Juliet area perimeter along its many towers at Phan Rang Air Base when personnel in the security towers heard a shot ring out. The tower closest to Ford tried to contact him and when there was no reply a USAF Security jeep (SAT jeep) responded to the area. Tensions were high because the perimeter security did not know if a probe was underway or not. Ford was found shot from an accidental weapon discharge. It was determined that Airman Ford had a chambered round and the weapon accidentally went off when his dog lunged for some reason with the round passing through his head, killing him instantly. Security police had to get some other K9 handlers to get control of his dog before anyone could get to him, the dog not allowing anyone near him. Security police on duty were admonished to have an empty chamber in their weapons, but when the shot rang out and Ford did not answer, it was reported that rounds could be heard being chambered all along the Juliet posts.

Sam Lewis, also a dog handler with 35th Security Police Squadron wrote: July 5th is such a profound day for me. It's the day I was separated from the USAF at Fairchild AFB in 1968 and the same day in 1974 that my mother passed.

On July 5th, 1967, fifty three years ago on this day about 9 P.M., I had just been relieved of regular duty and was settling down in the Reserve SAT hut when I was called out with the rest of the team to the Juliet Area on the East perimeter.

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When we got there we were instructed to help secure the area where **Bernard Ford** was lying on the ground unresponsive bleeding from his head with his dog over him. A K9 Supervisor was called in to secure the dog and we stayed there setting up a perimeter and keeping it secure



while an investigation went on and the body was taken care of. At that time we didn't know if the area was infested with VC who might have downed him or if something else had happened so it was a scary time there during the whole ordeal.

The official cause of death was determined to be Accidental Homicide but his handler buddies said he most likely had a round chambered in his weapon as all of them did. When the dog was alerted it might have caused a reaction from Bernard and he accidentally discharged his weapon sending a chambered round through Bernard's chin exiting the top back his head.

A niece of Bernard's contacted the VSPA a few years ago wanting to know if anybody was stationed with Bernie. She said the government told her family it was Accidental Homicide without going into any details. We directed her to a couple of Handlers who were with him. She wanted to know if the guys knew any details of what happened. She said the family had wondered for years with the parents dying wondering if he might have taken his life. The handlers she talked to told her about the likely hood of the dog lurching causing the weapon to fire. It was a great relief for her to hear that. She says she visits Bernie's grave there in Oak Lawn in Illinois from time to time especially on his birthday and the date he was killed.

RIP Bernie You Are Not Forgotten.

Additional Facebook comments:

EL Hoard: Great story Sam. As a K9 guy myself, and before “Operation Safeside”, the plausibility of an accident caused by his dog is very real. Thanks for sharing.

Donald Dinubilo: March 1967 I was drinking some beers in the "Black Beret" one afternoon when Bernard walked in. He stood next to me at the bar and asked about having the trots. I

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told him that it was not unusual giving the food, water and general living conditions were not good. We talked for a few minutes and he left. I rotated in early April and heard from Bob Knapp several months later that Bernard had passed.

Tom Shambo: I was a k-9 handler stationed in Phan rang 1967-68 and posted near Bernie that evening. Bernie had the bunk across the aisle in the barracks from me. Ironically I also grew up in Oak Lawn, IL. I’ve visited the Wall on a couple occasions to visit his name. One thing I remember was he had a fridge and sold cold soda. I enjoyed visiting with him.

Entertainers & Politicians

Donut Dollies **Sebastian Cabot**
BOB HOPE **Barbara McNair** Doris Day
ENTERTAINERS Barry Goldwater
Les Brown and his Band **POLITICIANS**
Connie Francis Raquel Welch **Phil Crosby**

Many entertainers and politicians visited Phan Rang during its existence. This article will focus on some of the more memorable groups that usually had larger venues. There were countless smaller USO performing groups that performed at the various clubs on base and also there were Australian groups for the Aussies. Thanks to **Terry Brodt** and **David Fiedler** for much of the information in this story.

