

# Phan Rang AB Newsletter

The History of Phan Rang AB and the stories of those who served there.  
“Keeping the memories alive” Newsletter 252

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## “THE AIR FORCE’S GUNSHIPS” A CONVERSATION



*(The following is a partial transcript of a Green Dot Podcast that was recorded 30 June 2022. The Green Dot is a podcast meant for those who love aviation, and is geared toward both pilots and non-pilots who love flight. Episodes usually include a mix of aviation news, general aviation, history, personal experiences from hosts and guests alike, and plenty of other topics.)*

Welcome, I’m **Tom Charpentier** and today we are joined by five guests. This is a multigenerational panel composed of crews from all three of the U.S. Air Forces major gunship platforms that have served across Vietnam and into the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The gunship platforms include — the **AC-47**, **AC-119**, and **AC-130** — to discuss the history of gunships and compare experiences from service.

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### Introduction

Let’s go around the table and introduce this multi-generational panel.



**Junior Skinner John Bonner Terry Sarul Ryan Wichman Clay Ten Eyck**

I’m **Junior Skinner** with the AC47 Gunship in Vietnam...I’m **John Bonner**, pilot, AC47 in Laos, in 69-70 but they said we weren’t there...I’m Maj. **Ryan Wichman**, instructor pilot at the 4<sup>th</sup> SOS, currently active duty and flew on the AC130U in Afghanistan and the Middle East and currently flying the AC130J...I’m Maj. **Clay Ten Eyck** five years on the AC130H Specter and five years on the AC130U Spooky with deployment to Syria, Turkey and Afghanistan and now flying in the Air Force Reserve...I’m **Terry Sarul**, I was with the 18<sup>th</sup> SOS a gunner on an AC119 Stinger Gunship in Vietnam in 1971 and all through 1972.

Tom continues, “So the AC47, AC119 and the AC130, the three major platforms that the Air Force has used across the years.

### History

**Let’s start with the history of the gunships.** “I guess you could say that the gunships traces its roots back to World War II and the up gunned B25s and things like that. Does anyone have a window into the history that might get us started with that?”

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Go ahead John...”The concept of the side firing gunship happened almost by accident. A fighter pilot with attaché duty down in South America was out observing, which is what attaches do, and mail delivery was about to happen in a remote village and the plane flies in low over an open area and enters an orbit and the pilot feeds out a bucket on a rope as the plane orbits. As the plane orbits the bucket, which was filled with mail, stays in the same place over the ground. Someone on the ground reaches in, gets the mail, and puts in the outbound mail and the bucket is retrieved and away they go. This fighter pilot is watching this and thinking what if that rope was a gun, and the idea was conceived. It took some time to do it, but that is how the gunship started.”

John Bonner continues, “So the idea of basically firing off the side doing a pylon turn was the basic idea. That’s interesting, because that was a concept of mail delivery, but when your firing ordnance out the side, that is the opposite of mail delivery.”

“What was the first test of the concept? Chris was saying that it was Convairs to start out with and then they moved to the C47.”

“That’s right, the Air Force Weapons Lab in Florida had a Convair, so it was the test article for the concept, and it worked fine. They tweaked it with guns and a 50 caliber didn’t quite do it, and here comes General Electric with the 7.62mm mini gun at an incredible rate of fire at 50 to 100 rounds per second. That did it, in their test on an old Convair 240/340. But they didn’t have airframes to devote to the concept, and interestingly they had C47s left over from World War II by the hundreds, and so they outfitted the Goonie Bird with 50s and it didn’t quite work, and then come General Electric with the 7.62mm mini-gun, and it worked just fine. They took five airplanes over to operational tests and evaluation, and the first thing they learned was that this wasn’t a daylight weapon system. They lost an airplane right away, trying to do ground attacks during the day. At night the enemy just couldn’t see it well enough so it went well. The theater commander said he wanted 50 of those aircraft right away, but he only got 35.

Meanwhile the program is evolving back at the weapons lab in Florida and the AC119 is coming along with more guns and longer loiter times, and all the advantages of a bigger airplane.”

Junior Skinner: “In order to get that C47 over to Vietnam, by the way, they didn’t have large enough fuel tanks to make the flight across the ocean, so they mounted 500 gal. bladder tanks in the belly of this thing and filled them up with fuel, so that they could ferry it to Vietnam. Then of course they took the bladders out and they had the mini guns as John mentioned and

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at night...since we flew at night, we dropped flares where the pilot could see the ground. They were 2 million candle power flares and the pilot could see the ground where he was shooting.”

Tom comments, “These aircraft, and it continues today, that they basically had their genesis as cargo aircraft flying logistics and suddenly, they are a tactical combat asset basically.”

### **Gunship Career Progression**

“I wanted to ask all five of you how you got into the gunship capacity and where did you come from...were you flying the cargo versions of those aircraft before, or did you go directly into the gunships...what was your progression into that community? Let’s start with you Terry as a crew chief I think that’s an interesting perspective.”

“Well, it’s Junior”

Tom apologized and said he had a cheat sheet and still got the names mixed up.

Junior then continues...” That’s all right. Once I got out of training, I was stationed at Travis AFB, in a phase dock and I got orders for Vietnam. I was 20 years old, young, scared, but anyway when I got there they told me I was going to be working on an AC47 and they put me in a phase dock over there for five months and then they put me down to Bien Thuy, and I became a crew chief down there on them.”

“And John, how about you?”

“Straight out of the T38 and flight school to the AC47. Almost all of the class was getting Vietnam assignments. What’s this thing called AC...47...it’s got guns. So, I go from this supersonic T38 to this World War II piece of crap airplane, but it’s got guns on it, and with 40 years of flying, it was the most fun airplane.”

“Ryan”

“So when 9-11 happened I was in 6<sup>th</sup> grade and it had a pretty big impact on me growing up, and for that reason, I wanted a gunship and I actually told my flight commander that in T6s, and I think he thought I was a little weird in wanting a gunship right off the bat, but I wanted to take the fight back to the enemy. Believe it or not, I didn’t drop AC130s right out of pilot training, I dropped MC130s, but they were retiring, so a couple of weeks after drop and I was told I lost my airplane and to come back in and redrop and as luck would have it there were two gunships on there and off to Hurlburt field I went.”

