

Phan Rang AB Newsletter

The History of Phan Rang AB and the stories of those who served there.
"Keeping the memories alive" Newsletter 240

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1LT JAMES KILPATRICK

TOP GUN

I was a little different in Viet Nam as my aviation goal was always to be an airline pilot. In Air Force pilot training, I fell in love with the Tom Cruise-Top Gun thing before anyone knew what it was. It was cool and flying fighters was where I wanted to be.

I was right at home flying the F-100 in Viet Nam but did not lose my goal of flying with the airlines.

One usually opportunity occupied during his assignment with the 35th Tactical Fighter Wing he was one of a few pilots that had the privilege of exchanging roles with aviators from the U.S.S. Hancock, a Navy aircraft carrier which was on station in the Gulf of Tonkin. He was part of a pilot exchange between the Air Force and the Navy. The operation began when Maj. **Frederick R. Nordin**, 35th TFW flight scheduling officer, received a call from, the Navy inviting the 35th

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TFW to participate in the pilot swap program.



1Lt. James Kilpatrick, Phan Rang AB.

There were two swaps of three pilots from each service on each exchange. A total of six Air Force pilots were to go to the Hancock and a like number of Navy aviators were to come to Phan Rang AB for a few days.

The first exchange saw Air Force Capt. **Dennis C. Hermerding** of the wing's 8th Special Operations Sq. at Bien Hoa AB switch, with Navy Lt. Cmdr. **Boyd F. Repsher** of the Hancock; 1st Lt. **Frederick L. Tomlins** of the 614th Tactical Fighter Sq swapped with Navy Lt. **Charles W. Singlet**; and 1st Lt. **James F. Kilpatrick** with the 615th TFS traded with Lt. (j.g.) **Gerald D. Tucker**.

The Navy men were shown around the base, lived with their host squadron, and were able to fly on a number of actual combat missions in the rear seat of the wing's F-100 Super Sabres.

The Air Force fighter, pilots were flown aboard the Hancock, an experience in itself, and quickly fitted into the swing (roll and pitch) of carrier life. The carrier operates in an area off the Republic of Vietnam coast in the South China Sea commonly called Yankee Station. There are no two-seat fighter aircraft aboard the U.S.S. Hancock so the Air Force men were not able to fly on an actual mission, but they were 'given a grand tour of the ship and saw how, the air war is run, "Navy style."

Tomlins said; "We, made, what appeared to be a kamikazi run on the carrier when we landed. We came in about 15 feet off the, deck. The landing officer told us to kill the engines, and we just fell the rest of the way." The lieutenant was also impressed by the Navy's careful aiming and precise coordination when moving a number, of aircraft on such a small deck.

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After the initial groups returned to their own squadron the second group traded places for another three-day swap. The second phase traded Capt. **Robert S. Pahl**, 352nd TFS, with Lt. (j.g.) **D. A. Foye**: 1st Lt. **Larry D. Bruce**, 612th TFS, with Lt **Jeff, R, Woodfield** and 1st Lt. **Sanders L. Avery**, 615th TFS with Lt. **J. R. Carlson**.

Some observation that Kirkpatrick observed while aboard the carrier was that it has only one air wing on it. In that wing are two fighter squadrons and three attack squadrons flying F8 Crusader and A4 Skyhawk aircraft. The sailors have an eight-month, tour to Southeast Asia, rotating three weeks on-station and about a week off in port. A pilot usually can count on two tours in a four-year hitch.

The officers' quarters are a bit smaller than the ones at Phan Rang AB but the total living conditions are about, equal. There aren't too many, recreational, facilities available on ship and they have an inhibited night life compared to Phan Rang because alcoholic beverages are not allowed on-board. The fighter pilots practically live in the squadron ready room, they even show movies there, and the average enlisted man works 12 to 14 hours a day.

The enlisted men live in 70-to-80-man, open compartments. There are no wall lockers for them, only a small box under their bunk.

Returning to the states I had a DOS and the Air Force decided to punish **Charlie Sublett** (he wanted to go to law school) and me and send us to fly T-29's at Mather AFB, Ca.

Turned out great for me, as I built up time and the T-29 turned out to be an asset for the Air Guard. Palace Chase came out 9 months after we got back from Nam and the Louisiana Air National Guard had F-100's and just got a T-29 and they did not know how to start it. They gave me a full-time air guard position running the T-29 program and getting requalified in the F-100. This also opened the door for the airlines and in March, 1973, I was hired by American Airlines. I had a wonderful career there and flew with them for 34 years.

I was a Check Airman on the B-767 instructing our pilots on flying to South America and Europe and retired in 2006 after flying the B-777 to Tokyo and London. I still loved the fighters and was

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able to combine my fighter love by flying the F-100 with the ANG for 6 years and then the Reserves flying the F-105 for four more years for a total of 12 years in the fighter business.



At my 20-year high school reunion I was “reunited” with my high school girl friend, Bev. We were married two years later and have been married for 35 years. We have four daughters, and three granddaughters. In 1985 AA opened a pilot base in Raleigh, North Carolina, and having grown up in NC we decided to move and make the girls Tarheels. That worked and three live in Raleigh and one in Asheville, NC.

After retiring from AA, I instructed in the Eclipse Jet for 14 years. I also formed the **Bandit Flight Team** flying formation fly over’s for over 50 sports and civic events each year. Some of our events are NASCAR, NC State, Clemson, Duke, Wake Forest and Carolina Panthers football games. Two things I thought I would never do again were fly a single pilot jet and fly formation. There I was at 41,000 ft. in a single pilot Eclipse and the next day leading a formation over a football game---Life is good.

Bandits to fly over stadium for HHS homecoming

September 2021 Jim Kilpatrick brought his Bandit team flyover to Main Street for the first time last year because of a local connection. A 1964 graduate of Hendersonville High School, he was a classmate of Hall Waddell, a local business man and who also covered the cost for the team to come to Hendersonville North Carolina.



Jim Kilpatrick is a graduate of Western Carolina University; Kilpatrick joined the Air Force and flew 257 missions in the F-100 Super

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Saber in Vietnam, earning two Distinguished Flying Cross Medals, 13 Air Medals and the Vietnam Cross of Gallantry. He flew for American Airlines for 34 years in the U.S., South America, Europe and the Far East, retiring in 2006 from the cockpit of a Boeing 777. He and his wife, Beverly, have lived for more than 30 years in Cary, where they raised their four daughters.



