

Phan Rang News No. 25

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**Last Day Home "Poems From A Soldier" by  
Stephen A Janke**

That day was so quiet, quiet and still.  
In spite of many people around until  
It was time to leave for the airport ride.  
My mom wept but tried her emotions to hide.

She was quiet all so quiet that afternoon  
But now tears fell as our leaving was soon.

We said goodbye at the gate inside.  
She buried her face and could not hide  
Her sadness and bitter loss of a son going off to war .  
I turned to watch just once more.

It seemed my buddy also shed a tear  
As we talked about how it was only a year.  
Then he said something I will never forget.  
You know we may never see them again as we board  
this jet.

Your crazy I said as defiantly as I could.  
Yet deep inside the reality suddenly hit me.  
Bill, you could be right.

# Vietnam

## **The development of Phan Rang (The 6258<sup>th</sup> Combat Support Group)**

by Joseph V. Barth, Maj. USAF (Ret)

The 6258th was the first home for the Air Police assigned to Phan Rang AB: RVN starting in Oct 1965. The Air Police were assigned to the Group HQ.

I arrived in Dec of 1965 and there were 13 enlisted personnel and two officers there when I arrived. One of the officers was CAPT Reg Maisey who returned to RVN in time for the Tet season of 1968 when he was killed while trying to get ammo to one of his bunkers. (He received the Air Force Cross for this heroic action and - personal opinion - had he been on flight status he would have won the Medal of Honor). The other officer was 1LT Fred Reiling. They were both TDY to Phan Rang and left soon after I arrived, to the best of my knowledge. (Memories for that kind of detail get a bit fuzzy after 35 years).

The 6258th was commanded by one of the "wildest" and most beloved officers I've ever had the pleasure to work for. COL Ben Matlick was responsible for getting Phan Rang built and he gave us the impression that the sun went up when the cops ran it up - and God help anyone that tried to mess with "his" cops. (He was so respected that about 90% of the 600+ cops volunteered to go with him to Phu Cat when he finished at Phan Rang).

COL Ben gave us the support we wanted and made sure that we had first "dibs" on whatever we needed and he really was good at looking the other way when we needed to find needed supplies and equipment. For example, anyone remember the M151 jeep with the 66K5432 hood number? Uh - my last four of my serial number at the time - why, it was 5432 of course! (We used real serial numbers not the SSAN now in use).

We had a small perimeter around the compound and the runway area was the responsibility of the RVN forces until we received more troops in Jan of 66. The runway was PSP and the famous company RMK/BRJ was building the "real" runway and the permanent housing.

The cops were living in hooches we built ourselves - first basic tents on concrete pads and then we framed them in. Seems to me we had 10 cops or so per hooch and we managed to survive. One special thing I remember was that the first Purple Heart awarded at Phan Rang went to a dog handler that met a punji stick the hard way. Now, this may have been after we became the 35th APS but I tend to remember that COL Ben made the presentation.

On 8 Feb 1966 the names were changed and we became the 35th APS and the rest, as they say, is history.



This Sandbag Fort at Phan Rang, Vietnam, protects the Black Hats and equipment, all under the command of the 1<sup>st</sup> Mbl. Comm. Gp., Clark AB, Philippines.

**Comm Build-Up-** Extract from AFCS Intercom article May 6, 1966 "Emergency Communications--Business of the Far Flung Black Hats in the Pacific"

#### 1st Mobile Communications Group & 1882nd Communications Squadron

The 1st Mobile Communications Group Team 56-65 came to Phan Rang with its own equipment and the basic necessities for sustaining life. Food consisted only of C-Rations until the base-support facilities moved in 30 days behind the 1st Mobile Black Hats. The bare-base support facility is known as the Grey Eagle Cantonment Package and consists of food, medical and living facilities plus the men to use and administer the supplies.

#### Phan Rang AB

Phan Rang Air Base is not a new base for air operations. During World War II, the Japanese operated from a 3,500 foot runway at a site not far from the present base. Team 56-65, composed of 60 men, upon arrival at Phan Rang immediately began the gigantic task of filling 45,000 sandbags and putting each one into place. These sandbags made a revetted fort large enough for two communication vans, several power units and two Jamesway huts. This fort became the center of the 1st Mobile operations and included a complete line of mobile communications equipment.