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“Clay”

“When I was a cadet, we got to do a squadron trip down to Albuquerque, and that was my first exposure to special operations, and we got to fly an MC130 at low levels over New Mexico. Then we got to do an infill with MH53’s at night and I said man I want to be in special operations. At the time there was a pilot and gunner that were up at the academy teaching, and I started talking to them and they said the helicopter and MCs are great, but they bring everyone in and then they head out and if you want to be there while the mission is going down, a gunship is where you want to be. I thought about all the planes in the Air Force, and I said, well I want to be somewhere on the front lines and being a child of the 9-11 generation myself, I want a big crew, a big airplane with a lot of enlisted folks and actually take care of the guys on the ground, so me the AC130s were number one pretty early on. I didn’t think I would get it right out of pilot training, worked hard and was lucky enough to get the AC130H Specter right out of pilot training and it couldn’t have been a better airplane for a new lieutenant and a better squadron with 8 airplanes. It was a great aviation experience and mentors to help me grow as an AFSOC (Air Force Special Operations Command) pilot.”

“Terry, how did you become a 119 crew?”

“Back then, the gunners were strictly volunteer status, and they took 462 weapons mechanics like me. I was down at Holloman AFB loading, bombs, rockets, and missiles on F4D Phantoms, and I always wanted to be a pilot growing up, but that didn’t work out. But regardless, I was going to find a way into the air, and I heard about this program of gunships, and I say, I’m going to do it. One day, I just told the crew that I was going to volunteer for gunships, and I said nice knowing you. One of the other crew members, John Wolff said, hey wait a minute, I’m going to go with you, and we walked off going to personnel and sure enough, here comes Joe behind us...the third guy of the crew and he said, you guys aren’t going without me. So, the three of us went down, thinking we were going to get AC130 Specters, because that was the hot thing going at the time, but we ended with the ‘Gunship Three’ program, which was the AC119K. Three of us spent a long time together, flight training at Hurlburt Field, basic survival training up at Fairchild (AFB, Washington, Clark AB, Philippines) for jungle survival school. We spend two and a half years together on the AC-119, and so, I evolved from being a ground pounder 462 weapons mechanic, to an airborne weapons mechanic, and that’s how I got involved with the 119.”



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Tom questions Terry, “Terry you bring up an interesting tidbit. You called the 119 the ‘Gunship Three’, and the C130 being the gunship which is still in service, and you would think that would have been the ultimate progression. So could you tell us a little about how that came about?”

“Sure, what happened was, and I’m not an expert on this, but the AC47 was being replaced at the time by the ‘Gunship Two’ program which was the AC130 Specter. And low and behold, they found out they had a shortage of aircraft to convert from the C130 cargo version to the AC130 version. So, the Air Force found themselves in a little bit of a pickle because they already promised that they were going to give those AC47s over to the South Vietnamese. So, they started looking around and they found these old C119s that were left over from the Korean War and found out the Indiana Air National Guard in Columbus, IN was still flying these birds and they found 52 of them. It looked like a good airframe, with a large compartment that could handle the ammunition, so they took all 52 of them from the Guard and sent them out to Fairchild-Hiller and had them converted to 26 ‘G’ models and 26 ‘K’ models. But the AC130s were already in the gunship program, but they were just being delayed, so that’s how the AC119 became the “Gunship Three”, which is actually the third program in the gunship evolution.”

Terry continues, “Yea, the C119 had a pretty long career at that point it was one of the first combat operations of Vietnam was the C119. When you think of it these aircraft were made in the 50’s, and basically were hauling cargo, paratroopers, and everything else. Basically, they were relegated to the back burner with the Air National Guard, but they got reborn when they converted them into the gunships. When they decided to convert them, they were supposed to be only on a temporary basis, until the AC130s became available. But they found out they were so effective and efficient being used in a dual role of TIC, which was ‘Troops In Contact’ and also ‘Armed Reconnaissance’, flying supply interdiction missions on the Ho Chi Minh Trail throughout Laos. They were doing such a good job, the ‘temporary’ aspect of it became permanent, and they lasted all the way to the end of the Vietnam War in 1973.”

Tom comments, “So we talked about the storied airframe of the C119 and if you talk about storied airframe, gosh the C47, pre World War II and the start of modern airliners, and all the stuff it did in World War II.”

“Junior, what was it like trying to keep these aircraft in the air in Vietnam, as these aircraft were 20-30 years old at that Point?”

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“Every morning, when we went to the flightline of course, depending upon whether you worked nights or days, every night we had one of our aircraft flying CAP over our base. If they got called out on a mission for close air support for Army, Navy or whoever, we had 15 minutes to scramble another bird to fly CAP over the base. Every morning we had to inspect them, totally, I mean for bullet holes or whatever, and it was not that hard to keep them flying as long as you had the parts. I remember our night shift supervisor one night, we needed a starter for one of the engines, and he went down to the bone yard, which was a scrap yard where we had a couple of AC47s down there, and he took one of the starters off it and he took and put it in his flight line truck and then here comes the APs. They asked him what he was doing and he told them he was getting a starter for one of our aircraft and he said you can’t do that. He said we don’t have one, and they don’t have one on base. The AP said you just can’t do it; you are going to have to order it. So he said, OK, I’ll put it back, so he takes the old starter...the one that he had brought down to the bone yard and he puts it back on the aircraft, so now he’s got the good one. We did what it took to keep the aircraft flying! While we were over there, and you can check the stats, the AC47 did not have a mission that was aborted due to aircraft maintenance. That’s how good a job we did, and we were very proud of what we were doing, because the guys in the air counted on us. We ended up losing 14 aircraft and 86 men anyhow.”

### **Missions**

“Junior you were there with John in the earlier days of conflict...John what was a typical mission like for you?”

“By the time the AC47 mission was shutting down transitioning to 119s in country in South Vietnam, there was this other mission cranking up in Northern Thailand and flying up into Laos. So the application was one airplane goes airborne, goes dark and flies up into a holding pattern and waiting for a target, which they almost always got. As soon as they launched, a second bird went on to a hot standby...maybe that’s not the right word. But, anyway, as soon as the airborne alert got a target, the second airplane would take off. That would cycle through all night long.”

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“It wasn’t until after I was home for a couple of years did I learn what was really going on, which was the CIA was running a counter-revolution up there against the Pathet Lao rebels. That’s what our mission was, to support that counter-revolution.”

Tom asks “How were targets designated for you and how did you find them?”

John answers, “I don’t know if this is AB triple C, (Airfield Battle and Command and Control) airplane was up running the war and they would take input from a fortified hamlet, and if they came under attack and weren’t able to handle their aggressor, then they would call for close air support. That concept, I don’t think has changed much.”

Junior adds to the comment: “These guys did such a good job, once we got on target in Vietnam, we never lost an outpost. Not one.”

