

Phan Rang AB Newsletter

The History of Phan Rang AB and the stories of those who served there.
"Keeping the memories alive" Newsletter 258

In this issue:

LOG OF THE LEPER - The awesome firepower of an AC-47

Air-Ground Punch KOs Red on Hill

A day when Happy Valley was no longer Happy

Let Me Tell You a Story about a Christmas Tree

Doug's Comments

LOG OF THE LEPER

The awesome firepower of an AC-47

by Steve Birdsall



A Douglas AC-47 gunship dubbed "The Leper" supports North American F-100s bombing Viet Cong positions near Bien Hoa Air Base in January 1967, in an illustration by Jack Fellows.

The awesome firepower of an AC-47's miniguns was on full display when an Australian journalist bummed a ride with a "Spooky" crew.

In 1967 a blackened, burned-out wreck lay near the minefield on the perimeter at Bien Hoa Air Base in South Vietnam. It was just one of hundreds of American aircraft lost to enemy action, but there was something special about this one.

The airplane was a "Spooky," an AC-47 gunship. It couldn't seem to hold a coat of paint, so they

“Happy Valley” Phan Rang AB, RVN

The History of Phan Rang AB and the stories of those who served there.

Phan Rang AB News No. 258 **“...keeping the memories alive”**

called it The Leper, but it had logged one of the best in-commission records of any aircraft in the U.S. Seventh Air Force. The Leper had started out as a Douglas C-47 transport, serial no. 43-48356, that left the United States for Britain on August 5, 1944, to serve in another air war long ago. Between battles it had racked up time as a VC-47 with Logistics Command and Air Defense Command. In September 1965, Tactical Air Command sent the transport to Eglin Field in Florida to be modified as a side-firing gunship.

Eleven months later the old warhorse was at Bien Hoa with Detachment 3 of the 4th Air Commando Squadron. The squadron's five detachments were scattered throughout South Vietnam, from the north in I Corps at Da Nang, down through Pleiku and Nha Trang (the 4th's headquarters) in II Corps, to Bien Hoa near Saigon in III Corps and finally at Binh Thuy in IV Corps in the Mekong Delta.

Early in 1967, I was working in South Vietnam as a stringer (A stringer is essentially a one-person reporting team who handles all aspects of the job from interviewing sources to taking photos and video on-site. Stringers freelance. In many cases, the very first job that a newspaper or television reporter will have out in the field is as a stringer) for an Australian magazine, and I was keen to fly in one of the old gunships. My first opportunity came on the night of January 22 in The Leper.

Showtime for a Spooky mission from Bien Hoa was around 6:30 in the evening. After clambering into the round fuselage of the militarized DC-3, camouflaged sandy brown with two shades of green and deep black undersurfaces, I acquainted myself with the unique interior of the AC-47: the olive green walls, the flare boxes—one next to the door and one up front—the discolored white fiberglass flak curtains and, dominating it all, the three General Electric GAU-2/A miniguns in their SUU-11/A gun pods. Operating on a principle that went back more than a century to the first Gatling guns, each weapon was capable of pouring out 6,000 rounds of 7.62mm ammunition per minute through six rotating barrels.

“Happy Valley” Phan Rang AB, RVN

The History of Phan Rang AB and the stories of those who served there.

Phan Rang AB News No. 258 “...keeping the memories alive”



“The Leper” was a combat veteran long before it joined the 4th Air Commando Squadron at Bien Hoa. The gunship’s perpetually peeling paint and motley camouflage pattern earned the AC-47 its nickname. (Steve Birdsall)

One of the crewmen helped me into a parachute harness, reminding me to make the crotch straps tight and explaining why in no uncertain terms. He pointed out the quick-release clips and hung a chest-pack chute on the harness, with a warning to turn my head away if I had to pull the D-ring. I plugged the jack of my headset into the clip-on lead, and listened to the pilot and copilot run through the preliminaries as we taxied out from the flight line in the very late afternoon sun. It was hot, and sweat poured down the sides of my face. We were airborne while it was still light, and shortly afterward the navigator, Major **William H. Niemeier**, showed me where we were going and explained what we were about to do: patrol a road about 60 miles from Bien Hoa, close to the Cambodian border, looking for enemy convoys. During the six-hour flight we would fly about a thousand miles at around 135 knots.

