

Phan Rang AB Newsletter

The History of Phan Rang AB and the stories of those who served there.
"Keeping the memories alive" Newsletter 231

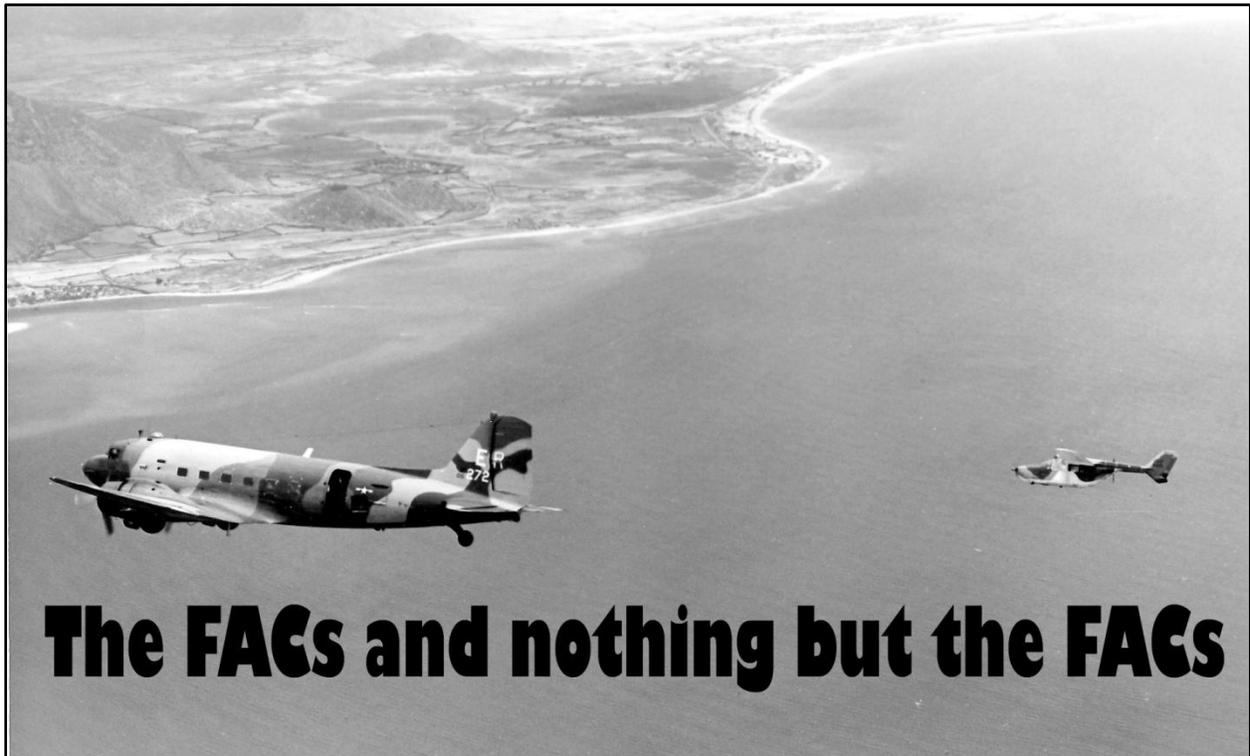
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The FACs and nothing but the FACs

- Tales From Over 'There' - David Robson
- Every 'Litter' Bit Helps - Phillip Nolden

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Doug's Comments



Ode to an Oscar Two

Tail-dragging
Bird Dogs
aptly named
to point the way
ground hugging
flutter-bugging
sparrow-like
between the trees.

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**Hawkish OV-10s
blasting, bursting, bucking, Broncos
blazing guns and smoking dives.**

**But best I recall
and relate to you
my push-me-pull-you**

Oscar Two.

**Nameless, fameless,
elegant but ugly too
its duck-like legs
dangling briefly
before it flew**

**double-buzzing
about its vital task.**

**This ugly duckling
did its job**

well and truly too.

**There were times
when I too**

**had to push and pull,
my Oscar Two**

and never once

**did you let me down
my push-me-pull-you**

Oscar Two

Thank you.

by David Robson

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TALES FROM OVER ‘THERE’



TALES FROM OVER ‘THERE’

Story 1, by David Robson, Flying Officer,

Royal Australian Air Force

FAC-U

or I should say, FAC O-2?