“So Terry, moving on to the C119, what capabilities did that aircraft bring to the table, and did that change the mission at all?”

“Yea, it started out with the AC119G ‘Shadow’. Shadow had the same 7.62mm miniguns that the AC47 had, only it added one...it went from three to four. We still did the close air support, troops in contact. Once in a while they would fly into Cambodia and hit some hard targets if



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they could find the 7.62mm armor piercing rounds, which were scattered about. That allowed them to fire on a hard target, but mostly it was TIC (Troops in Contact). If a hamlet was in trouble and the good guys needed help, they would call us in for support. But what happened was, they upgraded the 119 to the ‘K’ model, which became the AC119K ‘Stinger’ model, which was the one I flew on in 1971-1972. In 1972 they gave all the ‘G’ model ‘Shadows’ to the South Vietnamese. On the ‘K’ model ‘Stinger’, they kept the four 7.62mm miniguns, but they added two 20mm Vulcan cannons, which is what allowed them to participate in the armed reconnaissance, supply interdiction role over the Ho Chi Minh Trail. That was the dual mission mode we evolved to. I was a gunner, and we worked those six guns, a total of three gunners. We had racks that were filled with ammunition, which enabled us to re-load the guns as they expended their ammunition.”

***“...the gunship is a tank in the air.”***

Tom continues to ask Terry questions: “Just out of curiosity, being a gunner on an aircraft like that, you said you came out of basically the ordinance world of the Air Force, but it seems to me, you got a lot in common with folks like gun and artillery crews on the ground. Have you ever compared notes with them? “No. and I never thought of us as equivalent or something similar to what they were doing on the ground. We felt what are mission was totally different, from the time we caught the crew bus for those preflight briefings, to preflighting the birds on the ground before we took off to get into the air. Clearing a jam or repairing a gun if something went wrong. But mostly reloading the guns and keeping them online to make them available to the pilot. As far as re-loading, you run through a lot of ammunition in a short period of time when you’re firing at a rate of 6000 rounds a minute, or in the case of the 20 mm Vulcan Canon, 2500 rounds a minute. You can go through a lot of ammo in short period of time, so you might have one gun offline as one gunner was reloading, always trying to make as many guns available to the pilot as possible. But no, we never got into the comparisons with the ground people, as we had a job that we felt was like no other. I mean, like it was crazy! You pull into a 30° bank, in orbit for a target, in a black out situation, dark, no lights, no running lights on the aircraft, no lights in the gun compartment, and you’re either freezing or you’re sweating your tail off. You got wind blowing through there, you got the gun powder smoke, and it was a mess, and it was chaos, and on top of that, you got the pilot screaming at you “I need another gun, I need another gun” and you’re in the dark and trying to do your best, but yes. It was. It was a job all its own. You know, I could never really try to compare it to anything else, as we thought it was unique.”

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Johnny got your head up? “Just to pick up on what Terry’s describing what went on in the in the back of the airplane, even on the older AC 47s. On Target it was organized ballet but everybody had a job to do and they did it. The gunners to loadmasters and the flight engineer, they were wonderful.”

***“... redundancy in extreme and then and team work like you never seen...”***

“I think that is the biggest thing about the platform too, that the gunship is a tank in the air, right? So just as we have some failure does not mean we are going home, we have other guns, we have other hydraulics, we have other electrics, other fire controls, whatever we need to do to make sure those folks on the ground get us home every night is going to be the plan, redundancy in extreme and then and team work like you never seen, that’s what I loved about it.”

“So, Clay, you know it’s interesting that you know across basically 50 years of history here you’re basically saying the same thing, so Ryan and Clay you’ve flown the aircraft now, and continue to fly the aircraft. How have the capabilities of the aircraft changed significantly that it changes the mission at all, are there different ways you employ the aircraft now, that that have kind of evolved from the way that it was being employed in Vietnam?”

***“...the core mission is still the same... biggest thing out we got some newer technology to do it with...”***

“I think the core mission is still the same, especially what we saw in the mountains of Afghanistan - very similar, biggest thing out we got some newer technology to do it with, which helps us, so you know, we could do a little bit tighter, a little bit closer to Friendly’s, to put the fire down and keep them safe. But at the end of the day, and it all comes down to the systems experts and the crews, so there’s no way a single person could run that airplane... right. Like the guys are saying I’ve got a systems expert in the back with all the weapons, Lead gunners are going to let me know what’s going on if there’s a malfunction OK, we’re working on the 105 you could have the 40 mm and the engineer knows every system on the airplane, every switch, every circuit breaker. If there’s something going on, chances are he’s already worked up before even tells me that we got a problem but, we’re going to mitigate it and we’re gonna go from there. The sensors have improved drastically over the years too. That’s also been a huge improvement. It just allows us to find the targets faster. Ideally we should always find the target before it becomes a target on the friendlies. That’s how we keep them safe but I was in the

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middle decades of Iraq and Afghanistan and now with Ryan, he can talk to you more about some of the missiles and small diameter bombs that they have on it.”

“And Ryan, you’re flying the newest variant, right, the whiskey C-130J?”.

“So we’re kind of in the process in AFSOC of going to a pure fleet of squadrons with all AC 130Js. The ‘Whiskey’, I think, just retired. That was the test platform for the J models, and as Clay alluded to, so now we got the 105 and 30 Mike Mike, but in addition to that, we can basically carry, you know, either four ‘Hellfire’ on each wing or small diameter bombs, like the GB39. Three different variants of that, depending on what you wanna do, and then we have common launch tubes in the actual door. To your rear door of the aircraft, they can drop the missiles or the glider munitions out the back and then strike the target. So, it just adds a whole another capability and I’ve been flying when a gun was broken, and then we mitigated that with the ‘Hellfire’ strike, or we were able to do multiple weapon engagements. The amount of fire power we can put down in a very short time is pretty incredible.”

Tom “it’s interesting, now you have a lot of crossovers with other weapons platforms. With the hell fires and the bombs, there’s basically a mini bomber up there.”

***“...They call us a bomb truck, but at the core, we are still a gunship...”***

“They call us a bomb truck, but at the core, we are still a gunship with the capabilities of anywhere from, you know, the ‘Hellfire’ having a missile capability to the GB39, where it can punch into a harden target. So, the capabilities and the options we have are very wide now, just depending on what mission it is we’re doing.”

“I think the response time has always been an important part of the gunship world too. Fighters with their great munitions that they take a second to set up, right, and you have a single person working hard in that airplane. For us, we’re looking at the same piece of target, we’re watching them come out into a tree line with the bad guy guys and we’ve got the guns briefed up and everything ‘s ready. We’re just standing by clearance from the JTAC on the ground, and once I get that clearance. I’ve seen the weapons going up under 10 seconds, so we can get around and away.”