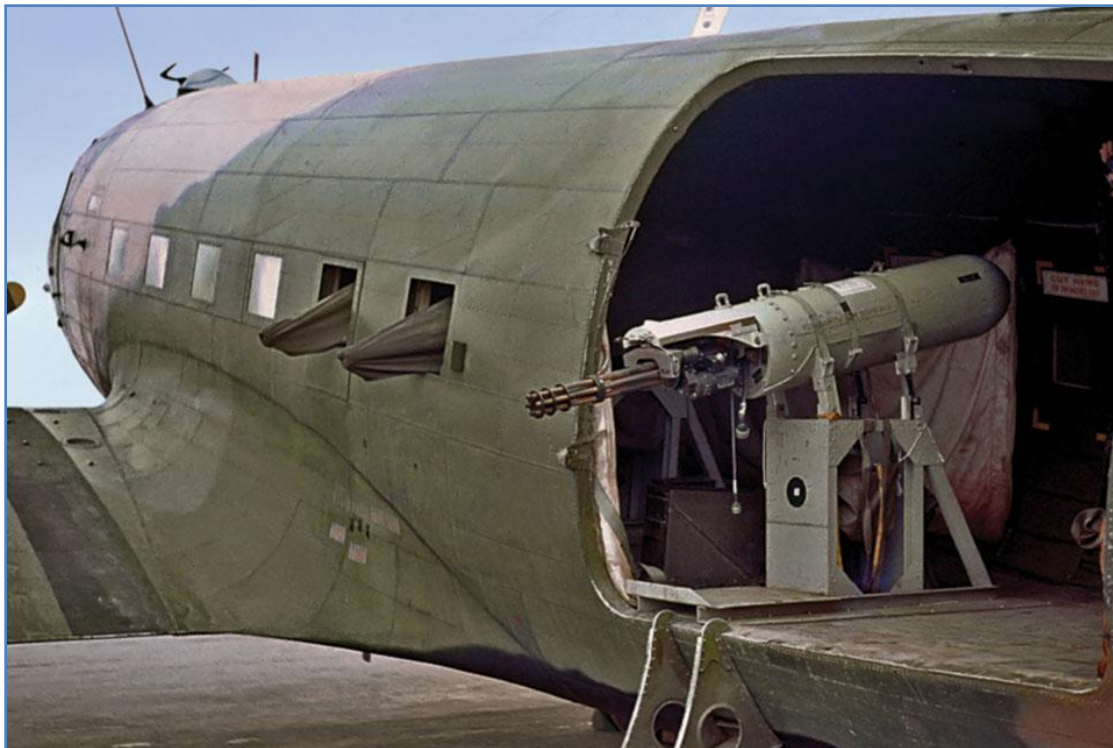
At 7:15 the road appeared below. By that time I’d removed my headset and moved back to the main door, now girded by two diagonal safety straps. The Kool-smoking loadmaster pointed to great holes in the ground below and beckoned me to lean my head toward him. He spoke close

“Happy Valley” Phan Rang AB, RVN

The History of Phan Rang AB and the stories of those who served there.

Phan Rang AB News No. 258 **“...keeping the memories alive”**

to my ear: “B-52s.” I nodded and we continued watching the flat, pleasant countryside.