Jim Kilpatrick, the founder of the Bandit Flight Team.

The Bandit Flight Team, which Kilpatrick formed in 2009, makes about 40 flights a year over stadiums, festivals and charity events, including N.C. State’s home football games, NASCAR races, Raleigh’s Christmas parade and services honoring military veterans. The organization has grown to 10 planes and seven ground controllers.

Kilpatrick’s Hendersonville connection is resulting in a treat for the Bearcat nation. “I’m being inducted into the Hendersonville High School Hall of Fame so I brought the Bandit Team with me,” Kilpatrick said.

The six pilots will take off from Asheville, reaching Dietz Field as the national anthem plays just before kickoff of the Bearcats’ homecoming game.

“We give ourselves a 4-second window to hit ‘home of the brave,’” he said.

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THE VUNG TAU FERRY

By Roger Lambert

5TH BATTALION, THE ROYAL AUSTRALIAN REGIMENT (5 RAR) - HOMECOMING – HMAS SYDNEY III AKA “THE VUNG TAU FERRY” – FEBRUARY 1970

History of HMAS Sydney III

1943/1944. The keel of HMS Terrible, the ship that would later become HMAS Sydney III, was laid at Devonport Dockyard, United Kingdom on 19 April 1943. She was launched on 30 September 1944 and was one of six Majestic Class light aircraft carriers whose construction was suspended following the end of World War II.

1947. The Commonwealth Government of Australia decided to acquire two of the Majestic Class for the Royal Australian Navy (RAN). Work consequently resumed on HMS Terrible which was to be the first 'flat top' aircraft carrier operated by the RAN.

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1948. HMS Terrible was handed over to Australia during a ceremony at Devonport on 16 December 1948 at which time she was renamed HMAS Sydney III. The carrier was subsequently accepted into service in the RAN on 5 February 1949.

1949. HMAS Sydney III sailed from the United Kingdom 12 February 1949 to begin working up exercises. Following a period of R&R and maintenance, “Sydney” sailed from Garden Island on 25 July to begin several months of exercising in the Tasman Sea. Daylight operations, night time operations as well as launching and recovering aircraft in varying sea states and weather conditions were a necessary part of ensuring that the RAN's new carrier was prepared future operations. This pattern of exercises continued throughout the remainder of 1949 and into 1950.

1950. On 7 June 1950 “Sydney” steamed out of her home port bound for England to embark two further RAN air squadrons, 808 Squadron (Sea Furies) and 817 Squadron (Fireflies). Between August and October “Sydney” conducted working up exercises before sailing from Portsmouth on 26 October for the return voyage to Australia. She arrived in Sydney on 8 December 1950 in time for Christmas leave.

1951. From January to August 1951, “Sydney” conducted further flying exercises and participated in war games in the eastern Australian exercise area.

The British Admiralty requested that Australia give consideration to sending the aircraft carrier to the Korean theatre of operations to relieve the Royal Navy carrier HMS “Glory” which was in need of crew rest and maintenance. Australia would be the third nation to provide an aircraft carrier for Korean War service. Cabinet subsequently approved the request to send Sydney on 11 May 1951.

“Sydney” began her first patrol of the Korean War on 4 October 1951 in the western theatre, transferring four days later to the east coast for special operations on 10/11 October 1951. Operations continued until 25 January 1952, the last day of the carrier’s participation in the Korean War. During the period of 17 to 25 January a total of 293 sorties were flown including one day on convoy escort and two days when weather conditions prevented flying. On 26 January 1953, screened by the destroyer HMAS “Tobruk”, the ship sailed for Australia.

1955 to 1957. In April 1955, “Sydney” was redesignated the fleet training ship. In that role, she was host to numerous drafts of Royal Australian Naval Reserve National Servicemen who joined the carrier to complete the seagoing component of their training. Drafts of engineering sailors were also embarked and training cruises saw “Sydney” visit a variety of Australian, New Zealand and South East Asian ports between April 1955 and December 1957.

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1958 to 1962. *Sydney* remained in commission until 30 May 1958 at which time she was paid off into Special Reserve in Sydney after steaming 315,958 miles since commissioning. Between May 1958 and March 1962, HMAS *Sydney* was berthed at Athol Bight near Bradleys Head, Sydney Harbour where she was maintained in a reserve state by a small RAN care and maintenance party. During that time, a proposal was made for the ship to be reactivated as a base ship for the 16th Minesweeping Squadron. However, a feasibility study was to prove that proposal impractical.

While the RAN no longer had a purely naval use for “*Sydney*”, the Australian Army expressed a view that in the event of either a limited war, or the need to counter insurgency in Southeast Asia, the former aircraft carrier would be of enormous value in the movement of not only troops but also vehicles, ammunition and other stores and equipment. Strategic airlift capabilities at that time were insufficient to move even a small sized army battle group and the only serious option was a sea lift. The Defence Committee deliberated on the proposal and, accepting that the movement of troops and equipment could not be accomplished by air, recommended that “*Sydney*” be brought back into service. Both the Minister for Defence and the Prime Minister approved the recommendation and the carrier was consequently taken out of reserve, refitted and reactivated as a fast troop transport, to be maintained at seven days' notice for sea.



HMAS *Sydney* undergoing refitting alongside at Garden Island Naval Base, Sydney (RAN)

“*Sydney*” recommissioned in her new role on 7 March 1962 but remained in refit for the rest of the year and into 1963.

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1964. In early 1964, HMAS Sydney III underwent a further, brief refit in Captain Cook Dock (a dry dock) at Garden Island, Sydney. On 6 April 1964, orders were received to prepare HMAS Sydney, now a fast troop carrier, to transport troops, equipment and aid to Malaysia as part of the Australian Army’s commitment to Confrontation.

“The Vung Tau Ferry”

1965. On 29 April 1965, a decision was made by the Australian Government to commit an infantry battalion to serve in South Vietnam. HMAS Sydney was subsequently ordered to make preparations to transport the 1st Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment (1RAR) to Vung Tau.