“And then you’ve got the loiter time to be there for a long time.”

“And with the J model now, with an increase in the loiter time, we got an increase in altitude, because of a lot more efficient and powerful engines that let us loiter even longer than the

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legacy was able to. It's pretty incredible what we've been able to drop our fuel burn down to, and then fly higher, mitigating sum of all the rest of the crew on top of that.”

Tom, asks the pilots “what is it like on the controls when those guns fire, particularly the 105?”

“On the H and the U you can definitely tell when they are going off because you get a little kick on the back of the airplane. It didn't change the firing geometry too much in my experience, anyway, but the 25mm is right up front by our crew entrance door, on the left side of the airplane, and the longest burst we could do on that was about 350 rounds, comes out in about 11 seconds And with that much power coming out of the gun, it pushes the nose to the right, so you have to put a little left rudder when you want to keep the gun on target.”

### **Let's go around the table...**

“Junior, what are the biggest things that sticks out in my mind is the night that we got hit and my aircraft got burned up, basically. And of course, we took the wings off of it and they took it out to the junkyard. It just burned to nothing. And another night we were getting hit...well I take that back, we had outgoing fire, and the sirens went off and everybody ran to the bunker. In about 15 minutes later they said, hey all clear. It was outgoing and that day they had moved our mortar launchers from the north side of the base to the south side of the base and they were shooting across the base, so we went back to bed. Just got back to sleep, sirens went off again. We run to the bunker again, and 15 minutes later it's all clear. It was outgoing. So, we go back to bed. Just barely got to sleep, the sirens go off again! I said the hell with this, I said I ain't going to the bunker this time. So, I fell asleep. Next time they came back in, and all the guys came back in and asked: “Skinner, what are you doing?” I said I'm sleeping. They said “We just got hit with so many rounds” Well sorry about that, and the good Lord was looking after me because we didn't take one at the barracks, even though we had had a round once before that really sprinkled our barracks good, but anyhow those kind of things are what you think about is anyone at any time that the first round could get you, and that happened a few times and we had some buddies that it happened to that we had one guy that was supposed to go home the next day and a mortar got him that night.”

“Junior, I think that's a really good point and I think it's worth mentioning for anybody that is unfamiliar with it is it you know when we hear about like fighter pilots in Vietnam and stuff like that, I mean there at a base hundreds of miles away in Thailand, and you were right there pretty close to the line of contact.”

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“Oh yeah in fact we had one of our AC 47’s flying right above our base one night, flying right outside the perimeter, I mean close, in fact the flare parachutes were dropping right there on our barracks. I mean, they were dropping right there, that’s how close they were, and we had two guys wanting to get on base, and they tried to find them, and they couldn’t find them. So they went through with the helicopters and the gunner. He just peppered that field good and then they went in with dogs, and they found them out there in the field dead, and they were right across the street from our barracks, and those kind of things you think about and it’s you know, hey, you just have to be glad that you were on the ground and not up in the air were they shoot at.”

“I don’t know if anybody knows the story of John Levitow, if you don’t, he was the youngest enlisted airman ever to receive the Medal of Honor. They took a round in the right wing one night a mortar round. When that aircraft hit the ground, it had 3,000 holes in it. John was wounded, but they had a flare hooked up ready to dispense, and whenever that mortar hit, it rocked the aircraft, and that flare came loose. Now, that you got a live flare ready to ignite and John crawled around and kicked it out the door just before ignited, and the pilot put him in for a Medal of Honor and he received it. But that’s what happens in the air and these guys whether you’re the AC130s or the 47s or the AC119’s, when you get up in the air, I mean there’s always that capability that you never know.”

John, how about you?

“I think I said earlier, our Intel was pretty good about keeping a AAA<sup>1</sup> mapped up in northern Laos and it worked really well except when it didn’t, so it didn’t one night when we were going into support a hot 45 hamlet and we can see in the light ahead of us as we approach the target and exchange of tracer fire and we thought that the hostile fire was some kind of automatic

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<sup>1</sup> Terry Sarul’s explanation: AAA means anti aircraft artillery. (The stuff that the ‘bad’ guys are trying to bring you down with). Different sizes of AAA range from: 12.7mm, 23mm, 37mm, 57mm. The one I did not like the most was the 23mm, it had the fastest velocity of all the AAA, and the bad guys built these anywhere from a single gun to a quad (4) gun configuration. They had four times the amount coming at you with one burst! I mentioned in my narrative about feeling pretty sure a quad 23mm is what had us bracketed on our daylight mission over An Loc on 2 May72. I thought we were toast. I was the scanner that day, scanning for AAA out the left rear door, and as a scanner, it was our job to inform the pilot of AAA threats. We do that by being able to see the muzzle flashes on the ground, which would be followed by the tracer rounds coming up at us. The scanner would assess whether or not it was close or a threat, inform the pilot of its location, and **if IT WAS** a threat to hit us, call a “**BREAK**” left or right to the pilot to avoid the AAA. If it was NOT an immediate threat to us, I would still let the pilot know where it was. For instance, my call to the pilot might be: “AAA 9 o’clock, no sweat”...or “AAA 7 o’clock! **BREAK RIGHT!** **BREAK RIGHT!**...If it was a threat to us, in which case, the pilot would break off of our 30 degree left bank firing orbit, snap it over into an extreme right bank, and hopefully the AAA would miss us and go by. Once a scanner called a “**BREAK**”, pilot NEVER questioned it. It was an immediate and violent maneuver.



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weapon field piece, so we head for it and when we roll in, he then traverses north up to us. So short story, it wasn't a field piece it, was 23mm anti-aircraft in an aircraft vehicle and I can still see the tracers coming through our flight path, but I knew I knew that was it. I even asked the guys in the back and say have we taken a hit and they say, “no sir we're good”. Check again because I just knew we had been hit, but we were not.”

“Let's just stick with Vietnam for one more second, so Terry, how about you?”