Let’s get started with a personal account when Connie Francis visited by Sgt. David Fiedler, 352nd TFS Operations.

I was assigned to 352nd Tactical Fighter Squadron, Ops 1967-’68. One of the perks of ferrying pilots from hooch to Ops and Ops to aircraft was occasional personal use of the several Ops vehicles. On the day that singer Connie Francis USO show visited Phan Rang, I had both use of the vehicle and a half-hour or so of free time. I took advantage of both to make a BX run.

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Connie and her small entourage had arrived an hour or so earlier to set up and rehearse at the Happy Valley amphitheater. Before beginning that work they too made a stop at the BX where our paths crossed and I had the opportunity to meet Connie, chat briefly and get an autograph. She also pulled out and handed me a signed photo. I was (still am) a major fan, having bought her 45's and albums during my teen years and after. To say the least, it was a stroke of good fortune to encounter her group heading into the BX just as I was exiting. Connie is small of stature. She also struck me as a tad shy, unusual for a major star, but at the same time she was gracious and engaging.

Naturally, I attended the show that night, and while I honestly don't recall much about it I know, I enjoyed it as well as bragging up my lucky BX encounter to anyone who would listen to me.

Now fast forward to the late 80's. Post-USAF I availed myself of the GI Bill, graduating from Temple University with a BS in Communications, majoring in television/film. I was fortunate to land a position with HBO during its halcyon growth years. I met or worked with talent, their management as well as production types. One memorable character was Ed Yoe, a road manager for numerous acts on tour, including Connie Francis. As an aside, Ed earlier in his career had been in senior management of Washington DC's Ford Theater, where Abraham Lincoln was shot, as well as Wolf Trap and several other major DC area entertainment venues. He was an interesting guy to spend time with over a few drinks.

In casual conversation I mentioned to Ed my Vietnam encounter with Connie. He immediately pulled out his planner and pinpointed her stop in the Philadelphia area, where I was living at the time, on her upcoming tour. It was just a few months hence at the now defunct Valley Forge Music Fair. Ed arranged tickets for me to be left at the door. Obviously they were great seats since they were part of the talent's contractual allotment. Following the show, that ran

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through the greatest hits of Connie’s long and storied career, Ed escorted me backstage. Artists regularly hold meet and greets, sometimes just for invited guests but many times for premium ticket holders. It’s simply a routine part of their obligation to the venue. This turned out quite different for Connie and for me. I started by telling her we’d met before. She was used to coming across enthusiastic fans, this was a mundane and quite ordinary situation for Connie until I mentioned Vietnam, Phan Rang and us serendipitously meeting at the BX. As I recounted my recollections and what it meant to me she began to tear up, gave me a hug and asked me to hold on until she finished greeting her remaining guests. I was subsequently invited back into the green room for refreshments, a late supper that had been set out by the venue. This gave rise to at least an hour of conversation with Connie and her band, a few of which had been with her much of her career including two that participated in the Vietnam USO tour. Essentially we were swapping “war stories.” Connie was genuinely engaged, and I came away feeling that our time together meant as much to her as it did to me. She had loads of stories about traveling all over Vietnam and Thailand on the tour, good and some not so good memories for her. The logistics of USO tours and the travel challenges were quite different than the star treatment and pampering many were accustomed to. Most were real troopers, adjusting to the inconveniences, and mustering their better nature to entertain us.

Backstage photos were taken at the Valley Forge show, which Ed promised to send to me. This was all pre-digital, pre-phone of course, but disappointingly I never received them. I later reached out to Ed to remind him, alas unsuccessfully. At a certain point when someone doesn’t come through you just let it go, especially when it’s a business associate. Possibly a disconnect with the venue’s photographer, who knows?

So, that’s my then and now story of memorable experiences with Connie Francis, both in Vietnam and many years later.