1966. On 8 March 1966, the then Prime Minister, Harold Holt, announced that Australia’s military commitment to Vietnam was to increase to a force of approximately 4,500 men.



HMAS Sydney III unloading in Vung Tau harbour in 1969 (RAN)

This force became known as the 1st Australian Task force (1ATF) and was based in Nui Dat, Phuoc Tuy Province.

During May and June 1966, HMAS “Sydney” was an integral part of Operation ‘Hardihood’, the code name for the deployment of 5 RAR and 6 RAR to Vietnam. Two voyages were completed in support of HARDIHOOD and HMAS “Melbourne”, the RAN’s aircraft carrier, already on deployment in connection with the Far East Strategic Reserve, was again tasked as an escort.

1967/1968. With Australian ground forces now well established in Vietnam, “Sydney” began a regular pattern of disembarking one battalion at Vung Tau and back loading another for the return passage to Australia. Her escort had by then been reduced to a single ship.

The Fast Troop Carrier’s turnaround times in Vung Tau received a boost in 1967 when she was equipped with six LCM Mk 6 landing craft. Three each were secured outboard on her port and starboard sides below the aft section of the flight deck. This added capability enabled a reduction in unloading times to an impressive six hours or less. This astounded United States Army port authorities, as it routinely took merchant ships carrying a similar load of motor vehicles up to two weeks to discharge their cargos in Vung Tau.

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1969/1970. HMAS Sydney III undertook three voyages to Vietnam in 1967, four in 1968, three in 1969 and two in 1970. Her busiest year, however, was 1971 when she deployed to Vietnam on six occasions. It’s not hard to understand why the fast troop carrier became known colloquially as “The Vung Tau Ferry”.

While at anchor in Vung Tau, self-protective measures, collectively known as Operation ‘Stabledoor’, were employed by Australian and US ships. These measures provided a level of protection against the threat of waterborne attack. The RAN’s well established Operation ‘Awkward’ routines provided an extra layer of protection against enemy sappers; this protection included the posting of armed upper deck sentries, additional lookouts, waterborne patrols and sweeps of the hull and anchor cables by ship's diving teams. Underwater scare charges were also employed as a deterrent against enemy swimmers.

By late 1971 the withdrawal of Australian forces from Vietnam had begun and for HMAS Sydney III, the focus shifted from rotating infantry battalions to bringing them home. In Vung Tau, on 8 December 1971, Sydney embarked 4 RAR, the final Battalion group, together with 104 Field Battery (Artillery) and 9 Squadron RAAF with its 16 Iroquois helicopters.

1972. Australia’s combat role in South Vietnam ceased in March 1972 when “The Vung Tau Ferry” brought home the last combat elements. One final visit to Vung Tau was made in November 1972, when Sydney delivered a cargo of defence aid for Vietnam and Cambodia. Leaving Vung Tau on 24 November, she set course for Hong Kong before returning to Australia.

Summary. In summary, the “The Vung Tau Ferry”, between 1965 and 1972, undertook 24 voyages to Vietnam amounting to 25 operational visits to Vung Tau. The fast troop carrier transported 16,094 troops, 5,753 deadweight tons of cargo and 2,375 vehicles during that time. Quite an achievement for a vessel that the RAN had no real use for continued naval operations, either as an aircraft carrier or training ship.

1973. On 20 July 1973, the ship’s company was informed that it had been decided to pay off Sydney instead of proceeding with a planned refit. On 12 November 1973, the ship was decommissioned, by which time she had steamed 395,591 miles as a fast troop transport. Since first commissioning in 1948 she had steamed 711,549 miles.

1975. Stripped of all useful fittings, “The Vung Tau Ferry” returned to Athol Bight where she languished until sold for scrap to the Dongkuk Steel Mill Company Limited of Seoul, South Korea, on 28 October 1975. The former aircraft carrier and fast troop transport left Sydney under tow on 23 December 1975.

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HMAS Sydney III 'The Vung Tau Ferry' mothballed in Athol Bight, Sydney, 1975



HMAS Sydney III under tow to Korea, December 1975 (RAN)

A sad end for a proud ship that had served Australia very well throughout the Korean and Vietnam War conflicts.

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5 RAR

1969/1970. The 5 RAR Advance Party flew out of Australia in January 1969 (*see Phan Rang News #165 for the author’s article*). The main body of 5 RAR troops departed Australia from Sydney, New South Wales aboard HMAS Sydney on 3 February 1969 and arrived at Vung Tau on 16 February 1969. The Battalion’s final operation in Vietnam, Operation ‘Bondi 1 and 2’ was conducted over the period 27 December to 16 February 1970; the operation involved a cordon and search of the hamlets of Duc Trung and Binh Ba.

At the conclusion of Operation ‘Bondi’, preparations began for the Battalion’s return to Australia in less than a fortnight’s time. Following the arrival of the main body of 7 RAR on 27 February 1970 to relieve 5 RAR, the ‘Tiger Battalion’ departed Vung Tau that same day, bound for Australia. While some key personnel had flown home, the bulk of the Battalion embarked on ‘The Vung Tau Ferry’ III for the sea voyage home.

Troops boarded LCM Mk 6 Landing Craft to be ferried out to the ship. Individual numbers were displayed on cards tucked into the puggaree (1) of the slouch hat; these were used to check off personnel as they boarded. As may be seen in the following image, the anticipation of leaving the war zone is plain to see after 12 months of combat operations.



**Charlie
Company troops
about to embark
for the voyage
home (author
arrowed) 27
February 1970**

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We Platoon Commanders were accommodated in four to a room cabins off the Quarterdeck at the stern of the ship. This was considered pure luxury after the tented and sandbagged sleeping quarters at Nui Dat.



The Quarterdeck

The troops were accommodated on the lower decks and were allocated hammocks for their sleeping arrangements.