“Our crew rotated through three different bases Nkom Phenon base in Thailand, DaNang AB in Vietnam and Bien Hoa in the southern part of Vietnam. My worst experiences were actually at DaNang on the ground with incoming 122mm rockets, so I would rather have been in the air than on the ground. So, that's just the opposite of what Junior was talking about. We had three gunners on our crew, two gunners would work guns during a combat mission and one gunner was assigned to the left rear door with a scanner picking out tripple 'A' that was being fired at you from the ground and relaying that information to the pilot and co-pilot, giving them directions, locations, if a threat or not threat or whatever. But, being a scanner, which I did quite often on our night missions you could pick out the ground flashes and they would lead your eyes to that and then you could sure that a tracer would be following that up and you could asses it if it was a threat or no threat. That information then would be relayed to the pilot to bank left or right or if we even had to evade it. But, because we were flying night missions, the aircraft painted totally black and blackout condition, you could see the tracer...you could follow the tracer and you could determine if it was a threat or not.

“We were flying out of Bien Hoa one time and we had a little hamlet down there called An Loc. This is during TET of 1972 and An Loc was getting overrun and they decided to run our Stingers over there 24 hours a day...even during daylight. Big black airplane, low altitude, slow, pretty blue sky behind ya and it didn't work. So I'm scanning in the left hand door and in firing orbit over An Loc and I cannot see any gun flashes coming because it was daylight. Subsequently I couldn't see any triple 'A' coming up at us because it was masked in the daylight. It was all over us...I'm calling to the pilot and the co-pilot said it was going right by his window and the pilot was saying it's right in his eyeballs. You could hear it crackling as it went by. It was a 23mm, high velocity, lot of rounds...couldn't call it. Long story short, we pulled off target and we headed back to Bien Hoa. You always have somebody coming in...you're leaving and someone is coming in to replace you. Stinger 41 was coming in and I still remember to this day the navigators communicating and we were telling them what we had and what we were up against. By the time we got back to Bien Hoa, Stinger 41 had been shot down. They lost three

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crew members and 7 were rescued on a SAR mission. Capt. Cortney stayed with the aircraft until all crew members were off and he pretty much flew the airplane into the ground. To this day, I don't know how we got out of that situation. It was probably more of a miracle than expertise, but more luck than anything.”

“Clay, do you want to go next?”

“Yeah absolutely, for me I wouldn't say one mission but the summer of 2017 and Afghanistan was a pretty busy summer for us. Taliban must've known that we went to midnight chow round midnight cause they would always attack about that point and ruined chow for everybody but as far as flying goes, shooting almost every other day we started dub ourselves “The danger close crew” so “Danger Close” is the term we use in troops in contact when the rounds are gonna be very close to Friendly's. I felt like more engagements were more Danger Close for us that summer were not danger Close I think the closest for us was about 14m between bad guys and good guys. So that being said, what I remember most is the teamwork. I was always blessed to have great crews, so I know some people have different experiences but for me, I must've lucked out, because I always had amazing crews and kept me safe got the job done and got us home every time. Also worked out with great Apache crews, you know, some of those missions where we were Tag Team and looking for the bad guys together, knock him out before they could hit the good guys and really getting after it so that was great. I think it's instead of just one mission probably be the phone calls will get from some of the special operators and usually it's a grateful phone call “thanks for getting me home so I can see my kids grow up” and that that means the most to me.”

“I guess the one that kind of sticks out was that we were on an interdiction mission one night in the J model and we're tasked with the basically coalition force checkpoint protection at that point. We're flying around and end up seeing, you know, we are wearing MBGs, so everything during low illumination nights sticks out like a sore thumb. Looking out, and all of a sudden I see a ton of tracer fire coming out of what I assume is a friendly checkpoint, and then I see another checkpoint shooting towards that checkpoint, and then we're maybe 40-50 miles away. What is going on? Two check point shooting at each other doesn't make any sense at all. As we get in closer, we come to find out, you know, we can see the Taliban had about 20 people 20 to 30, you know, fighters trying to overrun this one checkpoint with maybe four or five guys in it, so we get overhead and we had get clearance immediately to shoot and we end up taking out 15-20 of those guys, but what I do remember was vividly just trying to piece together how what is going on why are two checkpoints firing at each other? But ultimately what would end up

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happening was one checkpoint was shooting at the other checkpoint to try to shoot the fighters from coming over the wall at that other checkpoint, almost like the *Lord of the Rings*. A wave of guys trying to overrun these checkpoints so had we not been there, there's no way they they would have made it, but you know we ended up getting there and we took out a ton of those guys and saved and helped out the coalition forces and maintain stability for that time.”

“Clay and you other guys are talking about using your crew. As the two pilots we have the big picture of what's going on, the two sensors are looking through that soda-straw, but have that much tighter view of what's going on. All the crew coordination that then takes place from 30 miles away to a gun orbit, immediately putting rounds down it comes quick.”

“Chris mentioned that all the tactical call signs are named after the gunships that have come before you.” Chris responds “Yes because being a part of specter, I loved it, because there was generational legacy there that was awesome. “Spooky” having come from the AC47 brethren before us is awesome and we had an AC47 veteran visit the squadron once and they said these crews are the last of the B17 crews, and when you think about it between the gunners, and the navigators, the pilots and engineers and having to work together to get the job done and as the grandson of a B17 gunner, I'm just lucky to be a part of it.”

Terry, how about you?

“It is a brotherhood, and I think it's different when you're flying these fixed wing gunships. I don't know the legacy of it all, I mean, I told these guys earlier, I said 'I've got two guys on my left and two guys on my right, and I'm in the middle. I feel like I've got legends that I'm dealing with here on either side of me', but we're all one group... there is no difference”

***“...those guys...on the ground they brought me home.”***

“For God sake we were flying antiquated prehistoric aircraft that were left over from Korea, and these guys on the ground, crew chiefs and the ground crew, they were putting these things together with tie wire and duct tape for God sake and it brought me home on 120 missions, because of those guys on the ground, they brought me home. Obviously, we had a 10-man crew, and we are coordinated too. I was on a hard crew, so we all knew our jobs, we trust each other, and everything else, but it took not only the crew in the air but took the ground crew also everybody else, so it just creates a camaraderie that doesn't happen when you're working personnel and handing out paychecks or something. It's different, it has a different feel to it and a different look to it and to this day, we still have a reunion every year and get together

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and talk to people, and switch challenge coins from different groups, but it just is a different feel.”

Junior comments, “And to follow up on that, there’s no one here except these five guys that you can talk to and they’ll understand what you’re talking about because we’ve all five been through it and you can’t explain that to anyone else.”