Sadly, Connie had some difficult years post-Vietnam and in the latter stages of her career while playing less than top tier properties. Performing on Long Island at Westbury Music Fair she was attacked and raped at a nearby Howard Johnson’s Motor Lodge that Westbury had booked her into.

Connie is still living and a few years ago wrote a book, “Among my Souvenirs.” I have not been able to find it available on Amazon or Barnes & Noble. Perhaps I’m in it (said tongue & cheek). Hope to find and read it someday.

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And me? I was with HBO 22 years, retiring when the AOL-Time Warner merger was consummated. I then took a position as GM of an entertainment venue for 10 years. I enjoyed booking and producing shows with many of the 60’s acts I’d grown up with....but never Connie Francis. It would have been cool to have a close encounter of the third kind (apologies to Steven Spielberg for that pun), but her availability (if she was even touring then) never popped up on my radar. *There’s more information and a different perspective about the visit of Connie Francis in the recollections of Airman Terry Brodt in a following story.*

Probably the most notable show was the 1967 tour of the Bob Hope show with Les Brown and his Band of Renown, Barbara McNair, Raquel Welch and Phil Crosby among other.

Bob Hope USO Christmas Show 1967



The graphics above are film clips from the Bob Hope show at Phan Rang AB. The 435th MMS

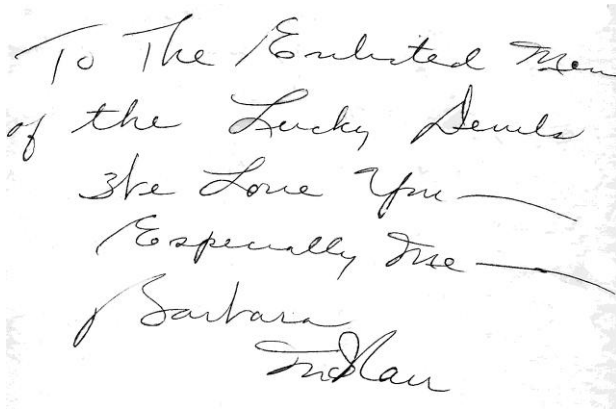
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is holding up a huge banner thanking Bob Hope. Also pictured is Phil Crosby and Barbara McNair along with hundreds of Air Force and Army personnel.

Barbara McNair, the pioneering black singer-actress who gained fame in the 1960s as a nightclub singer and on her TV show was one of the entertainers with the Bob Hope USO Tour that performed in December 1967 at the Happy Valley Theater. A2C **Terry Brodt** got her autograph when she and the Bob Hope cast visited the 614th squadron operations center following the show. She was one beautiful lady with lots of class and personality, said Airman Brodt. She died in 2007 at the age of 72.



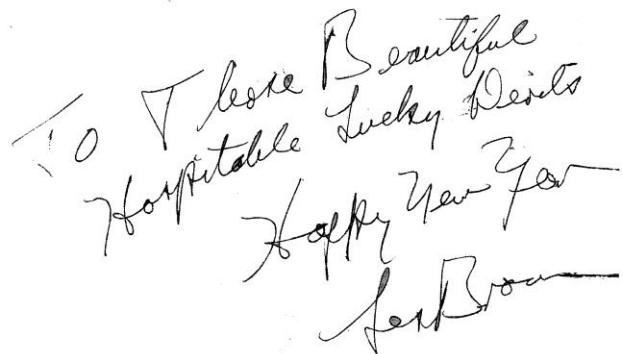
To The Embellished Men
of the Lucky Devils
I Love You —
Especially Joe —
Barbara
McNair



Also on the Bob Hope USO tour was famed band leader, **Les Brown and his band of Renown**. A2C Terry Brodt got Les Brown's autograph when he visited the 614th squadron operations center following the USO show in December 1967.

Les Brown and his band had a BIG hit in the mid-1940's with "Sentimental Journey" which featured a new singer called Doris Day.

He died in 2001 at age 88.