AC-47s mounted three General Electric GAU-2 (M134) miniguns that fired 2,000 7.62mm rounds per minute (downrated from 6,000 rpm) from six rotating barrels. The miniguns were mounted in SUU-11/A aircraft gun pods, each of which held 1,500 rounds. Pilots generally fired about five-second bursts. (Courtesy of Steve Birdsall)

As darkness edged in the two gunners and a Vietnamese observer—who had to get approval for The Leper to start shooting—found various ways to pass the time. Two slept and one read by the light of a small lamp attached to the fuselage on a long flexible arm. Spooky dropped flares, the hours passed. Around midnight I was shaken awake and told we’d be landing in a couple of minutes at Saigon’s Tan Son Nhut Air Base for my convenience. Major Niemeier looked apologetic as he explained, “The other bird’s out where we were at the moment, shooting at sampans on the river—it’s the luck of the draw. Come back and see us again.”

At that time I was heading north to Pleiku and Da Nang, and I wasn’t sure I’d be accepting his kind invitation. But The Leper, with its peeling paint and gray-patched wing edges scarred by the flicked-off phosphorus of the tracer streams, was hard to resist. So a couple of weeks later I again took the monotonous military bus ride from Saigon to Bien Hoa, and with more time to

“Happy Valley” Phan Rang AB, RVN

The History of Phan Rang AB and the stories of those who served there.

Phan Rang AB News No. 258 “...keeping the memories alive”

spend I visited some of the Spooky pilots of Detachment 3 in their quarters. Major **Harley Jeans**, the operations officer, talked about the flak curtains, which some of the gunners I’d met had less-than-boundless faith in. He explained how they were effective if they were slack, but rigid they could not “swallow” a hit. Jeans had a greater concern: “I haven’t felt safe since I saw my first flare, and I won’t feel safe until I see my last,” he said.



An AC-77 cuts loose on an enemy target with two of its three GE GAU-2/A miniguns. (Larry Burrows/Getty Images)

The flares that caused so much consternation were magnesium parachute flares weighing 28 pounds each. These 30-inch cylinders were 4½ inches in diameter and generated 1 million candle-power for three minutes. If Spooky took a hit in a flare box from an incendiary round, that was it—the aircraft was incinerated. Most Spookys that were lost were thought to have suffered that fate, and it was something you tried not to think about.

My second Spooky mission began the same way as the first, and again in The Leper, with Captain **Charles A. Boatwright** and his crew. I received another briefing on emergency

“Happy Valley” Phan Rang AB, RVN

The History of Phan Rang AB and the stories of those who served there.

Phan Rang AB News No. 258 **“...keeping the memories alive”**

procedures, this time from the loadmaster. He was blunt: “The main exit is the door back there. There are two emergency exits on each side, but the number-two gun’s in that one,” he said, pointing to the left side of the aircraft. “If we take a hit in the flares you won’t be able to get out the door.” He needed to say no more, but continued, “If we have to jump, you go out fourth and try to stay near one of us. Count to three or four before you pull the D-ring at the altitude we’ll be at.”

Again the pleasant countryside stretched out below, beneath a brilliant sunset. The dying fires of an afternoon napalm strike flickered around a blackened patch of ground. One of the gunners read Stars and Stripes sitting on a row of ammunition boxes by the number-one gun. Soon it was dark.

I was dozing off when I felt a tap on my shoulder. I slipped off the disconnected earphones that served a dual purpose by blocking out some of the engine noise. The words “*We’ve got a mission*” brought me to my feet.

The gunners were arming the miniguns, the sparse light of their little lamps catching the rich coppery glint of the bullets. I moved back against the rear bulkhead by the main door and watched the flares cast a strange light over the earth below, creating deep, ominous shadows. A tiny shape passed below, a forward air controller (FAC) in his Cessna O-1 Bird Dog. Another gunner armed flares by the light of a small flashlight. As he did so he dropped the milky white plastic lids into a quickly filling ammunition box. There was something immediately familiar about those lids, and I couldn’t help thinking that this would be some place to have a Tupperware party. Down below, the flat curving gash of the Song Be River reflected the yellow flare light like a mirror. As the light faded, the on-and-off red glow of our overhead revolving beacon glanced off the wing.

“Happy Valley” Phan Rang AB, RVN

The History of Phan Rang AB and the stories of those who served there.