“Yeah, there’s an expression that these guys have heard, **“If you’ve BEEN THERE, you can’t EXPLAIN it, if you HAVEN’T BEEN THERE, you can’t UNDERSTAND it.”**

***“...you’ve all written the Page in aviation history through the work that you’ve done.”***

“Well folks, I hate that we already used up our almost hour here talking, and it’s time to wrap up the episode but I just want to say it’s been really special and has been a very memorable podcast for me, not the least of which because I’ve been flying solo with you guys, but it’s been an absolute honor to have all of you guys here in the room. Everything that you’ve done, you’ve been through so much and rendered so much service to our country through all of its conflicts over the past 50 years and I just want to say thank you. It’s been so wonderful to talk to all of you guys and hear your stories and really feel this kinship that y’all have together. It’s a special part of military aviation, it’s a very very specialized part of military aviation and then you know you’ve all written the Page in aviation history through the work that you’ve done.”

**Notes:** To hear the actual podcast, click [here](#). Special thanks to Terry Sarul for helping me edit this document. To see a list of all Phan Rang AB Newsletters click [here](#).



**Mini-Gun...WITHOUT US  
SHADOW & STINGER ARE?**

**(As seen on the side of a flight line  
panel truck at Phan Rang)**

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### Phan Rang AB Newsletter

Viets Go Red-Hunting in Blue With Black Dragon Gunships

Spookies, Gunships Hold Off VC Attack on Defense Group

The Night Belongs to Gunships

AC-119G Gunships

Loss of “Spooky Gunship” and Crew on 14 February 1968

AC-119 Tails by Jim Mattison: Longest Mission

Gunships, F-100s Rout Enemy

C119 Tails: Strike Team Engages Charlie at the Perimeter

**Just some of the Gunship stories appearing in  
the Phan Rang AB Newsletter**



## Viet Workers Defy Cong; Vote in Union

*(Dubuque Telegraph Herald, June 8, 1966, Dubuque, Iowa)*

**PHAN RANG**, South Viet Nam (A P) — About 1,100 Vietnamese construction workers defied Viet Cong threats and voted Wednesday in an election that American organizers called a “small slice of democracy.”

The workers elected 10 labor representatives and 10 alternates from their ranks to represent them with their employer, the giant American construction combine of four firms operating throughout South Viet Nam under the initialed name of RMK-BRJ and usually known just as RMK.

The combine is building an airfield and related facilities near this coastal city 180 miles north east of Saigon.

Because of the Viet Cong intimidation, the procedures in this “test case” election were of special interest to premier Nguyen Cao Ky’s Vietnamese government, which has promised nationwide political voting in September.

For six weeks before the secret voting, Viet Cong terrorists used leaflets and nocturnal visits to threaten Phan Rang workers and their families. The leaflets told the workers to go on strike, not to vote in the election and to quit working for the Americans.



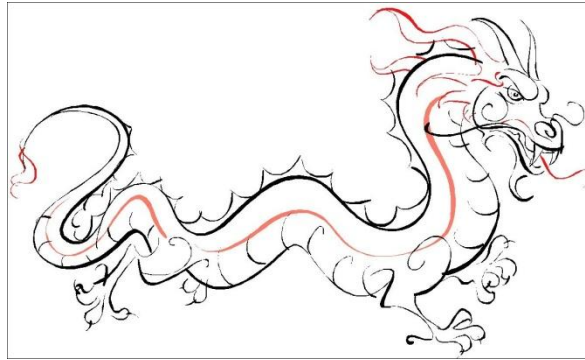
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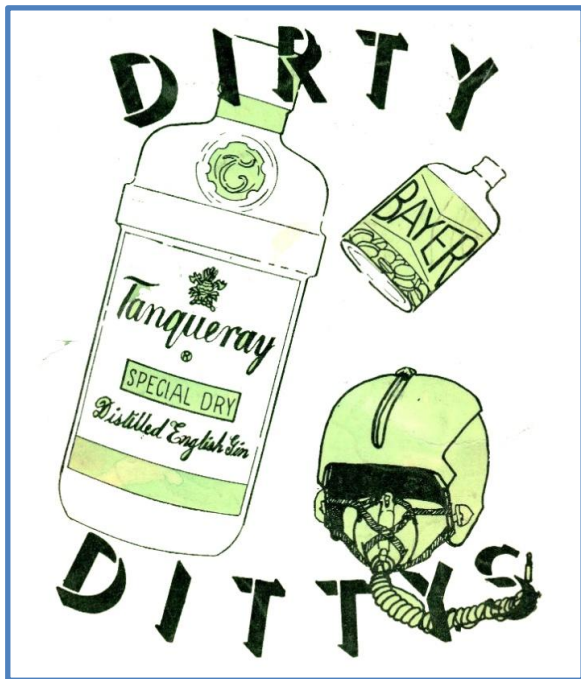
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Because of the threats, U.S. and Korean troops in the area provided extra security for the election, guarding the highways and surrounding area from Phan Rang to the air base voting site.



**DIRTY DITTYS** by Bob Howe

**Peter W. Taylor** captures some ADGs<sup>2</sup> on duty.



If anyone has the contents to the “Dirty Dittys” please send.

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<sup>2</sup> See Phan Rang Newsletter 124 “RAAF Air Defence Guards (ADGs) at Phan Rang”  
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**JOE A. JORDAN**, son of Mrs. Ruby Jordan of 1217-A Jeanette, has received the Air Force Commendation Medal at Phan Rang, AB, Vietnam, from Col. Walter C. Turnier, 35<sup>th</sup> Tactical Fighter Wing commander. Sgt Jordan distinguished himself as an electrical power production technician at Phan Rang. (*Abilene Reporter News, December 21, 1970, Abilene, Texas*)

Airman Babe At Vietnam AB WITH U.S. COMBAT AIR FORCES, Vietnam — Airman First Class **George B. Rabe**, son of Mr. and Mrs. George A. Rabe, Realitos, is on duty at Phan Rang AB, Vietnam. Airman Rabe, an aircraft electrician, is a member of the Pacific Air Forces. Before his arrival in Southeast Asia, he was assigned to the 350<sup>th</sup> Pilot Training Wing at Reese AFB, Tex. The airman is a 1965 graduate of Hebbronville (Tex.) High School. *Alice Daily Echo, February 2, 1969, Alice, Texas*

**Pvt. Roy Gunn Is Assigned** - PHAN RANG, VIETNAM — Army Private First Class **Roy S. Gunn**, 25, son of Floyd S. Gunn, 1020 N. Aransas, was assigned to the 589th Engineer Battalion near Phan Rang, Vietnam, Jan. 6 as a finance clerk. His wife, Carol, lives at 4008 Douglas, Farmington, N. M. (*Alice Daily Echo, February 2, 1969, Alice, Texas*)

**Making Wedding Plans - Wells—Teders LEIPSIC** - Mr. and Mrs. Bertram B. Wells of Dallas, Tex. have announced the engagement of their daughter, Cynthia Ann, to Airman 1C **Richard R. Teders**, son of Mr. and Mrs. Herbert Teders, Leipsic. The bride-elect is a 1966 graduate of W. W. Samuell High School, Dallas, and a 1867 graduate of the Cosmetology, Inc. Her fiancé is a 1966 graduate of Leipsic High School. Mr. Teders is stationed at Phan Rang Air Force Base in Vietnam. No definite date has been set for the wedding. (*Findlay Republican Courier, December 19, 1968, Findlay, Ohio*)

**Merry Beth Morford weds Kirk Minert** - Merry Beth Morford and **Kirk Walter Minert** spoke their wedding vows in an Aug 24 ceremony in Fultonville N. Y. The bride is the daughter of Mrs.