FAC STORY

Introduction

My introduction to Phan Rang was as a novice Forward Air Controller (FAC) at the in-country Theatre Indoctrination School (TIS) - known colloquially as FAC University or FAC-U!

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What was a FAC?

A FAC in Vietnam took the previous roles of observer, artillery director, target marker and air support communicator, to the next level. In addition to the previous roles, the FAC was tasked to actually control delivery of all fire support to troops if air support was involved. Artillery could still be directed by Army units as could helicopter gunships but as soon as tactical air support entered the picture, the FAC became both co-ordinator and controller. The FAC was accountable for the safe and effective delivery of ordnance. He was also accountable for any friendly injuries or damage.

A FAC's daily menu of tasks included visual reconnaissance of a defined **Tactical Area of Responsibility (TAOR)** about 20 miles square. He came to know this area like the back of his hand. He attended a daily briefing to know what friendly troop movements and tactical operations were planned. He knew what air strikes were pre-planned for his area.

He looked for signs of troop movements, fires, digging, vehicle tracks, cut-down trees, structures, rope bridges – anything that had changed since the day before.

He listened on as many as five radios to the infantry, the fire support base (artillery), the

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helicopter fire support teams and Air Cavalry units, the FAC net (the FACs own communications link) and the radar controller for his area. He could call his *Tactical Air Control Party* (TACP) for fighters any time his troops were ambushed. Sometimes he would cover and navigate for a *Light Observation Helicopter* (**LOH** pronounced Loach) or a *Long Range Patrol* (**LRP**) team who would be working deep into enemy territory - although almost any area was enemy territory - there was no ‘front-line’ in Vietnam. He might provide top cover for an armoured convoy, a helicopter medevac (dust-off) or he may direct ground or naval artillery fire. He could map-read to 100 metres or better and often provided navigation assistance and radio relay to the LOHs and LRPs.

But his real value was close air support – directing the fighters in support of friendly troops. He may have to mark targets and control airstrikes less than 100 metres from friendly positions, direct artillery, co-ordinate helicopter fire teams and lay down suppressive minigun fire from a gunship – all at the same time. Ultimately, the FAC was responsible for the safety of his troops on the ground. He carried full responsibility for the accuracy of the strike and for not having the fighters fly into a hill – and some of these guys were only 20 years old!

My Background

I was posted to Vietnam from RAAF Butterworth where I had served as a fighter pilot on Mirage and previously, Sabre aircraft. I was trained and combat ready to go to war as a member of a fighter squadron.



**Mirage fighter -
RAAF Base Butterworth**

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Because our fighter squadron had the role of ground attack as well as air defence, I had attended a Joint Warfare course which introduced me to the traditional British/Australian means of liaising with Army units and understanding more of the ground war. However, we had no introduction the US Army ranks and order of battle, nor the management and control of the air war over Vietnam. This came with the parallel introduction to our particular FAC aircraft at the FAC-U. Mine was the much maligned Oscar-Deuce - or Oscar Duck, if you prefer.



FAC-U Oscars in the revetments at Phan Rang

It was a little like being trained to play cricket as a member of the Australian team then being attached alone to a US baseball team and in the case of the O-2, asked to play left-handed!

In June 1969, I took a RAAF C-130 directly to Phan Rang and was accommodated at the RAAF Officer's Mess with No 2 Squadron personnel.

On my first night there, I came to hear what was to become the familiar warning over the PA system, '**INCOMING**'. I went into the adjacent bunker and discovered that there was a civilian next to me - it was Mr Lance Barnard, the Labor opposition Member for Defence in the

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Australian parliament. He was not happy and asked me how long we were likely to be there. I didn't know of course, and from memory, we were there for a good hour and a half. I later learned that there had been an attempt to sabotage the flight line by intruders carrying satchel charges. There were trying to enter under the cover of the rocket attack but were caught in the wire and shot by the perimeter guards. It was later discovered that one of the 'commandos' was identified as a employee in the Base barber shop!

We shared Phan Rang air base with Aussie Canberras and a squadron of USAF (ANG) F-100 Super Sabres.



F-100 in the revetments at Phan Rang.