#### Fort Cross

This communications complex soon became known as "Fort Cross," named after MSgt. Nelson T. Cross, team NCOIC. This honor was bestowed upon Sergeant Cross by fellow-team-members because of his devotion and loyalty to the team. Sergeant Cross, 6 feet 5 inches tall and weighing 245lbs., the Air Force Judo Champ for 1965, is now teaching the art of throwing sandbags instead of people. Often, he became the final link in a chain of sandbag throwers in building revetting walls. As the wall reached six feet he would move into the key position and stack each sandbag to a summit of eight feet.

First Mobile equipment, inside Fort Cross, ranges from a single side band radio which is carried in a suitcase, to a communications van that weighs 17,000 pounds.

The initial equipment and personnel required to set up communications at Phan Rang were flown in to Cam Ranh Bay AB, Vietnam, by five C-130s and two C-124s; one ship was also used in the movement. After the equipment was off-loaded at Cam Ranh Bay AB, it was trucked to Phan Rang, 30 miles south

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of Cam Ranh Bay AB.

After the final shipment of 1st Mobile equipment, a Ground Control Approach unit, (GCA), was flown to the new Phan Rang Air Base in a C-124. In just hours the GCA unit was off-loaded, pulled into place and declared operational - on the air.

### Ready for Action

At that time, the 1st Mobile team entered the final stage of bare-strip operation, the communications equipment was transferred to the newly activated 1882nd Communications Squadron. Then the new 1882nd personnel were trained to operate their newly acquired semi-mobile gear. As the training was completed, some of the 1st Mobile men packed their bags, folded their tents and returned to Clark where they prepared for another "Black Hat" deployment. Others continued on at the 1882nd until PCS personnel arrived to take their place.



Sandbag crew of the Black Hats, 1<sup>st</sup>. Mbl. Comm. Gp. at Phan Rang, Vietnam secures the guard post at the entrance to "Fort Cross". Placing sandbags are (left to right) A2C William Blanks, 6254<sup>th</sup> Air Police Sq., SSgt Tillman B. Johnson, MSgt Nelson T. Cross, A1C Floyd W. Scheer and A1C Ronald A. Watkins.

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### Airman Highly Positioned *(The Post-Crescent, Appleton, Wis., Monday, January 11, 1971)*

Phan Rang, South Vietnam - Being a member of the only Air Force installation coordination center (ICC) in South Vietnam is quite a job. And that job belongs to Sgt. Ronald E. Witthuhn of Appleton.

The 22-year-old noncommissioned officer, who has been in Vietnam since August, acts as both a radio-telephone operator and as a liaison between the ICC and the Korean Army.



**Air Force Sgt. Ronald E. Witthuhn of Appleton chats with Sgt. Tai Hun Ko of the Republic of Korea army during a lull in the defense of Phan Rang Air Base. Witthuhn acts as a liaison between Korean and U.S. forces.**

He is the son of Mrs. Marian E. Hawk of 533 N. Linwood Ave. and a 1967 graduate of Appleton High School-West. He joined the Air Force in Nov. 1970.

His duty station is an observation perch high above Phan Rang Air Base.

“One of our jobs is keeping track of where all outgoing artillery rounds are landing to insure the protection and safety of our men.” Remarked Witthuhn, a member of the 35<sup>th</sup> Security Police Squadron.

“Its really beautiful up here,” the sergeant commented from his perch, surrounded by communications equipment. “You can really see a lot of the countryside.

Sure there’s a lot of responsibility; it comes with the mission of base defense. But I wouldn’t trade the feeling of satisfaction I get from the job for anything.

“With all the artillery firing and patrols going out, we pretty well keep ‘Charlie away from the base.

“A good working relationship with everyone helps,” added Witthuhn. “If we need (them) they’ll be there, and vice versa.”

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### **Chance Encounters** (*Members comments from “Happy Valley”, Phan Rang Facebook Group*)

**James Gilliland comments:** Well people if you want to hear about a weird one here it is, I arrived around July 1969 and on the 4th they opened the gate going to the strip well being a young A1C I went there while coming out of one of the bars/whore house. I heard someone call out my name not my last name but the name that I was called in high school it was like this “Hay Andy where are you going?” Well we all knew that we were mostly called by our last name, so I froze in my tracks and turned around and there was a guy that I went to high school with. And he is also a member of the FB group so I want to say Hi to Richard Gentry...long time no talk. We saw each other while I was there, he was in the Safe side unit I was BCE as a equipment operator. We have talked a little after we left Nam.