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John A. Morford, Fultonville. Mr. Minert's parents are Mr. and Mrs. Henry L. Minert of Grafton. Gloria Belleger and Denise Bellinger sang a duet, accompanied by organist Grace Minert Stonder, grandmother of the bridegroom. The bride designed and made her wedding gown, with which she wore her great-grandmother's watch and chain. The bridegroom, a 1955 graduate of Elyria High School, is a Staff Sergeant in the U.S. Air Force, stationed at Mildenhall Royal Air Force Base in England. He served in Vietnam for 14 months at Phan Rang Air Force Base. (*Elyria Chronicle Telegram, September 1, 1972, Elyria, Ohio*)

**NEWS OF** a promotion in Viet Nam for **David R. Finnestad** has been received Sp/5 Finnestad, son of Mr. and Mrs. Donald R. Finnestad of 79 Cherry, received his present rank while serving with the 13<sup>th</sup> Army Artillery. Specialist five is an enlisted rank equivalent to that of sergeant. Specialist Finnestad is a personnel clerk in the service battery of the 13th Artillery's Second Howitzer Battalion. He entered the Army in April 1964 and was formerly assigned at Fort Sill, Okla., after completing basic training at Fort Knox, Ky. A graduate of Rich high school in 1960, he also attended Southern Illinois University. (*Chicago Heights Star, April 28, 1966, Chicago Heights, Illinois*)

Currently stationed in Phan Rang, Viet Nam, is Army Pfc. **James F. Zyonse**, son of Mr. and Mrs. John Zyonse of Mount Pleasant, Mich., and husband of the former Susanne Morel of Crete, now residing on Cornwall drive. ZYONSE entered the Army in June, took basic training at Fort Knox and completed field communication crewman course at Fort Benning, Ga. Earlier he had attended both Chicago Technical college and the University of Illinois (Chicago extension) while working at Blommer Chocolate company, Chicago. As a member of the 62<sup>nd</sup> Engineering battalion in Phan Rang, Zyonse repairs communications equipment and handles radio messages. Phan Rang is the location of a newly completed 10,000-foot-long expeditionary airfield, one of the Corps of Engineers first major projects in Viet Nam. Pfc. Zyonse is slated to return to the United States December 5 to complete the remaining six months of his enlistment. (*Chicago Heights Star, April 28, 1966, Chicago Heights, Illinois*)

### **Utah Servicemen In Vietnam - PHAN RANG, Vietnam -**

Private First Class **Larry R. Hendricks**, an Army radio operator, son of Mr. and Mrs. D. Russell Hendricks, Lewiston, arrived in Phan Rang, Vietnam, Sept. 13, with other members of the 116<sup>th</sup> Engineer Battalion, a former Idaho National Guard unit. His wife, Myra, lives at 1048 E.

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Claremont, Bountiful, Utah. The battalion was called to active duty early this year as part of President Johnson’s program to increase manpower strength and arrived at Ft, Lewis, Wash. on May 13 to begin training. During the following months it underwent an intensive Vietnam orientated program designed to develop the skills from the individual through battalion levels. (*Logan Herald Journal, October 3, 1968, Logan, Utah*)

**PHAN RANG**, Vietnam — Specialist Four **Gerald P. Winn**, an Army truck driver, son of Mr. and Mrs. Spencer T. Winn, 26 North Lust East. Preston, arrived in Phan Rang. Vietnam. Sept. 13. with other members of the 116<sup>th</sup> Engineer Battalion, a former Idaho National Guard unit. His wife. Carol, lives at 211 South Fourth East. Kaysville, Utah. The battalion arrived at Ft. Lewis. Wash., on May 13 to begin training. During the following months it underwent an intensive Vietnam orientated program designed to develop the skills from the individual through battalion levels. (*Logan Herald Journal, October 3, 1968, Logan, Utah*)

**POLICEMAN VIETNAM** — Airman 1-C **Walter D. Parks**, son of Mr. and Mrs. Everett Parks of Pembroke, Va., is on duty at Phan Rang AB. Vietnam. Airman Parks, a security policeman, is a member of the Pacific Air Forces. Before his arrival in Vietnam, he was assigned to Malmstrom AFB, Mont. The airman, a graduate of Giles High School, Pearisburg, Va. (*Bluefield Daily Telegraph, May 18, 1969, Bluefield, West Virginia*)

**Samuel Oipton** TSgt. **Samuel Oipton**, 692 E. William St., Crestvlew, Is on duty at Phan Rang AB, Vietnam. Sgt. Oipton, an aircraft maintenance technician, Is assigned to a unit of the Pacific Air Forces. Before his arrival in Vietnam, he served at Lockbourne AFB, Ohio. The sergeant Is a 1942 graduate of W.B. Townsend (Tenn.) High School. (*Playground Daily News, April 8, 1971, Fort Walton Beach, Florida*)

**John T. Parish Jr.** - Col. **John T. Parish Jr.**, son of Mrs. John T, Parish, 143 Sunset Drive, Marlanna, has assumed the position of director of training for the Twenty-First Air Force headquartered at McGuire AFB, N. J. Col. Parish served at Phan Rang AB, Vietnam, prior to his appointment al McGuire. Twenty-First Air Force is a major component of the Military Airlift Command. The colonel, who has more than 27 years military service Is a veteran of World War II and was commissioned in 1945 through the aviation cadet program. He now holds the

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aeronautical rating of command pilot. A 1939 graduate of Walton County High School, DeFuniak Springs, he attended Michigan State University, the College of Great Falls(Mont.) and the University of Delaware. His wife, Madeleine, is the daughter of Mrs. Effie J. Laird of Rt. 3, DeFuniak Springs. (*Playground Daily News, April 8, 1971, Fort Walton Beach, Florida*) **Note:** A similar announcement appeared in the same newspaper and was included in Phan Rang News 251, but this announcement has more information.