The ‘Left-Handed’ O-2

I came to Vietnam with 1,000 hours of fighter flying. Every aircraft I had flown, civil and military, had been operated with a joystick, by the right hand. The throttle, radios, speed brakes etc. were operated by the left. I was also left-handed so I could write notes on a knee-pad on my

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left leg while flying.

To fly the O-2, I had to change to a left-hand operated yoke in an aeroplane with sluggish response (compared to a fighter) and to write with my right hand (a FAC had many occasions where target co-ordinates etc. had to be written on a kneepad or on the side window with a chinagraph pencil). This left/right process was significant. When the mind/body learns motor skills, they become a routine - a habit pattern of muscle movements, pressures and feel. Imagine learning to play golf right-handed and then be told to play with left-handed clubs; this was the O-2. Fortunately, the O-2 was stable and most of our work was from only moderate pitch and bank attitudes - although during the airstrike we were far more adventurous - and even semi-aerobatic!

There was also the known problem of twin-boom aircraft where the control cables to the elevators follow a more complex path from the cockpit. There is inevitably some slack and therefore delayed response to control inputs. The pilot could then over-correct. This was most noticeable in the landing flare. Many O-2s were over-controlled in this way and touched down prematurely on the nosewheel. This was known as ‘wheelbarrowing’ and the nosewheel could collapse - with disastrous consequences. Several O-2s died this way.

**An O-2 that was
‘wheelbarrowed’
to death.**



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Cockpit of the O-2

The O-2 cockpit was ‘busy’ with radios and nav aids but one soon learnt their way around.



The cockpit of the Oscar Deuce

The offset seating was a problem and tended to lead the FAC into left-hand turns for reconnaissance and strike patterns. With steep left bank the FAC could have difficulty seeing his fighter overhead and in addition to the roof window, extra windows were cut into the right hand door and fuselage of the O-2 - but realistically, we were forced to carry out the strikes in left-hand turns - and the enemy knew it!. Even then, the upward view was limited and later models had an extra high-cut left window.

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Note the modified pilot's window with upper curved surface - on this later model O-2A.

Emergency Egress!

We had parachutes but there was no door on that side and the pilot would have to cross the cockpit to the right-hand side to bail out. If the aircraft was out of control, the chance of a successful bail-out was low. We were also generally at 1,500 feet or lower and often amongst high terrain. Any escape from the aircraft would likely result in a low bail-out and possible late deployment of the chute. There was also a rear propeller to think about!

Willy-Pete

The O-2 was an interim solution to an operational need. The competition for a COIN (Counterinsurgency aircraft - the role for which included FAC) was won by the North American OV-10 Bronco but they were late in coming. The USAF hastily called for a modified version of the Cessna 337 Skymaster to fulfill the FAC role. Significant advantages of the O-2 over the O-1 Bird Dog were the additional *willy-petes*, significantly higher cruise speeds and on-target loiter time. Also, the high limiting speed of the take-off flap setting meant very tight turning ability at

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relatively low speeds with reduced risk of stalling.

The 2.75in FFAR (folding fin aerial rocket) was developed for interceptors to shoot down formations of bombers. It was a high velocity, very straight-flying and therefore accurate, unguided rocket which could be fitted with a variety of heads - high explosive, incendiary or white phosphorous (WP - or ‘Willy-Pete’).

For the FAC role, it was USAF policy to fly unarmed and the white phosphorous head was the only head that was fitted to the FAC rockets.



F-89 Scorpion with massive pods of 2.75in FFAR - woe betide the Bisons!