Phan Rang AB News No. 258 “...keeping the memories alive”



A time-lapse exposure captures gunfire pouring from an AC-47 defending Tan Son Nhut Air Base during the 1968 Tet Offensive. Every fifth round fired was a tracer. (U.S. Air Force)

In the darkness below a Special Forces camp was under mortar attack, and they wanted air support, but the FAC couldn't find a target for us. So Spooky hung around, dropping flares. As the stock in the rear compartmented box was exhausted, the crew formed a chain to move more down from the forward box. A gunner methodically set the flares, and the loadmaster attached them to the lanyard and heaved them out at regular intervals. They drifted down, their glow illuminating the land and, dimly, the aircraft interior. Then the loadmaster spotted groundfire. The Viet Cong were shooting at us with tracers, and everybody tried to pinpoint the position for a firing pass.

Suddenly, the whole aircraft lit up. The roar was deafening, like an insanely loud, grinding buzz—nothing like a gun. The blaze of light moved up the aircraft as Boatwright changed guns, a molten glare framed by the small windows. I saw a great pale yellow tongue reaching out from the side of the airplane, and I could smell the fire. The interior of the AC-47 was as bright as day as streams of red tracers arced toward the ground.

The guns were sighted by the pilot and fired individually. His firing pass was a left bank, and with incoming fire he varied the pattern of each pass. One time it would be a figure eight, then perhaps an oval—enough variation to prevent Charlie from tracking Spooky too accurately.

“Happy Valley” Phan Rang AB, RVN

The History of Phan Rang AB and the stories of those who served there.

Phan Rang AB News No. 258 “...keeping the memories alive”

The number-three gun roared as we got on target again, and a thick stream of brass shell cases poured down into an ammunition box that had been empty just minutes before. Everyone worked swiftly and precisely. The flame died and the barrels of the gun glowed dull red. Another was firing as I moved down the fuselage close to the forward window and watched the pattern of fire from the number-one gun, the tracers spraying out. It was beyond description—people were always pleased to cite the gee-whiz fact that the miniguns could spread a projectile every six inches over an area the size of a football field, but it’s still not easy to imagine. Moving forward to the cabin, I looked over Boatwright’s shoulders at the lit-up reflector gunsight at his side. Below the dully glowing, red-lit instrument panel his feet were constantly moving, manipulating the rudder pedals.



The AC-47 burns at Bien Hoa on March 23, 1967, after losing an engine to sniper fire during takeoff. (Chuck Boatwright via Steve Birdsall)

When it was over, all 60 flares had been exhausted and 7,500 rounds had been fired. The enemy was “suppressed” and it was time to go back to Bien Hoa after a relatively short mission—three hours. Spooky would reload and go right out again. I’d completed my second Spooky mission; Chuck Boatwright had completed his 169th.

“Happy Valley” Phan Rang AB, RVN

The History of Phan Rang AB and the stories of those who served there.

Phan Rang AB News No. 258 “...keeping the memories alive”

About seven weeks after I left Bien Hoa, Boatwright was taking The Leper out on Spooky 41, the “early CAP” mission from 1900 to 2400 hours. It was still light and the plane yawed to the right as the gear was coming up. The right engine was about to quit, so the copilot, Captain **Erik Vettergren**, feathered the prop as Boatwright tried to turn back, realized it was impossible and headed for an open area. The Leper landed gear up, slid about 80 yards and 180’d, twisting the tail assembly at a 90-degree angle. The gunship came to a stop backwards as the left fuel tank exploded. The pilots lit out through their overhead hatch and jumped 15 feet to the ground. Boatwright hit wrong and broke his wrist, his leg and some small bones in his foot, while Vettergren broke an elbow. The rest of the crew didn’t get a scratch. The next morning they found several bullet holes in the right wing and deduced that they had been shot down by sniper fire off the end of the runway. After 24 years, The Leper’s luck had finally run out.

Aviation historian Steve Birdsall writes from Sydney, Australia. For further reading, he suggests: Grand Old Lady: Story of the DC-3, by Lt. Col. Carroll V. Glines and Lt. Col. Wendell F. Moseley; and Douglas DC-3: 60 Years and Counting, by Ed Davies, Nick Veronico and Scott Thompson.