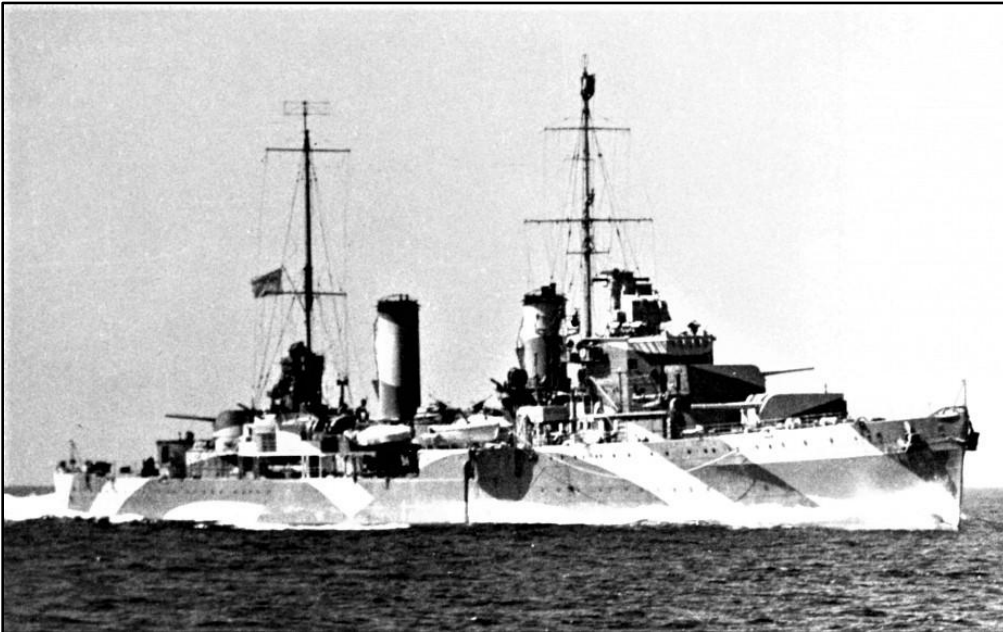
Typical hammock sleeping accommodation

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The route home from Vung Tau was through the South China Sea and into the Indian Ocean via the Sunda Strait. As a mark of respect, HMAS Sydney hove to in the vicinity of the wrecks of HMAS Perth and the USS Houston which were sunk by the Japanese during WWII. Wreaths were dropped into the sea and a minute’s silence was observed by crew members and the 5 RAR troops.



HMAS Perth in her wartime camouflage



USS Houston (CL-81)

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Following the remembrance ceremony, HMAS Sydney III got under way once again and headed into the Indian Ocean bound for Western Australia.

Life aboard was very relaxed compared with the strict routine of Nui Dat. As officers, we did take turns as Duty Officer to accompany our naval equivalent on rounds of the ship but otherwise, we were allowed to relax and unwind after the rigours of our tour of duty. The Navy treated us extremely well with three square meals a day and access to the Messes for drinks and bar snacks. We were even treated, as officers, to barbecues on the Quarterdeck.

The troops had access to the flight deck as well as volleyball games in the lift well to help pass the time and literally, to unwind. Much time was spent just relaxing and sun basking.

Enroute to Fremantle, Perth, Western Australia, HMAS Sydney III was refuelled by HMAS Supply, the fleet oiler, along with our escort ship, HMAS Yarra III.



L to R: HMAS Yarra III, HMAS Supply and HMAS Sydney III (RAN)

After the crossing of the Indian Ocean, HMAS Sydney III berthed in Fremantle, Western Australia. This enabled the Western Australian soldiers to disembark before we headed for Sydney, New South Wales. It also enabled members of Australian Customs staff to board and to go through the vessel before it reached Sydney.

However, our trip was interrupted as we dropped anchor in Twofold Bay in Southern New South Wales to ‘paint ship’ as the Navy referred to it. This literally meant what was implied

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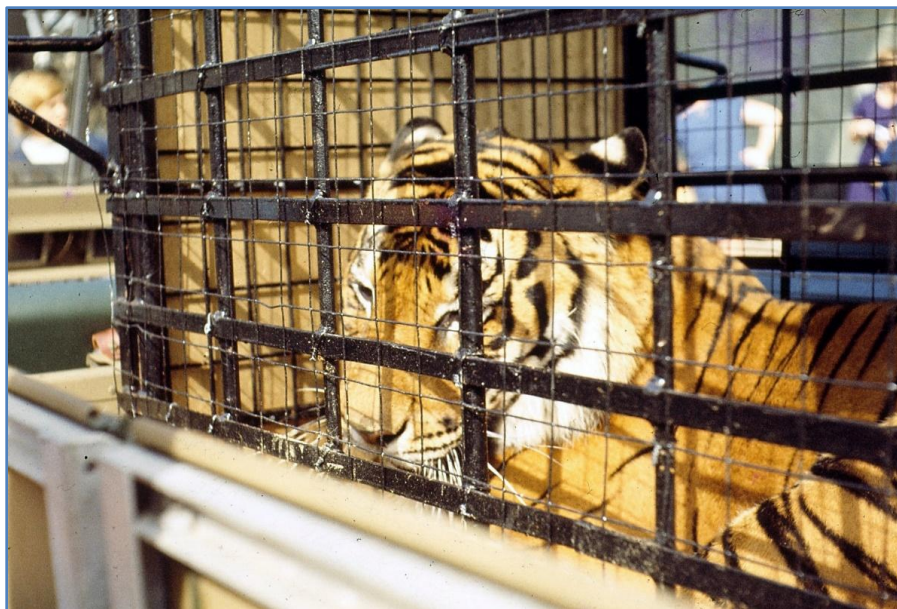
as ratings were lowered over the side and the starboard hull was given a fresh coat of paint ahead of our scheduled docking at Garden Island, Sydney. Why the starboard side? This was the side that would be berthed alongside the Garden Island Naval Dockyard.

With the Customs staff aboard, the opportunity was taken by some members to dispose of ‘contraband’ over the side. I suspect to this day, there will be illegal souvenirs such as weapons as other ill-gotten goods still on the seabed in of Twofold Bay where they were dumped some 51 years ago.

Finally, after two days, we got underway once more, heading for our final destination at Garden Island, Sydney Harbour, New South Wales.

On the morning of 10 March 1970, as we came through Sydney Heads, we assembled on the flight deck dressed in freshly starched Jungle Greens, polished boots, campaign ribbons and the venerable Australian Slouch Hat. After what seemed an eternity, we finally docked at Garden Island, Woolloomooloo (Sydney Suburb where the Naval base is situated) and were greeted by a large throng of family members, partners and girlfriends.