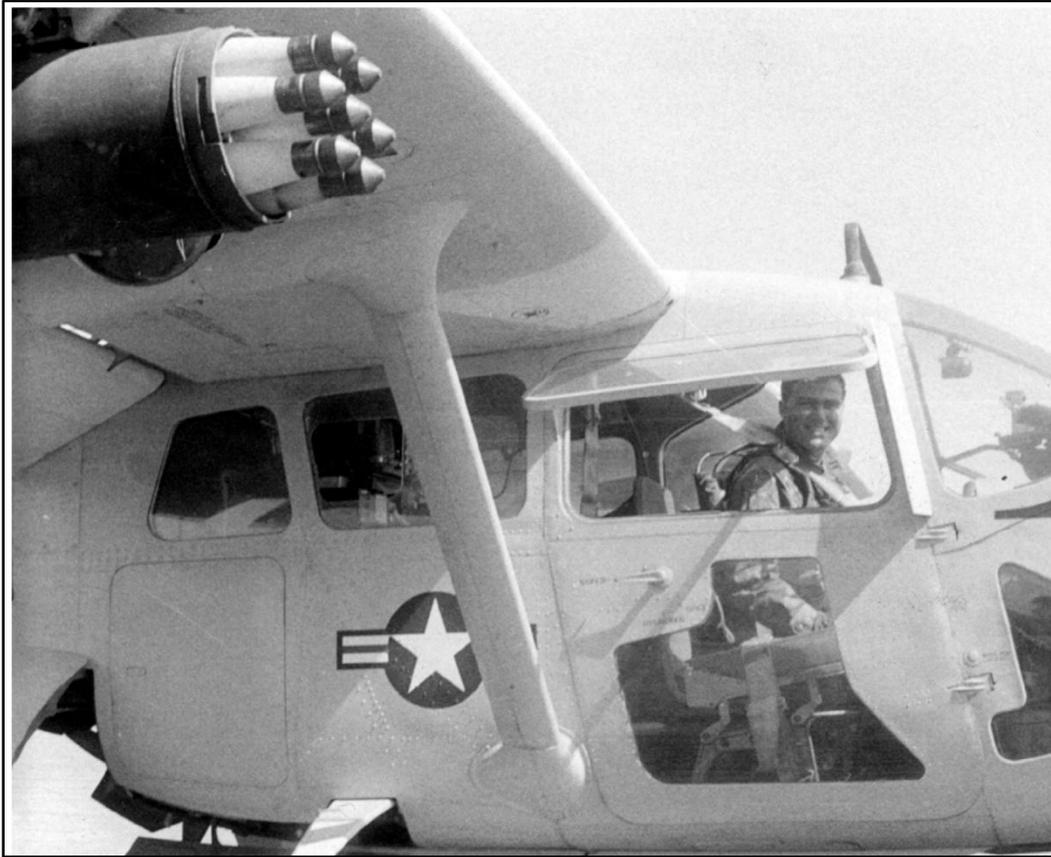


Willy-Petes fired from an O-2

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Armed for action.- a Jade O-2 with full rocket pods. The pilot was Captain Chris Neale USAF (call sign Jade 08) who had retrained from navigator of the RB57F (US Canberra high-altitude reconnaissance version). Chris had over 100 hours above 60,000 feet!

Maps and Charts

Our maps were from the French and followed the international convention of metric units. Map scales were 1:100,000 and 1:50,000.

The maps were aligned to a grid with 100 metres squares, we could map read to tens of metres easily.

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Small area of Phuoc Tuy showing 100m grid squares (Map scale 1:100,000).

Another interesting aspect was that the tactical maps gave elevations in metres. The FAC had the task of converting the target height to feet. We learnt a useful formula - multiply by 3 and add 10 percent of the result, e.g. 500 metres became $1500 + 150 = 1650$ feet.

Directing Artillery Fire

Army artillery support was available at all times. We had the 105mm guns from the NZ team at Nui Dat and the 155mm big guns out of ‘Bearcat’ fire support base to the north-west of our area. Army units also had integral mortar teams. Army artillery was accurate since the firing position was accurately known and the target co-ordinates precisely identified by ground or air parties including the FAC. We would then request a single round to confirm the sighting. When we saw the fall of shot we could correct the fire, left, right, long, short. Then we would approve the artillery to fire a certain number of rounds, ‘five rounds - fire for effect, fire when ready.’ (all guns then blazed).

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Naval Artillery

Because our province bordered the coast we were occasionally tasked to direct naval bombardment. In these instances we carried a US Marine observer who communicated with the vessel. We would visually check the area was clear of air and ground forces and approve the fire. We provided the grid references for the bombardment. In my limited experience, such bombardment was an area weapon and could not be used with precision.

As you may have read in a previous issue of Phan Rang News, a FAC O-2 was shot down while directing naval artillery in Phuoc Tuy. This was two weeks before I was tasked with the same mission.