Log of the Leper appeared in the July 2017 issue of *Aviation History Magazine*.

Air-Ground Punch KOs Red on Hill

(Article provided by Dan Brownell, date unknown)

PHAN RANG, Vietnam (Special) - Aided by 17th Combat Aviation Group gunships, Korean troops recently secured a mountain just northeast of here after four days of hard fighting that left at least 71 enemy dead.

The hill, heavily contested by Viet Cong Troops, was believed to have been the base for several attacks on Phan Rang AB.

Slicks from the 48th Assault Helicopter Co., 10th Combat Aviation Bn., inserted 4th Co., 1st Bn., 30th ROK Regiment troops near the base of the mountain. As they started the slow climb small arms fire chased them back down.



17th Combat
Aviation Gp. Crest

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The History of Phan Rang AB and the stories of those who served there.

Phan Rang AB News No. 258 **“...keeping the memories alive”**



The 48th's gunships quickly moved in with suppressor fire, allowing the ROKs to advance again. The heavy bombardment snipped away the thick brush and other vegetation the VC had used for concealment, leaving Charlie vulnerable.

By mid-afternoon, the Koreans had reached the enemy and killed 19 in the vicinity of the cave and bunker complex.

They made a haul of enemy arms and munitions. Including four carbines, three submachine guns, two AK47s, and 133 rounds of ammo, a CKC (Russian-made machine gun), 10 B40 rockets, 20 pounds of TNT, five anti-personnel mines, three anti-tank mines and 27 enemy documents.

At 9:30 A.M. the following day, another enemy force ambushed the 4th company as it tried to ascent the same mountain.

Again, using the 1-2 punch of air power and ground assaults, the Allies overpowered the enemy and uncovered a supply of mortar and rocket rounds.

As the Koreans inched their way forward, the 48th's gunships airlifted ammunition, supplies, food and other combat essentials, using whatever means possible to reach their comrades below.

At about noon, the 1st Co., supported by the 48th's “Joker” gunships, killed an additional 12 of the enemy forces in a bunker position. The Koreans found a carbine that had been lost in action by a 48th gunship pilot earlier in the month.

The next day found the Koreans and Americans again working as a team. As they proceeded to the summit, the Koreans left 15 more enemy soldiers dead in their path.

By late the fourth day, at least 71 enemy troops had been confirmed killed and blood trails indicated the VC had possibly suffered even a heavier loss.

“Happy Valley” Phan Rang AB, RVN

The History of Phan Rang AB and the stories of those who served there.

Phan Rang AB News No. 258 “...keeping the memories alive”

A day when Happy Valley was no longer Happy

by Lupe Saenz

Sad day in my life when I found out that the Air Force base we fought hard to defend, made it the best for the Vietnamese, fell to the enemy in April 1975.

Here is a brief on it: **Capture of Phan Rang Air Base**

"As the war in South Vietnam entered its final days in April 16, 1975 the pilots at Phan Rang flew sortie after sortie, supporting the retreating South Vietnamese Army after it abandoned Cam Ranh Bay. For two days after the ARVN left the area, on 14 April the Wing Commander at Phan Rang fought on with the forces under his command. Airborne troops were sent in for one last attempt to hold the airfield, but the defenders were finally overrun on 16 April and Phan Rang Air Base was lost.

The last of the 2d Air Division abandoned the airfield with the remaining flyable airplanes, leaving four AC-119s which had flown in from Da Nang and two A-37s to the North Vietnamese. At dusk on 28 April, three captured A-37s, flown from Phan Rang bombed Tan Son Nhut in Saigon destroying a number of aircraft on the flight line. There are conflicting stories about who was actually flying these aircraft. One source insists they were VNAF pilots who were communists, another says they were VNAF pilots who were forced to fly the mission in return for the safety of their families, and NVA General Van Tien Dung claimed the A-37s were flown by North Vietnamese Air Force pilots.