And of course, the Battalion mascot, Quintus, was also there to greet us and welcome us home. Quintus’ home was Taronga Zoo on Sydney’s North Shore.



Quintus, the tiger mascot of 5 RAR – 10 March 1970 (image by Mark Lambert)

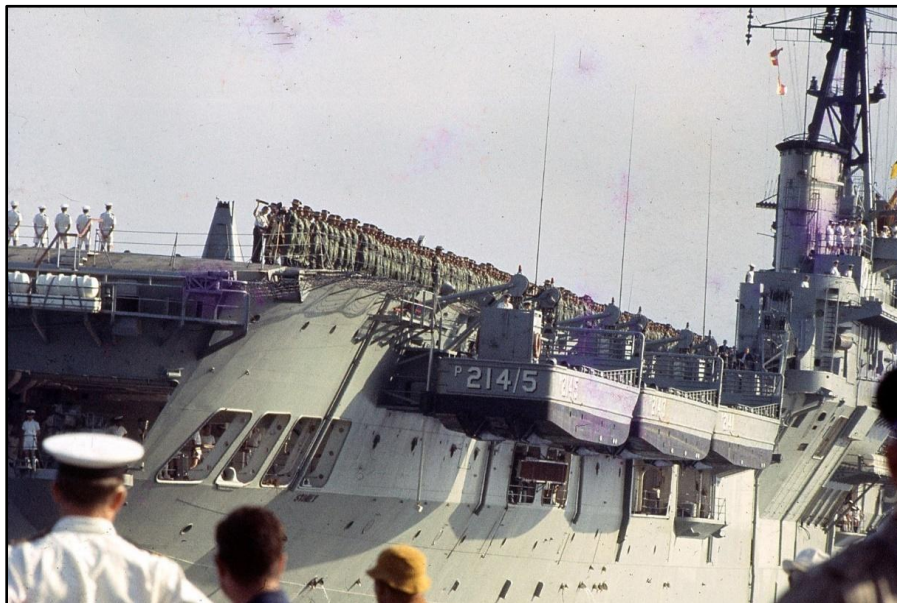
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**Almost home: HMAS Sydney III being berthed at garden Island, 10 March 1970
(image by my brother Mark Lambert)**



**Not quite there: HMAS Sydney III berthing at Garden Island, 10 March 1970 (image by my
brother Mark Lambert).**

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The battalion officers were lined up towards the stern and to our right, the troops were lined up towards the bridge and island, and forward to the bow.

This is a close-up of some of the officers:



Some of the Battalion officers; L to R; MAJ Fred Spry, Battalion 2IC, MAJ Reg Sutton, MAJ Ray Harring, 2LT Pat Clague, author, CAPT Laurie Ganter, CAPT David Wilkins, CAPT Bill Tittle and CAPT Terry Southwell – 10 March 1970 (image by my brother Mark Lambert).

On disembarkation, we were allowed time to spend with family and friends before forming up for our Welcome Home Parade through the streets of Sydney. Readers may have read articles on how badly some returning Vietnam veterans were treated but we didn't experience any negativity at all during our march. The march route took us from Woolloomooloo up to George Street through the centre of the city's Central Business District, past the Sydney Town Hall where the salute was taken and then on to Hyde Park adjacent to the War Memorial.

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Beginning of our Welcome Home Parade from Woolloomooloo; the Battalion leading (the tail end of the troops are seen here), followed by the 2nd Military District Band and a Royal Australian Air Force contingent (image by my brother Mark Lambert).

Following the parade, we were again given the opportunity to catch up with friends and family before we were transported to Holsworthy Army Barracks in Western Sydney to undertake administrative procedures before proceeding on well-earned recreation leave.

Overall, the RAN looked after us extremely well. There were no complaints about their service. A great example of Inter-Service cooperation to say the least.

LTCOL (Rtd) R.A. Lambert (Platoon Commander, 9 Platoon, Charlie Company, 5 RAR, 1969-70)

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Note:

Air support from the 35th Tactical Fighter Wing (USAF) and No. 2 Squadron (RAAF) stationed at Phan Rang AB is the connection to 5 Royal Australian Regiment. Phan Rang Newsletter 186 “Blondes, Bombs and Bunkers and Newsletter 187 “Magpie 31 and the final chapter in Newsletter 188 “Magpie 31” Part 3 very eloquently tells the story of the ground troops meeting up with air support 50 years later. It’s rare that this kind of reunion could ever take place, but with the dogged research persistence of Bob Howe it was made possible.

The term ‘puggaree’ originates from the Hindu word, ‘Pagri,’ meaning a turban or thin scarf of muslin. Intended for insulation, the puggaree was a traditional Indian head-wrap, adapted by the British for headdress worn in hot, sunny regions.

During World War One (1914-1918) a plain khaki cloth band was worn and this practice continued until compulsory training was suspended in 1929. Following the introduction of Voluntary Training in 1930, new puggarees were issued to the Commonwealth Military Force with different coloured folds denoting Arm or Service.

During World War Two, a flat type of band was issued. Troops who were on active service in the Middle East at the time introduced a folded puggaree as a distinguishing mark of active service.

Later, the Army reverted to various types of plain bands, green dyed puggarees for example, for jungle warfare. However, the official puggaree at the conclusion of World War Two was still the flat band.

The current puggaree has seven pleats, one for each state and one for the Australian Territories. It is made from light khaki coloured cotton and is worn on the slouch hat. While the majority of the Australian Army wear the light khaki coloured puggaree, there are slight variations for members of the 1st Battalion and members of the Royal Australian Regiment which, of course, includes the 5th Battalion.

Soldiers of the 1st, the Royal Australian Regiment, wear jungle green puggaree. The dark green puggaree was introduced during the Battalion’s service in Malaya over the period 1959-61. Unable to get puggarees from Australia for an official parade; the task of producing them was given to the Battalion tailor, Mr. Mohavved Beseek. Mr Beseek used ‘bush shirts’ (common issue British field uniform at the time) to make the puggarees as he was unable to obtain the khaki material locally or from Australia. After the battalion’s return to Australia, the dark green puggaree was adopted for permanent use. Because the dark green puggaree is so distinctive, the battalion does not wear a colour patch.