Conducting an Airstrike

Typically the FAC would be given target co-ordinates and a description of the target (bunkers, cave or troops in contact). The FAC proceeded to the area and contacted the Army unit, the artillery and the DASC who advised the fighters that were assigned and their ETA. The FAC would establish a mental pattern of what and where, the target was located any friendlies and any high terrain. The attack direction would be chosen to align with the line of the closest friendlies and avoiding an attack direction towards rising terrain (if possible).

The FAC could ask the friendlies to pop coloured smoke to establish or confirm exact locations. The FAC would fly a race-track pattern at 1,500 feet initially. The pattern for the O-2 was always a left-hand pattern for maximum field of view.

The fighters would check in and the FAC would give a rendezvous position - a TACAN bearing and distance from a nominated station. The FAC would connect visually with the fighters and they would establish a pattern of their own over the top. The O-2 could actually leave a smoke trail to help the fighters locate it.

As the fighters approached, the FAC would brief them on the sequence of weapons release, attack direction, target elevation and the bearing and distance of friendlies from the target. They would also be told of a safe ejection area, if needed. If the FAC was working with a

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reconnaissance helicopter, artillery or gunships these could be kept in action while the fighters were arriving overhead (with precautions, of course).

When the fighters were established overhead, the area would be cleared of gunships and the artillery withheld. The FAC would then mark the target with a willy-pete rocket and provide any correction to the lead fighter. The FAC would check the fighter was heading to the correct target and would clear the aircraft to release weapons. (Cleared hot or Cleared live).

The second fighter would be given an aim point relative to the blast of the first delivery. And so the FAC made continuous corrections and made further willy pete references as required. After the fighters had dispensed their weapons, they would hold overhead and the FAC provided feedback in the form of a BDA (bomb damage assessment). This could be followed-up by a closer inspection by an Aussie army ‘Possum’ helicopter or ground troops.

This all may sound a laborious process but the absolute emphasis was on protecting and not inadvertently striking friendly troops nor civilians.

GRADUATION

From Phan Rang, I had to report to Saigon (RAAFV) and I flew to Tan Son Nhut in a C123. The flight was memorable. It hopped from airfield to airfield down the East coast and then to Tan Son Nhut. For each arrival, the aircraft arrived overhead and then entered a tight spiral descent to avoid ground fire. I shared the freight compartment with Vietnamese villagers - men women and children. All were violently airsick.

In June 1969, after I returned to Phan Rang, I graduated as a newbie O-2 FAC and was assigned to III Corps and posted to the 19th TASS based at Bien Hoa.

I had a limousine service from Phan Rang to Bien Hoa. I was fortunate to be offered a ride indirectly to Bien Hoa, in a 2 Squadron Canberra which was on a bombing mission to the Mekong Delta. The pilot was Shane Welsh and the navigator, Alan Pearson. We completed the mission and they dropped me at Bien Hoa where I checked in at the 19thTASS headquarters and then headed to the Officers club for a beer. Soon after we were served, there was the

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warning, ‘Incoming’ and we dived to the floor and hid under tables and stools. The club manager came in and told us we had to evacuate to a bunker (here we went again).

I was to fly 240 missions in the O-2 and control 80 air strikes of which 20 were with Magpies.
- but that’s another story.....

PS: I should explain to our allies, the callsigns used by the Aussie units. Canberra bombers from 2 squadron used the call sign, ‘**Magpie**’, the FACs were ‘**Jade**’, the helicopter gunships were ‘**Bushrangers**’ and the army reconnaissance helicopters were ‘**Possums**’.

There were 25 Aussies that served as FAC’s with the Americans during the duration of the program. Beside Flying Officer **David Robson**, flying officer **Bruce Mouatt** and **Chris Mirow**, Flight Lt. **Bruce Wood** and Wing Commander **Barry M. Thomas**.

To read more about the Aussie involvement see Phan Rang Newsletter 126, “*Aussie FAC Takes Training at Phan Rang*”, and Phan Rang Newsletter 129 “*Did a Grand Job - That’s AFAC Aussie Fliers Wind It Up*”.

Also please note that I’ve retained the Aussie spelling to make the article as authentic as possible. Maybe the English can be blamed for the spelling difference, just as they probably are responsible for them driving on a different side of the road than we do, but they are still Awesome Aussies as documented in Phan Rang Newsletter 130.

There are more ‘Oscar-Two’ stories in the works and will be published in future issues of the Phan Rang Newsletter.