Whatever the case, the A-37s escaped, despite being pursued by several SVNAF F-5s. Although the physical damage to Ton Son Nhut was not extensive, the threat of further air strikes eliminated Ton Son Nhut AB for fixed-wing evacuation flights, further lowering what little morale remained in the capital.

The result? We had just LOST South Vietnam.

"Happy Valley" Phan Rang AB, RVN

The History of Phan Rang AB and the stories of those who served there.

Phan Rang AB News No. 258 **"...keeping the memories alive"**

Let Me Tell You a Story About a Christmas Tree

by Rick Wiest

In 1965 after tech school at Lowry AFB in Denver Colorado I transferred from Indiana ANG to Buckley ANG in Denver. At Buckley I met Roger Sill and we became best friends. Since I had no family in Colorado, his family, Orville and Ruthie "adopted" me. In January 1968 we were called up to active duty and shipped to Phan Rang in May of '68.

Before I go any further, I must explain Roger's father. If you ever had a mental image of a construction foreman, tall, crew cut, heavy set, about 225 pounds, not fat, weathered face, gruff voice and very patriotic, this was Orville.

Well, come Christmas of '68, Orville was determined his "boys" were going to have a real Colorado Christmas tree. He proceeded to go to the mountains and cut a small tree for us. He got a mailing tube, put a small amount of soil at the base, wrapped it with wet rags, wrapped the whole thing in a plastic wrapper and slipped it down the tube.



Our tree in the cubicle before decorating.

He headed on down to the post office and gave it to the clerk. The clerk asked him what the tube contained so Orville explained what was in it. The clerk told Orville he was unable to mail it I believe, because it was a live tree. Well, that was the wrong thing to tell Orville. He proceeded to tell the clerk in no uncertain terms, that his "boys" were going to have a Colorado Christmas tree.

Although I can't say for sure, I believe there were some not so veiled threats made, and lo and behold, Roger and I had our live Colorado Christmas Tree!

“Happy Valley” Phan Rang AB, RVN

The History of Phan Rang AB and the stories of those who served there.

Phan Rang AB News No. 258 “...keeping the memories alive”



Santa Suit leads to one big party!

52 yrs. ago today, Christmas Eve 1970, a group of Shadows returned to Phan Rang after 1 month TDY to Phu Cat. The Shadows were flying missions all night to defend the Laotian outposts (Lima Sites) on the Bolevens Plateau in Southern Laos. The Pilot of my crew, Maj. Frank Golden, received a package from home while at Phu Cat. It was a full Santa suit. Upon our arrival back at home base, he put on his Santa suit and deplaned. Quite a sight on the Phan Rang flightline. That night, we had one big party – officers and enlisted, at the enlisted barracks.



That night, we had one big party – officers and enlisted, at the enlisted barracks.

*Story and pictures by
Michael Drzyzga*



“Happy Valley” Phan Rang AB, RVN

The History of Phan Rang AB and the stories of those who served there.

Phan Rang AB News No. 258 **“...keeping the memories alive”**

Doug’s Comments:



It’s amazing that after having a “Happy Valley” Phan Rang AB Facebook page for approximately 14 years and over 2,100 members we still have on the average of seven people a week asking to join. Obviously more people are at the age when they are reflecting on their lives and searched us out. Increasingly we are seeing more surviving family members asking to join in the hopes of finding out more information about their family members service. As is typical with Vietnam Veterans they are often reluctant to talk about their service, except to fellow veterans, which sometimes leaves the families with questions. To date there have been 258 newsletters documenting the events and exploits of “Happy Valley” veterans and there will be many more to follow. I hope that you enjoyed this newsletter. This newsletter was composed by Douglas Severt and all graphics by Douglas Severt unless otherwise noted, however, without your stories, this newsletter would not be possible. To see a list of all previous newsletters click [here](#). To unsubscribe to Phan Rang News, dougsevert@cox.net and put ‘unsubscribe’ in subject line.