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The Story of Delbert Ping

EARLY DAYS

Being born into a farm family was the way my life started in a farm house in Pulaski County, Kentucky on 9 February 1943. I was the sixth child, with my twin coming soon after. Mom didn't have enough milk for both of us, so we became "carnation" babies. I was allergic to Carnation Milk, so Mom put me on straight cow's milk. The Doctor told her it might kill me, but it didn't. I cried a lot, and my oldest sister took care of me most of the time. My twin would drink his own bottle and throw it down and then grab mine and drink my milk. I developed Rickets. I was sick a lot when I was a child.



Delbert on the right with his younger brother.

When I was 3, my youngest brother was born. I thought he should have been put out with the cats and dogs at night. I also, once, pushed him down the stairs in a stroller. He didn't get hurt, but I did. I guess he was getting more attention than

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what I was getting.

My earliest memories are of working on the farm and going to school. I started school at Hazeldell School. It was a 1 room school. We had to walk across a field to get to school. When I was 6 years old, we moved to a different farm on Buck Creek.

This home didn't have electricity. We had a double fireplace (between the dining room and living room) for heat and a wood stove for cooking. We did have running water from a spring piped into the kitchen from the hill behind the house. If there was a storm and lightning struck the spring, it would travel into the kitchen and we would have electricity. We did finally get electricity.

SCHOOL DAYS

The school we went to was Bobtown school. We had to walk up hill, a mile and a quarter south of our home, just to go to school. Did I mention Up Hill?

Bobtown had been a 2 room school, but was turned into a 1 room school when I went there. Miss Farmer was my teacher from 1st grade to 6th grade. Bobtown didn't have electricity or running water. A coal stove set in the middle of the room. The school board supplied the coal and they would also coat the floor with black oil to keep the dust down. Since we didn't wear shoes, except during the winter, our feet would get black. The boys had to clean the outhouses and carry fresh water from neighbor homes every day. The well at school wasn't good to drink from. The county nurse would come every year and give shots for typhoid and polio. Ouch, they hurt. Some of the younger kids would cry. I broke my arm twice in the fourth grade. Once wrestling with my brothers and once when I fell out of a tree at school. My



Delbert's Grade School picture.

report card said I didn't attend school enough to get a grade, so they held me back. If we did get in trouble at school, our folks knew it before we got home. We didn't have a phone. Never did find how they found out.

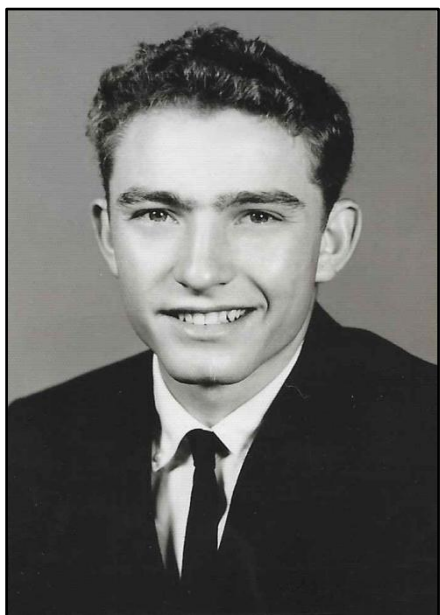
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When I was ready for the 7th grade, the school system consolidated the schools. Since I lived on the north side of the creek, I had to go up the hill to Woodstock School. We lived on the creek and it was up hill both ways. Woodstock was about 2 miles from home and we did get to ride the bus.

At Woodstock, one of our teachers gave us a test on the first day of school. On the last day of school, he would give us the same test. If we got a better grade, we passed. We had learned something.



Delberts High School Photo.

Then in 1959 I went to Pulaski High School at Somerset to start my 9th grade which was 10 miles from my home. During my Junior and Senior year, I went to trade school at Somerset High School in the afternoon. My senior year was the best. I didn't have any books, because I couldn't afford them, or didn't want to buy them. For my grades, I would wash and wax the teachers cars, or arrange dates for the teachers with the senior girls. My girlfriend at the time also did a lot of my homework. During lunch, we could walk to downtown Somerset. We would end up in the pool hall. The principal, Mr. Webb would come and get us out of the pool hall and tell us it was time to get back to school. I started wearing glasses during my junior year. Wow, I could see. If I would have had them sooner, I might have better grades.

After trade school at Somerset, we had to walk home, and that was 11 miles, because the bus didn't run from Somerset. On the way home, we would decide what kind of a car we wanted to ride in that day, such as, a blue Ford, green Chevy. If a red Ford stopped to pick us up and we had chosen a blue Ford, we wouldn't get in. We didn't want to get home too early, because we had chores. On the weekends, I got a job at Roses department store, stocking shelves and putting bicycles together.

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WORK ON THE FARM

I had two sisters and five brothers and we all had to work. Everyone had a job, even the dogs. One would go with us to get the cows. One would watch the grandkids and make sure no snakes come around or the kids didn't wonder off. We also had hunting dogs.

On the farm, we had 23 head of cattle that had to be milked twice every day. I wasn't a real good milker, so I only milked 3 or 4 cows. If there came up a storm in the night, Dad would get us up to go bring the cows back across the creek. The creek would flood, and we would have to swim across the creek and drive the cows into the water. When we got one to go in the water, the others would follow. Then we would grab onto their tails and let them pull us back across. The cows could float.

We cut timber, had a saw mill, raised more than 100 acres of corn, and had 12 acres of tobacco. That's not counting working in the garden, or feeding the chickens and pigs. We farmed with mules and horses. Dad worked with the mules and my older brother worked with the horses. The rest of us hoed the corn by hand. We had mile long rows. We would start out in the morning and each of us would take 3 rows up and back and then it was time for dinner. We would do that again in the afternoon, and it would be time to milk. My Dad did buy a new tractor. Some of the fields we tended were 10 and 20 miles from home. I usually did the tractor work.

Working the tobacco was hard work. Early spring we would burn the tobacco bed to kill all the weeds. Then we would plant the seeds, pull the plants, and plant the plants in the field. Then during the hot summer, we would have to hoe them, break the tops off, pick the worms off, and the suckers. Around the end of August, we would cut the stocks down, put the stocks on a stick, and hang them in the barn to dry. When it was cold and damp, the tobacco would be in "case", so you could handle it and it wouldn't break. We had to strip each leaf off the stock and grade them by size. Put so many leaves in a "hand" and tie it with another leaf. When it was all done we took the tobacco to market to sell around Thanksgiving. Then it was soon time to start over again.