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Every Litter Bit Helps

by Phillip Nolden

(Flying a psychological operations (psyops) mission over South Vietnam, an O-2B Super Skymaster drops surrender leaflets as its three 600-watt amplifiers broadcast messages to enemy troops below, encouraging them to give up the fight. The aircraft is from the 14th Special Operations Wing at Nha Trang AB. The wing carries out all Air Force psychological operations in South Vietnam,)



Phillip Nolden as an American Airlines Captain.

I was an O-2B pilot in the 9th SOS at Phan Rang from 31 May 1971 until the base closed and the 9th Special Operations Squadron moved to Tan Son Nhut. For the most part it was boring, thankfully, but at times it could be real sporty, especially since we also had an FOL at Ubon in Thailand and we'd fly the trail at night over in Laos all blacked out. I rotated back to the states on 25 February 1972, after we had turned the psyops mission over to the VNAF and the 9th SOS was disbanded.

Usually we didn't get shot at too much, but there was always the occasional bored soldier, ARVN or VC, who would take a pot shot at us. The brass wanted us to work at 2,000 ft AGL (Above Ground

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Level), which gave us an intelligible footprint of one square mile on the ground, but that made you an ideal target, so (in country, anyway) we (the O-2's – not the C-47 in the squadron) operated down on the tree tops so that most of the holes were in the tail, rather than in the fuselage – by the time they could acquire you and fire, they either hit the tail or missed you altogether.

We had no armor plating. We flew standard Cessna Skymasters with a big magnesium cone speaker. Since we didn't have a parachute, we wore headsets rather than helmets and hung our survival vest over the back of our seat. We were the “casual” O-2B pilots, unlike the FACS in the O-2A model, who wore chutes and ballistic helmets.



Lt. Jim Anderson poses for a picture next to his aircraft at an ARVN fire base, somewhere in the Central Highlands of Vietnam, where he landed to refuel, Photo by Phillip Nolden.



Refueling at a forward operations location somewhere in the central highlands. Photo by Phillip Nolden.

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When I first got there we carried M-16's along with a .38 Smith and Wesson Model 10 sidearm. One of our intrepid pilots was over in the Tuy Hoa valley shooting at enemy water buffalo one day, when he hit some turbulence and shot off his own left wingtip. The squadron CO locked up the M-16's and all we had left was the .38. I quit carrying it, since it was useless. I knew I couldn't win the war with only a .38 and thought that if I were shot down I didn't want to be tempted to use it, and get hacked to death by my target's buddies. Somebody ratted me out; the CO called me into his office, and gave me a direct order to carry the sidearm. I said, “Yes sir”, but I carried it unloaded and without any ammo for the rest of my tour.



My U.S. Army liaison officer, Capt. Miller, at Phan Rang who provided our targeting. In the background is one of our bunkers where we were supposed to go in case of rocket attacks, but none of us ever went in there, not matter what; the rumor was that there were cobras in there and that if one took a direct hit, it would probably collapse on top of us. Photo by Phillip Nolden.

As for the Snoopy callsign, I suppose it had to do with the squadron patch, below:



This was our squadron patch. That's a bullhorn that Snoopy has in his right hand, representing the Psychological warfare missions while he flies his dog house with his left paw. Image by Phillip Nolden.

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This group photo of the 9th Special Operations Squadron at Phan Rang AB was made prior to it moving to Tan Son Nhut. Phil Nolden back row just to the right of center, in a flight suit with the soup-bowl haircut and a scowl on his face. Photo by Phillip Nolden.

Phil shared an interesting story about one of his passengers, Captain Kang, the commander of the Republic of Korea (ROK) detachment at Phan Rang. First of all let me give you a little background. I was 6' 3" (I'm losing altitude in old age) and I had to look up at him - he must have been 6' 4' or 6' 5". His troops made occasional sweeps outside the wire and they had a connection to the ROK artillery units.

They also made me ashamed to see them running the perimeter road in formation with full gear and rifles many mornings, as I staggered up to the club for breakfast. Kang loved to fly and I flew him many times. He'd have his topographical maps laid out on his lap and he would tell me where to go. He knew where all the ROK artillery units were and when they were firing.