To These Beautiful
Hospitable Lucky Devils
Happy New Year
Les Brown

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A Birthday Serenade For Connie Francis

PHAN RANG, Vietnam (OI)—A crowd of approximately 3,000 Air Force and Army Personnel turned the tables on singer Connie Francis following a show.

It was the petite singer's birthday, and the men serenaded her with "Happy Birthday" after the commander of the 35th Tactical Fighter Wing, Col. James A. Wilson, 49, Glendale, Calif., went on stage to offer birthday greetings and presented the famed vocalist with a wing plaque.

Although the popular entertainer delighted the men with her fathous rendition of "Where the Boys Are," she scored her biggest hit with "God Bless America."

Winner of eight gold records denoting sales of more than a million copies for such songs as "Who's Sorry Now" and "Lip stick on Your Collar," the vivacious entertainer invited the men to join her in singing the patriotic song.

Bleachers were erected to accommodate the overflow crowd which punctuated the show with thunderous applause and whistling. To make sure of seeing the show, some men came to the scene 11 hours ahead of time.

When the electrical system failed in the midst of her songs, Miss Francis took advantage of the lull to step down from the stage and sit with some patients in the first row. She signed autographs for them, and after the show one of the patients gave her his blanket and pillow so she could sit comfortably on the edge of the stage while signing autographs for a crowd of fans for approximately 30 minutes.



Connie Francis meets and poses with pictures of the Phan Rang AB brass. A2C Terry Brodt says that when he met her at the BX she had that same striped scarf on.

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ENTERTAINING

Phan Rang



Upper left photo: Sebastian Cabot visits with troops of the 614th Tactical Fighter Squadron “Lucky Devils”. Photo by Robert Kellington. Lower right: Senator Barry Goldwater, Arizona visits with troops of the 614th TFS. Photo by Robert Kellington. Other photos are performers from the Kirk Minert collection.

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Goes Fishing in China Sea

PHAN RANG - One of the most adventurous rescues in the history of the 35th Tactical Fighter Wing, here occurred recently when Capt. Fred E. Davis, Makanda, Ill., ejected from his F-100 Supersabre over the South China Sea.

Captain Davis, for whom this was the second bailout from a battle-damaged aircraft in recent weeks, ejected a few miles from Phan Thiet City and splashed down near a small fleet of Vietnamese fishing boats.

“We knew,” he later commented, “that there were quite a few Viet Cong sampans in the area. I floated there for a minute, and then one of the boats pulled along side me and motioned for me to come aboard.

“I was scared, but there were so many other boats around that I didn’t figure that I had anything to lose. Once aboard, I tried to tell them that I wanted to go to a nearby destroyer, the USS Robert K. Huntington. I couldn’t make them understand, and from the way they were looking at me, I wasn’t sure that they wanted to understand.

“I took out a smoke flare and lit it, hoping to get the attention of one of the search planes. Finally, one of the forward air controllers saw me.

“My problems still weren’t over. By this time, a number of other boats were beginning to close in on us, and I had a good idea why! About the time I had finished all the prayers I knew, an Army Huey Cobra came over and let loose with a burst of .50 caliber machine-gun fire between us and the other boats.

“Before we could weigh anchor and head for the destroyer, I had to help them pull in their fishing nets. After about 20 minutes of some pretty strenuous work, we got underway to the Huntington.

“A lifeboat met us at the ship, and took me aboard. On the Huntington, I was outfitted in a Navy uniform. The men of the ship were very helpful in getting me back to base.

:First I was taken by Navy chopper to Phan Thiet, and then an O-2 Bird Dog (**Note:** The Bird Dog was an O-1 and the Skymaster was an O-2) aircraft brought me back to Phan Rang.

“Now,” concluded Captain Davis, “I’ll have something to tell my grandchildren about!”