During the winter, we cut timber and did logging. We used an ax and cross-cut saw. Two of us

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boys would be on each end of the saw. We would cut down the tree and use the ax to cut the branches off. Then we tied it to a mule and the mule took it where it needed to go. We had a sawmill at one time and it was my job to turn the logs, so that the saw could cut them into boards.

In our free time, we built 5 barns and 2 cement silos. My Dad only had hammers, a level, a square, a saw, and a plum bob. Us boys would hang by our knees, upside down, and hammer nails in the boards. The silos were about 36 feet tall. It took three of us boys to pull 5 gallon buckets of cement up the side. All of the barns and silos are still standing. When it was time to work on the farm, Dad would come to school and get us out. The school understood, because all the kids lived on farms.

PLAY ON THE FARM

We worked hard, but we also played hard. Like when we played rodeo. We would get up in the hay loft and jump on the cow's back. It was fun till someone turned the bull loose and my brother jumped on the bull's back. It bucked him off and stepped on him. We made sure Mom didn't find out, or we all would have been punished.

In the bank barn, where we milked the cows, we had a basketball court upstairs. We would always have lots of friends and neighbors playing ball. Since we didn't have a television, we would go across the creek and watch TV. Mr. Burton was the only one in the neighborhood who had a television. His living room would always be full of kids.

We swam in the creek during the summer. That's where we also took our baths. It was deep enough we could jump off the bridge into the water. Or we would stand on my brother's head and dive off. We built a bicycle from parts we found in the dump. That's the only bike we ever had. We would get the rooster drunk and we terrorized and wrestled with the goat, until the goat got too mean and Dad had to sell him. What a great childhood.

After graduation, my uncle Ken wanted me to help him in his business. So I went to Wisconsin. Ken had a Dodge dealership in Iron Mountain, Michigan, and I helped him by pulling cars from Green Bay and other towns for him to sell. He also had a junk yard and I worked out there.

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When it started getting cold up there in Wisconsin, I decided it was time for me to head back South.

UNCLE SAM WANTS ME



Delbert's, Air Force Basic Training photo.

When I got home, Mom told me my "Uncle Sam" had sent me a nice letter. He wanted me. I went down to the recruiting office and found out my number was just about up. My older brother was already in the Air Force. I wanted to go in the Navy, but their basic training was at Great Lakes and I knew it would be cold there, since I was signing up in November, 1963. So I also choose the Air Force, since I knew I would be sent to Texas. I'm no dummy. Spending the winter at San Antonio was good. After basic training, I went to Chanute AFB, at Rantoul, IL.

for schooling. To get a weekend pass, they would give us a bucket and we had to go out on the parade ground and

pick dandelions to fill our bucket.

After schooling to be a Jet Engine mechanic, I went to Andrews AFB near Washington, DC. I was there for 16 months. That was choice duty. We stood for a lot of important people who came to the base. If we would stand for VIP's, we would be off the rest of the day. When Pres. Johnson was inaugurated, we marched in his inauguration parade and stood in formation. I even took a driving course while at Andrews. When I was at Andrews, my Dad died. He had had a heart attack, but actually died from stomach cancer.

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Technical training graduation class at Chanute AFB. Delbert is second from the right in the back row.

My next assignment took me to Clark Air Base in the Philippines, in September 1965. I liked the warm weather, but not the monsoons. The native people worked on the base. They would go out along the road and pick greens for a salad for their lunch. I ate in the mess hall. They would always call us "crazy Americans".

While I was there, I didn't even know there was a volcano, until years later when I saw it had blown and covered Clark Field on the news. There was an election for President of the Philippines. We were restricted to the base, but somehow a group of us made it downtown. Marcos was elected. After 18 months, I was back in the States.

Norton AFB, San Bernardino, CA was my next assignment. I really liked the weather there. The base didn't have housing for us, so we stayed in a hotel in Redlands. Norton had been a missile base, but was changing over. We would report to the base every morning, but we didn't have planes to work on for a long time. When we did get engines, they were new and not much to do on them. The La Posada Hotel was our home. Of an evening, we would sit on the balcony and throw firecrackers over on to the street. The police would come, but the doors were locked and we wouldn't let them in. I was the ranking airman, so I was in charge of the hotel, about 90,

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eighteen and nineteen year olds. Next to the hotel was a bar owned by Bee. She would loan us money and look after us. I re-enlisted while at Norton. I left Norton, after 16 months as a staff sergeant.

It's now July 1968 and I was headed to Phan Rang, Vietnam. I remember landing at Cam Ranh Bay one evening, and asking where I could spend the night. The guy told me to go out back and find a piece of cardboard to sleep on. A plane could take us to Phan Rang in the morning. A Master Sergeant, got there when I did, and suggested we catch a ride with some GI's going that way. So crazy me, I got in the jeep with the MSgt and we took off. The GI's had their machine guns drawn the whole way. Sure won't do that again, I was scared the whole way. Bob Hope had a USO Show at Phan Rang and called it "Happy Valley". I didn't think it was too happy, but the name stuck.

The NCO club was up on a hill near our barracks. We drank a lot of beer there. You couldn't drink the water. The mama-san for our barracks, took really good care of us. She washed our clothes, shined our shoes, cleaned the barracks, and got us up to go to work. We only paid her a couple of dollars a month. My youngest brother George, was in Viet Nam while I was there. George was injured and I could have visited him, but I had just got back from R&R in Australia. He wasn't hurt bad, so I didn't go see him.



At night, we would sit out and watch the fireworks or "Spooky" might be up spraying stuff. Maybe it was Agent Orange. Whatever he was spraying, it would drip off our heads. When the incoming mortars came, we would head to the bunkers. I never wanted to be the first one in, because of the snakes. Snakes liked to stay in the bunkers. They had a deadly snake over there called a "two stepper". Legend goes that if you were bitten, you could only take 2 steps

before you died. Sometimes, we would spend hours in the bunkers. You learned to sleep in the

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bunkers.