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One day he directed me to an area and I suddenly saw artillery shells going off directly ahead and close to us. I racked the O-2 into a hard left turn, but Kang protested to me, "No, my people no fire today." I answered, "We'll I don't know about that, but we're sure as hell not going through there." I think the ROK unit left the base before we finally pulled out of Phan Rang.

When they turned Phan Rang over to the VNAF, we moved the 9th SOS to Tan Son Nhut, and finally shut the whole thing down when they transferred our aircraft to the Vietnam Air Force (VNAF). The VNAF ripped out the amplifiers and speakers and used our O-2's for “VIP” transport. What a total waste - just like the entire war.

About the author: Phillip Nolden had several notable classmates in his pilot training at Reese AFB, Texas, class 70-03 in 1969; **Lee Howard** and **Joseph Stanley Smith**. There's a heartwarming reunion story about Lee and his crew chief in Vietnam. The story starts with Lee sending **Charlie Cafarelli** an e-mail in 2008 after he had seen something he had written on a web site, which really surprised Lee because he thought he had died in a crash of a Bookie Bird that was enroute to Cam Rahn Bay. They eventually got together for a reunion in Gila Bend, Arizona. In March of 1971, Lee was the monthly high flier for the 615th Tactical Fighter Squadron where he flew 42 missions for a total of 66.9 combat flying hours helping the 35th TFW achieve a record bonanza month. His other classmate Joseph Smith flying his F-100D was shot down and was killed during a strafing run 56KM North-Northwest of Kampong, Cambodia.

After Vietnam, Phil moved on to fly C-141 Starlifters all over the northern hemisphere (including the middle-east) out of Dover AFB, Delaware, and after military service he flew for American Airlines until retirement. Both Phil and his wife Sherrie worked for American Airlines in Fort Worth, Texas, but they lived in St. Petersburg, Florida and their long-distant commute, 900 miles, made the newspapers in their hometown. Phil will have several more stories in upcoming issues of the Phan Rang Newsletter.

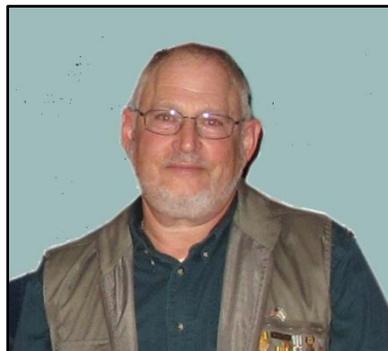
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It Happened in Georgia

by Ken Miller



Ken Miller

Here in Savannah, Georgia I had the chance to meet a South Vietnamese family who has made Savannah, and the USA, their home. When I spoke to the father I mentioned that I had been at Phan Rang 1969-1970.

The father then introduced me to his father who told me that he had been stationed at Phan Rang, in the South Vietnamese Air Force, at the same time as I was there.

Because I had Covid-19 and I also had Agent Orange Lung Cancer, I was quarantined for 16 months. After my quarantine ended, I stopped at their shop to say hello and to order something. I was told that the Grandfather had died of Lung Cancer the past year. I immediately thought that his, as well as mine, was an Agent Orange caused issue.

The Republic of Vietnam soldiers had no VA to treat them, even though he lived in the USA and had fought right alongside us.

I returned to the store and gave the Grandson one of our Phan Rang Challenge Coins, my last one. I explained it, showing the Grandson the 4 country flags of those who were stationed at Phan Rang Air Base and I told him **"Never forget, your Grandfather was a hero"**.

His face shone.



Doug's Comments: *The photo on the left is Douglas Severt sitting in a fully functional and restored Skymaster at Wiley Post Airport, Oklahoma City. I was hoping to get a ride in one and I was thinking of attaching my GoPro Camera to a strut to take in-flight pictures. Fortunately the stories keep coming for which I'm grateful. So many think that no one*

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would be interested in what they had to say, I always say that there will always be someone out there that appreciates and enjoys what you have to say. So with that said please write your experiences down and send to me so that your unique experiences can be shared with the Phan Rang community and saved for posterity.

I hope that you enjoyed this newsletter. This newsletter was compiled by Douglas Severt with help from so many wonderful people and all graphics by Douglas Severt. To see a list of all previous newsletters click [here](#). If you have an address change, also please notify me of the change. To unsubscribe to Phan Rang News, mailto: dougsevert@cox.net and put *'unsubscribe'* in subject line.