SGT. **Virgil E. Adkins**, son of Mr. and Mrs. Raymond S. Adkins of 116 Arborland Acres, St. Albans, has received Air Force Commendation Medal at Perrin AFB, Tex. Sgt. Adkins was decorated for meritorious service as a weapons mechanic at Phan Rang AB, Vietnam. He was cited for his professional skill, initiative and dedication to duty in loading munitions on the F-4C Phantom aircraft under extremely hazardous conditions. He is now Perrin as a member of the Aerospace Defense Command. (*Charleston Gazette, April 13, 1968, Charleston, West Virginia*)

Airman 1C **Steve E. Harrison**, son of Mr. and Mrs. Coy D. Harrison of 1833 Lotus Dr., is on duty at Phan Rang AB, Vietnam. His wife, Glenda is the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Les Hall of Rt. 3, Hurricane. (*Charleston Gazette, April 13, 1968, Charleston, West Virginia*)

AIRMAN **ALFRED G. BEANE**, son of Mr. and Mrs. G. W. Beane Jr. of 207 First St., St. Albans, is on duty at Phan Rang AB, Vietnam. Airman Beane, an aircraft mechanic is a member of the Pacific Air Forces. (*Charleston Gazette, April 13, 1968, Charleston, West Virginia*)

**WITH U.S. COMBAT AIR FORCES**, Vietnam U. S. Air Force Master Sergeant **Orville L. Hutson**, son of Mrs. Lucille L. Huston of 708 South Jackson St., Mt. Pleasant, Iowa, has been decorated with the Bronze Star Medal at Phan Rang AB, Vietnam, for meritorious service while engaged in military operations against Viet Cong forces. Sergeant Hutson distinguished himself as a site development superintendent with the 554th Civil Engineering Squadron at Phan Rang. He was cited for his outstanding professional skill, leadership and devotion to duty. The sergeant, who attended Mount Pleasant High School, served during the Korean War. His wife, Sheila M. Vicker, daughter of Mrs. Kula M. Vicker of Rt. 4, Mt. Pleasant. (*Mount Pleasant News, November 28, 1969, Mount Pleasant, Iowa*)

Maj. **Richard L. Stoner**, graduate of the Air Force Institute of Technology, has been assigned as



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a navigator at Phan Rang AFB, Vietnam. He is the son of Mr. and Mrs. Russell M. Stoner of 118 Broadway; his wife, Linda, the daughter of Mrs. Edgar Zepp of 606 Oak Hill Ave. (*Morning Herald, July 17, 1969, Hagerstown, Maryland*)

Sgt. **William L. Cover**, an automotive repairman, has been assigned to Phan Rang AFB, Vietnam. His wife, Sharon, is the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Francis Gilbert of Greencastle, Pa. (*Morning Herald, July 17, 1969, Hagerstown, Maryland*)

A1C **David M. Higgins**, son of Mr. and Mrs. Robert L. Higgins Sr. of Williamsport, has been assigned as a supply inventory specialist at Phan Rang AFB, Vietnam. (*Morning Herald, July 17, 1969, Hagerstown, Maryland*)

Air Force T.Sgt. **James D. Hackworth**, son of Mr. and Mrs. James Hackworth. Crab Orchard, has received the Air Medal at Phan Rang AB, Vietnam. Sgt Hackworth, an aircraft maintenance technician, was decorated for his outstanding airmanship and courage on successful and important missions completed under hazardous conditions in support of the Air Force mission in Southeast Asia. The sergeant, a 1950 graduate of Williamson High School, is assigned to Phan Ran with the 311th Special Operations Wing, a unit of the Pacific Air Forces, headquarters for air operations in Southeast Asia, the Far East and the Pacific area. His wife is the former Barbara J. Butler from England. (*Raleigh Register, December 16, 1969, Beckley, West Virginia*)

Spec. 5 **Chester L. Conn**, 22, son of Mr. and Mrs. Homer L. Conn, Pemberton received the Army Commendation Medal while assigned to the 687<sup>th</sup> Engineer Company near Phan Rang. Vietnam. Spec. 5 Conn earned the award for meritorious service as a mechanic in the company. (*Raleigh Register, December 16, 1969, Beckley, West Virginia*)

**Karr On Duty At Phan Rang** - Master Sergeant **Gerald A. Karr**, son of Mr. and Mrs. Ramsey R. Karr of Rt. 1, Keavy, is on duty in Phan Rang AB. Vietnam. Sergeant Karr, a helicopter flight engineer, is assigned to a unit of the Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Service. Before arrival in South east Asia, he served at Sheppard A F B , Tex. A graduate of Lily High School, the sergeant attended Black Hills College in Rapid City, S. D. His wife, Barbara, is the daughter of Mrs. Edna M. Pearce of 105 Yeager Court, San Antonio. (*Corbin Daily Tribune, April 18, 1969, Corbin, Kentucky*)

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**PHAN RANG. Vietnam** — Army Platoon Sgt. **Jesse L. Harrison**, son of Jesse L. Harrison, Route 1, Climax, Ga., received the Bronze Star Medal for heroism during ceremonies at Phan Rang, Vietnam, January 26. The sergeant, whose wife, Love Alerga, lives on Route 1. Tallahassee Highway, Cairo, Ga., completed his high school education in 1964 through the general educational development test. (*Thomasville Times Enterprise, February 15, 1967, Thomasville, Georgia*)

### Doug’s Comments:



The 2022 Annual Phan Rang AB Veterans Reunion is scheduled for 13-15 October in Mobile, Alabama. There still is plenty of time and rooms are available for you to get in on the action. We have many exciting things planned just for the reunion and the city of Mobile also offers many other entertainment opportunities. The annual reunion is a time to rekindle old friendships and make new ones, but the main thing to know is you will not be a stranger, in fact, you’ll believe you knew these comrades all of your life. To make a hotel reservation at the Mobile Marriott copy and paste the link that is displayed below into your browser. The reunion rate is effective three days before and three days after the event and to register for the reunion, click [here](#). Reunion shirts and other Phan Rang merchandise is available [here](#). I hope that you enjoyed this newsletter. This newsletter was composed by Douglas Severt and all graphics by Douglas Severt unless otherwise noted. To see a list of all previous newsletters click [here](#). To unsubscribe to Phan Rang News, [dougsevert@cox.net](mailto:dougsevert@cox.net) and put ‘unsubscribe’ in subject line.

<https://www.marriott.com/event-reservations/reservation-link.mi?id=1647882756323&key=GRP&app=resvlink>