**Boyd Pettitt comments:** I am from a small town in Tennessee. My graduation high school class was only 44 members. I ran into a fellow football team member (he was a class below me), in the chow hall one day. I also ran into a fellow church member, from my home church, while I was there. I haven't seen either since.

**David Knighton comments:** The only guy I saw from high school was when I was at Cam Ranh Bay waiting to board the Freedom Bird. He had just gotten in country. He was Army and asked if I had any advice. I told him to NEVER VOLUNTEER for anything. Never saw him again.

**Tom McCandless comments:**

There were 21 in my high school senior class. Eleven girls and 10 guys. I had been in country two days when I ran into one of the guys from my senior class. We talked for a while and went to the other side of base and saw another classmate. Three out of 10 on the same base same time. Happened April 1967 at Tan Son Nhut. Air Base.

**Rodney Eagan comments:**

My cousin's husband, Tom Pickrell, was assigned with the Army at a fire base north of Phan Rang, he came and visited several times during my tour of duty and we drove his truck all over the base.



**Advancing Communist Forces Peril Saigon from Two Sides** (*The News, Van Nuys (Calif.)*)

*Thursday, April 3, 1975*

SAIGON (UPI) — Advancing Communist forces threatened Saigon from two directions yesterday. Convoys of panicky refugees and soldiers fleeing the Communist blitzkrieg down the east coast reached the outskirts of this capital city.

Heavy fighting was reported around Xuan Loc, 38 miles east of Saigon, where the Communists cut key Highway 1. Lt. Gen. Cao Van Vien, South Vietnam's top general, told the troops in an order of the day: "We have only one way and that is to fight for our survival. The historic hour has come."

**Scenes of Panic**



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Government troops and most civilians pulled out of the coastal cities of Phan Rang and Phan Thiet yesterday as frightened refugees poured down Highway 1 headed south, military sources said.

They reported scenes of panic and confusion at Cam Ranh Bay, 188 miles northeast of Saigon, and feared that the city was in imminent danger of falling.

South Vietnam's Senate unanimously passed a resolution demanding a change in leadership of the South Vietnamese government. It blamed the government of President Nguyen Van Thieu and the United States for the staggering series of defeats that have given the Communists more than two-thirds of the country.

### **Ready to Talk**

In Paris, the Viet Cong's provisional revolutionary government made it clear that its military forces will press ahead with their offensive and march on Saigon unless Thieu's regime is overthrown.

Dinh Ba Thi, the Viet Cong's chief negotiator in France, told a news conference that the Communists were ready to open immediate talks-with a new Saigon administration that would replace Thieu.

Thi warned that Communist forces considered President Gerald Ford's decision to send Naval vessels and Marines to the coast of South Vietnam to evacuate refugees a hostile act and a "grave escalation" of U.S. involvement in Vietnam.

### **Threatening Saigon**

In Washington, South Vietnam's ambassador said the U.S. failure to "lift a finger" to stop the Communist onslaught in Indo-China is evidence that "it is safer to be an ally of the Communists and . . . fatal to be an ally of the United States."

Intelligence sources in Saigon said the victorious Communist force of tanks and infantrymen that has swept down the east coast, swallowing city after city is threatening Saigon from the northeast, with only about 5000 government soldiers between them and the capital.

The second threat is from Communist forces in a wide arc from west to north of Saigon.

### **Tank-Backed**

On that side of the capital, the equivalent of three divisions of South Vietnamese troops — including two brigades of crack paratroopers — stand between the Communists and Saigon, the sources said.

The size of the Communist force sweeping toward Saigon from the northeast is unknown, but it is large and heavily backed by tanks and artillery, the sources said.

Intelligence officers were unsure how many North Vietnamese and Viet Cong troops had dropped off behind the vanguard of the advancing blitzkrieg to secure captured areas on the central coast.

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The first road convoys of refugees and soldiers fleeing the coastal collapse reached the outskirts of Saigon late yesterday.