One day, a man on my crew needed to go to the restroom. The one in our shop was out of order, so he went next door to a building. When he came back, he was white as a sheet. He told us that the building had dead bodies in it getting ready to be shipped back to the states. I didn't go see, I took his word for that.

After a year at "Happy Valley", I was stationed at Grissom AFB, near Peru, IN. Grissom was out in the middle of a cornfield. Air Force One backup is stationed at Grissom, but way on the other side of the base. My home was only 6 hours away. That was too close. I joined the Air Force to see the world, not to be able to drive home every weekend. I was single, and after 4 months, I volunteered to go to Thailand.

U-Tapao, Thailand was my next assignment in 1969 only about a year after leaving Vietnam. The base was good, just not as big as Phan Rang. We worked hard on the engines, just like at Clark Field and Phan Rang, 12 hour shifts. There was a pet Python on the base. A year later, I was shipped to Castle AFB, California. I didn't care for Castle. I had cut my finger on something and it got infected. I went to sickbay and they put me in the hospital. My doctor left on vacation and he forgot to release me. The nurses wondered why I was still there after a few days. They waited till he got back to release me. I had had enough of that base, so I volunteered to go back Thailand after only 4 months.

I went back to U-Tapao in 1971, the same base, the same job, but not the same barracks that I had left just four months earlier. I liked working on engines, but since I was SSgt in charge of the crew, I had lots of paperwork and meetings. I once got called for a review. Someone on my crew had forgotten to safety wire something. It had been caught by the inspectors. I got the blame, cause it was my crew. I may or may not have even been there that day, who knows.

Do you realize 18 and 19 year olds are working on million dollar planes that really didn't want to be there? I volunteered for TDY (temporary duty) at several bases, too many to list. Married airmen might leave home in the morning and be shipped somewhere by noon. Never being able to tell their wives. Since I didn't have a wife, I could leave anytime.

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Another year went by and it was time for me to reenlist. I wanted to go to England, but was told that I had to stay in the states for a while since I had been in Southeast Asia for 4 1/2 years, 3 out of the last 4 years. They wanted me to make rank, but I would have to go for more schooling, and school wasn't one of my favorite things. More rank, more paperwork. I would have been sent back to a base in the states, somewhere in the upper Midwest. I can't remember which one, but I knew it wouldn't be warm there. Also I was working in SAC and couldn't get out. SAC was working on bombers. It wasn't that I didn't like working on bombers, it was the way they ran SAC. I had worked on TAC, fighters, and MAC, supply, and SAC ran things differently. The war was winding down, rank would have been harder to get, so I got out of the Air Force. After 8 1/3 years, life as I had known was going to be different. That was March of 1972.

LIFE AFTER THE AIR FORCE

I went back home to the farm. Since my dad had died, the cows had been sold, and the farm was on a government program where you couldn't farm the ground for ten years. I collected my unemployment, then my brother ask me to come to Indianapolis with him. He was married and had a small son. I lived with them a short time until I got my apartment. I started working at Mitchel & Scott in October 1972.

Mitchel & Scott Machine Co was a good place to work. It was family owned. They asked me, what I had done in the Air Force. I told them I was a jet engine mechanic. They hired me on the spot. I worked there as a machine repairman. I built some machines from the ground up. I worked at Mitchel & Scott 29 1/2 years. Mitchel & Scott had been started after WWII by Mr. Mitchel and Mr. Scott. Mr. Mitchel had 3 sons and Mr. Scott had 2 sons. The sons ran the company. At one time, they had 400 employees and 7 plants. Five of the plants were in the Indianapolis area and two were in Tennessee. I repaired machines in all 5 plants.

Soon after I started working, a buddy I worked with and I had known him from home, asked if I wanted him to set me up with a girl. I said sure. His sister worked with a single girl, and they set us up. A blind date. We met the end of January 1973 and married in November 1973.

MARRIED LIFE

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Sharon and I lived in an apartment on the far east side of Indianapolis, near 10th Street and Post Road. It was across from the old Warren Central High School. The city had turned it into the police training center. At 4 am the recruits would be outside training. No more sleep those nights. In May of 1977, our son Aaron, was born. We bought our home in Frankfort in July 1977. We did some remodeling to the house and moved into it in August 1983. Sharon quit her job at Sears when we moved, but I still drove back and forth to Indianapolis. I retired from Mitchel & Scott in April 2002.

We have done a lot of traveling, which we have enjoyed. I have been to all 50 states and 10 countries. Another joy in our lives, was when our granddaughter was born in December 2007, Shelby Sue.

I'm going to end this story now. I have more to live and could write more, but the memories are getting foggy. I may not have all my facts correct, but I tried.



Charlie sending Phan Rang AB a Christmas Message.

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In Phan Rang Newsletter 239 “Exonerated” by Ron Deyhle, the story of Fred Tomlins accident on 25 October 1970 at Phan Rang AB, William Gentry commented:

“Doug, enjoyed your last issue and particularly the story of the investigation of the crash landing on the F-100 piloted by Lt. Tomlins. Our Weapons Load Crew was working the Alerts that night and sent him off on his mission. We were awaiting his return when we heard the crash of him landing short. We immediately ran to his plane and arrived from the left side in all the dust and smoke. The nose wheel had collapsed and the canopy was up. We looked inside the cockpit and it was empty. Went around to the right and found Lt. Tomlins sitting on the ground by the fuel tank. We convinced him to move away from the plane some 50 ft or so. He did not appear injured. By this time the emergency people were arriving. We thought about making sure the plane was “safe” from a weapons point of view but decided to back away and let things work themselves out. Another crazy night at PRAB. Load Crew members: they were Frank Hayes, Charles Berry, Jerry Boling and myself, William Gentry.”

Doug’s Comments:



I hope that you enjoyed this newsletter. I really enjoyed reading about the early life of Delbert Ping, who as a country boy, had a very hard life, not unlike many others in our generation and it will be completely foreign to the current and future generations. 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. Remember if your stories are not written down and published, they will disappear over time. This newsletter was composed by Douglas Severt and all graphics by Douglas Severt. To see a list of all previous newsletters click [here](#). To unsubscribe to Phan Rang News, mailto:dougsevert@cox.net and put ‘unsubscribe’ in subject line.