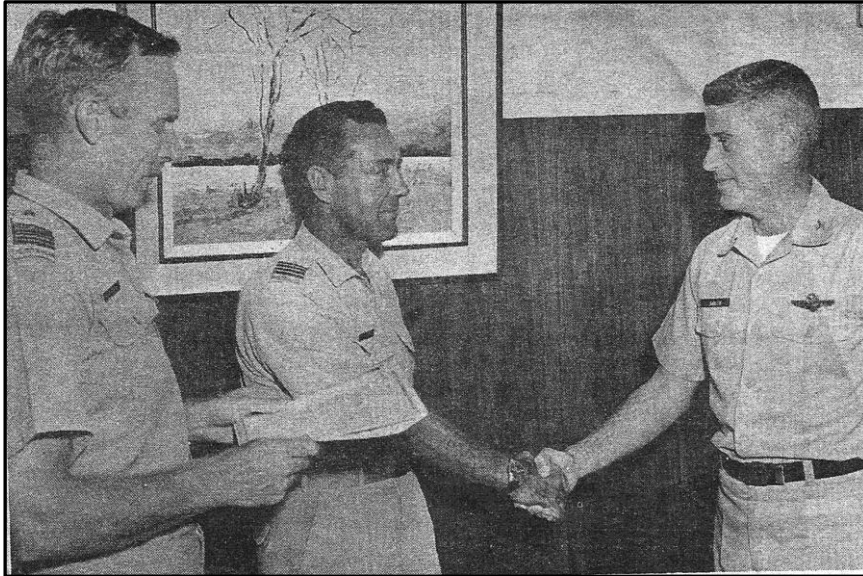
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(Note: A different article about this same story appears in *Phan Rang Newsletter 202* under the title "VC Boats Close In -- Til Strafing Starts".)

WELL DONE - RAAF Security Patrol



Flight Lieutenant *George Foskett* (center), No. 2 Squadron, Royal Australian Air Force, receives congratulations and a letter of commendation from Col. *Frank L. Gailer Jr.*, commander, 35th Tactical Fighter Wing. At left is Wing commander *John Whitehead*, commander No. 2 Squadron, Lieutenant Foskett was cited for his role in planning, directing, and personally leading RAAF security patrols at Phan Rang AB on several occasions when the base was under attack.



From Tom Barden: ...thank the entire staff for me on the outstanding work they do not just for the reunions but all year long and to their supportive wives. I'm sure I speak for many but wanted to ensure you know what a tireless yet commendable job you all do. Kudos to all.

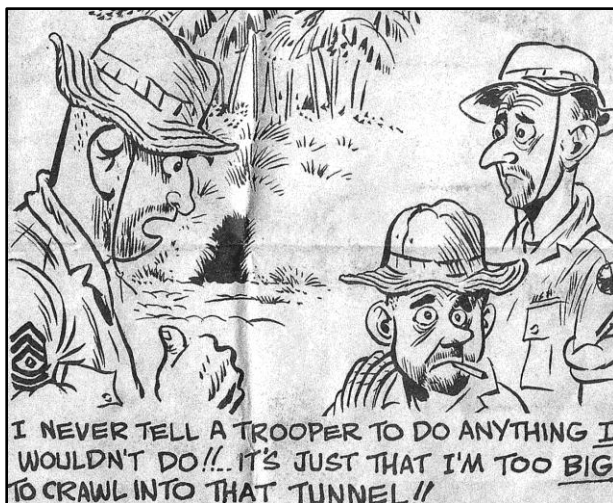
Jim Kucipeck: This was a big story (Disappearing Soldier) locally for weeks. I have friends who

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manned the search parties to find him. It was in the newspapers and TV. It is indeed very close to me here in Tupper Lake. Betsy and I have climbed Scarface Mountain and it is indeed remote. In some places on the climb you have to actually pull one's self up the steep terrain. I have not seen the spot where he died. He did pick a spot where it would be difficult to locate him. Each ANZAC Day Saranac Lake celebrates that special day and remembers him.



Doug's Comments: I hope that you enjoyed this newsletter. 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> and put 'unsubscribe' in subject line.