### **Disarm Soldiers**

A ragged caravan of 2000 to 3000 people on trucks, buses, cars and motorbikes piled up behind military police checkpoints eight miles northeast of the capital in a rainstorm. Their welcome was not a warm one.

Tough Saigon military police disarmed soldiers among them, firing over their heads when they were not quick enough to raise their hands, and turned away civilians whose identity did not show a Saigon address.

Government intelligence experts said the refugees and fleeing troops have brought the seeds of disorder, looting and ultimate defeat into many Vietnamese cities over the past three weeks.

They are determined it shall not happen in Saigon, a capital full of rumors, jangled nerves and citizens bewildered by stunning Communist successes that have eaten away over half of South Vietnam.

Phan Thiet, province capital of Binh Thuan province 100 miles east of Saigon, was evacuated by military and civil authorities late yesterday as fighting broke out in the streets.

Merchant and Navy ships loaded with thousands of refugees were moving south down the embattled coast toward shrinking safety zones at Vung Tau and further south in the Mekong Delta.

In Saigon President Thieu conferred yesterday with U.S. Army Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Fred Weyand at Saigon's Independence Palace in a meeting that had been twice postponed by the Saigon leader.

The two were later joined by Vietnamese chairman of the joint general staff, Gen. Vien, and U.S. Ambassador Graham Martin for discussion of the rapidly deteriorating situation.

South Vietnamese Prime Minister Tran Thien Khiem earlier yesterday submitted what observers called a "pro forma" resignation to clear the decks for cabinet shakeup.

### **Armed Americans Bar South Vietnam Escape** (*The News, Van Nuys (Calif.) Thursday, April 3, 1975*)

By CHAD HUNTLEY

NHA TRANG, South Vietnam (UPI) — "If one Vietnamese is allowed on the aircraft, we'll never be able to stop them," an American said to the South Vietnamese army lieutenant pleading to let children on the mercy flight.



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Some Americans holding shotguns, automatic rifles and submachine guns Tuesday kept long-time Vietnamese friends from taking the places they had been promised on helicopters flying from Nha Trang to refuge in Saigon.

### **City Falls**

Others fired in the air and beat back pleading Vietnamese who tugged at them desperately and then watched helplessly as the last two evacuation helicopters slid from their hands and bolted free.

Hours later, Nha Trang fell to the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong.

U.S. civilian employees at Nha Trang left behind more than 100 Vietnamese employees and families at the U.S. Consulate compound.

### **Inaction Criticized**

"I'm so ashamed of the U.S. government that I'll never be able to work for them again," said one U.S. government employee. "They totally abrogated their responsibility.

"And the pity is that "it was so uncalled for. The people in charge knew eight days ago what was coming, but they refused to do anything about it."

### **Riot Feared**

All Americans wanting to get out of Nha Trang left on the airlift which began Monday. Only two — one a professor at Dalat University — refused to leave without their Vietnamese families.

The evacuation of Americans from the cities of Qui Nhon, Cam Ranh Bay, Phan Rang, Dalat, Tuy Hoa and Phan Thiet became a panic Tuesday afternoon when the Vietnamese military shut the airbase to avoid a riot like at Da Nang.

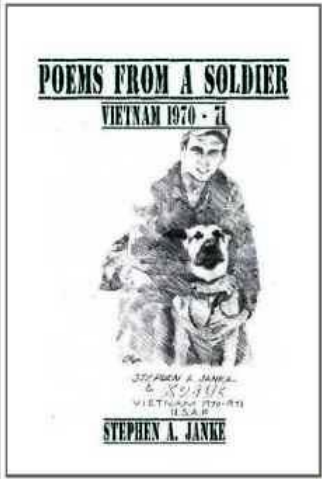
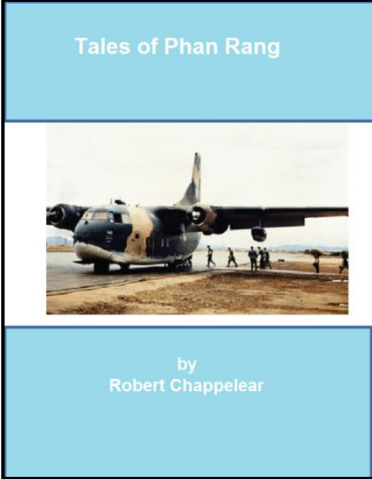
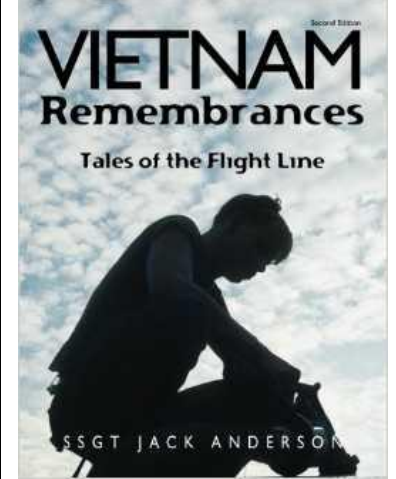
### **Throng Warned**

Vietnamese Consulate employees were promised they would be taken and thinking the Americans were abandoning them rushed the compound. Marines closed the gates. The Vietnamese dashed onto the helipad through unguarded gates. They were met by armed Americans.

Five warning shots rang out.

At Nha Trang's Air Base the scene was the same. The Vietnamese were orderly until they saw Americans were getting out first. Again armed Americans helped U.S. civilians board while holding back sobbing Vietnamese.

**Authors in our Midst**

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| <p>Steve Janke...<a href="#">click to buy book</a></p>                            | <p>Robert Chappellear...<a href="#">click to buy</a></p>                          | <p>Jack Anderson...<a href="#">click to buy book</a></p>                            |

**With U. S. Combat Air Forces** (*The Daily Courier, Connellsville, Pa., Monday, August 18, 1969*)

U. S. Air Force Major William R. O'Brien, whose wife, Margaret, is the daughter of Mrs. Margaret Ryan, 201 Brown St., Everson, Pa., recently took part in an unusual strike mission over Vietnam.

Returning to Phan Rang Air Base from another mission, the major, pilot, and fellow AC-119 "Shadow" gunship crew-members were diverted to a site 20 miles west of the base to investigate reported enemy activity. The crew located lights in a small clearing and raked the area with the aircraft's miniguns, touching off 10 explosions and igniting a sustained fire. Remaining in the area, they then directed friendly artillery fire which scored a direct hit on the target. The artillerymen later said it was the first time they had ever been directed by a gunship crew.

Major O'Brien was commissioned in 1953 through the aviation cadet program and holds a command pilot rating. A graduate of West Seattle High School, Seattle, he attended Montana State College and Trinity University, San Antonio, Texas

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## The 2014 "Happy Valley" Phan Rang AB Reunion

### The 2014 "Happy Valley" Phan Rang AB Reunion

**Where: DoubleTree by Hilton, Reid Park, 445 S. Alvernon Way, Tucson AZ**

**When: October 9-11**

**Single/Double rate \$99**

**Banquet 11 October in the Bonsai Room**



You may now make your hotel reservations for the reunion. Click on the Double Tree logo above and it will take you to the Phan Rang AB Reunion Web Site. Please make your reservations early which will help us greatly in the planning process and also to insure that everyone that wants to attend gets the reunion rate. This is a smaller hotel than the previous year, so we have to watch it very carefully. Remember if circumstances prevent you from attending you can always cancel within 24 hours of your check-in date. If you have any questions or concerns please do not hesitate to contact [me](#).

Got Photos or Stories that you would like to share with Phan Rangers and other interested Vietnam veterans? If you do, send those treasured pictures and stories to me and I'll include in this newsletter, that reaches out to over 200, or post on Facebook where we have over 550 former Phan Rangers, their families and friends. You can contact [me](#) and I will provide further instructions. Share the Phan Rang story and keep the memories alive.

**Doug's note:** I know not all of these stores have a dateline of Phan Rang, but we have a lot of members and readers that have an interest in stores dealing with the B-57, F-100, C-119, C-47 and C-123 aircrafts. Some may have friends or may have even been stationed at one time at these other bases.

Also if you are new to the Phan Ranger mailing list and you would like copies of previous issues of the Phan Rang News, they are all available [here](#) for downloading. If you have any difficulties, just send [me](#) a note and I'll will send one your way. If you know of a Phan Rangers that would be interested in receiving news about Phan Rang AB, please let [me](#) know and I will add them to the mailing list.

