

“Happy Valley” Phan Rang AB, Vietnam
...keeping the memories alive

Phan Rang News No. 38

“Stories worth telling”

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John Ploof Assignment: Phan Rang AB, RVN (jpg)

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It Happened July 20, 1969 Near Nha Trang AB, RVN *(from a personal account of Mike Trahan)*

The date: July 20, 1969

The place: Near Nha Trang, RVN

We were airborne, in an AC-47 "Spooky" Gunship, on an H&I (Harassment and Interdiction) mission. Which meant we were just shooting up the woods to keep the enemy off balance.

I was the Aircraft Commander that night, and I knew a once-in-history event was about to happen. My navigator was monitoring the AM radio and I asked him to let me know when the time came. Right in the middle of a firing pass he said, "Mike, it's about to happen!" I stopped firing, rolled wings level and said, "Secure the guns for a few minutes." And then, "Men, monitor Alph Mike. This is something I don't want us to miss!"

We took a break from the war and flew around for awhile on that beautiful night, looking at the moon as we heard, 'Houston, Tranquility Base here. The Eagle has landed!' It would be a couple of hours before Neil Armstrong would step out and become the first human to set foot on another heavenly body.

As soon as our Moon Lander was down safely I said, 'Okay guys, back to the war. Guns hot!'

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Mike Trahan, "**The Gift Part Two - The Air Force Years**", featuring the Spooky Cover, is now available on Amazon.com in Paperback and Kindle. It contains a personal account of our mission out of Nha Trang and Phan Rang during the last nine months of USAF AC-47 operations in Vietnam.



Click [here](#) to buy.



Ask Aunt Phanny (*PHANFARE, 13 September 1967*)

Dear Aunt Phanny: I was taking a shower the other night and had just finished soaping down, when the water was turned off and I had to finish the shower in beer. My question is how do I get the yeast smell off. **Airman Smirnoff**

Dear Airman Smirnoff: Some people work for years and spend a fortune to smell like a brewery and here you are trying to ruin such a condition. (Try Water) when it is on. **Aunt Phanny**

Dear Aunt Phanny: I am a might worker, and have to sleep days. The other morning, I was shook from my bed by what sounded like a Mortar attack. My bed jumped up and down; I jumped under the bed. How can I tell when the base is being attacked? **Sgt York**

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Dear St. York: If your bed jumps 3 times or less don't worry, but if the roof of your barracks starts falling and you smell smoke, hear a siren; It is a reasonable assumption that an attack is in progress. ***Good Luck Phanny***



The patio of the Bamboo Viper as seen through a 28mm fisheye lens. Photo by Joseph Burkhart.

Squadron Commanders Share Medals, Friendship (*PHANFARE, 13 September 1967*)

The recent awarding of Distinguished Flying Cross medals to the commanders of two F-100 Super Sabre Squadrons climaxed an 18-year friendship between the two combat veterans.

Lt. Col. Kenneth P. Miles, commander of the ‘Lucky Devils’ of the 614th Tactical Fighter Squadron, and Lt. Col Julian D. Sawyer, commander of the ‘Black Panthers’ of the 615th Tactical Fighter Squadron, began their long friendship as aviation cadets.

They won their wings together in 1949. After that Colonel Miles observed, “We instructed together and flew together for about three year...we’ve always kept our friendship alive by wirting each other and visiting each other...I consider Colonel Sawyer my best friend in the Air Force.”

In February, the two officers ferried F-100's into Phan Rang Air Base from the U.S. and have been flying missions from here since that time. Colonel Sawyer readily admitted that rivalry exist between the Black Panthers and the Lucky Devils, and said of his long time buddy: “He’s a tough one to compete with.”

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The two squadron commanders received Distinguished Flying Crosses in joint ceremonies at the headquarters building. Lieutenant General James V. Edmondson, Vice Commander of PACAF, made the presentations.

Colonel Miles received his for leading a flight of F-100's in a series of air strikes which prevented enemy forces from overrunning an Army unit of the Republic of Vietnam and destroyed 35 per cent of the target area in the process.

Colonel Sawyer received his medal for leading three F-1200's on a series of air strikes which killed 35 Viet Cong soldiers at their base camp and resulted in the capture of enemy rifles and automatic weapons.

“This was on activity,” Colonel Sawyer commented, “in which air power and Air Force aircraft alone were the reason for the destruction of enemy forces.”

Recently the two officers participated in a briefing on base attended by General William C. Westmoreland, commander of U.S. Forces in Vietnam. Afterward General Westmoreland said:

“The close support (of Army ground operations) that is provided by the F-100's based here at Phan Rang has been of the highest order.”

General Westmoreland simply reflected again the close relationship between the Air Force and the Army, “ Colonel Sawyer declared, “We're here to support eh Army exclusively...that's the name of the game.”

Engineers Build AF Parking Ramp *(The Stars and Stripes, Monday, April 15, 1968)*

PHAN RANG, Vietnam (Special) — A construction team of the 554th Civil Engineering Squadron recently completed a 30-day project to provide Air Force AC-47 Dragonships of Flight B of the 14th Air Commando Sq with a 600-by-375-foot parking ramp at this base.

The engineers removed 13,000 cubic yards of earth and 25,000 square yards of 'hot plant mix' asphalt, five inches deep, on the north ramp of the flightline. A total of 4,743 tons of hot asphalt, fresh from the squadron's asphalt plant, went into the new ramp.

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Detachment Relocated (*The Stars and Stripes*, Monday, April 15, 1968)

PHAN RANG (Special) —Det 1, 504th Tactical Air Support Group (TASG) recently completed a move from Binh Thuy to Phan Rang Air Base. The detachment operates the Theater Indoctrination School (TIS) for all forward air controllers (FACs) reporting for duty in Southeast Asia.



Dear Nguyen, just read a letter put out by the Base Commander about our Viking Theater and escort of Vietnamese guests. Seems as though to do this, written permission is now required. However, my question is this. This certain Vietnamese female employee I know is authorized to be on base during the late evening work hours. Is this written authorization needed to bring her on base during the daytime to attend a movie? If so, does the paperwork need to be renewed for each visit? And finally, what are the chances of bringing two guests at one time? Wondering

Dear Wondering, Yes, yes, and no. As it presently stands, the base work pass is valid only for her to go from the main gate to place of duty at the start of her shift and return directly to the main gate at the termination of her work day. The regs don't allow for an early arrival and a movie - - this would require a letter approved by the Base Commander and 35th SPS commander. As to your second question, yes the letter would be required for each visit. And for your third question, better find a GI friend for the second girl, one guest per sponsor - - now I know a lonesome old master sergeant who.... Nguyen

Dear Nguyen, the food at the RMK dining hall is mighty fine but the heat there is something else, particularly during the high noon meal. Could they open the windows or something to reduce the heat and provide a little ventilation? Sweltering from AMS

Dear Sweltering, I checked with the RMK troops and their answer was, "You're telling us it's hot!" Unfortunately the building was constructed with sealed windows (so we can't open them and the air conditioning isn't up to keeping temperatures down - - and fans aren't available.

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The men did thank you for the compliment on the food though and said they aim to make up in quality what they lack in comfort. Nguyen

Dear Nguyen, I’m not a finicky eater, but I would like to like to know what I’m getting when I order food at the NCO Club. By that, I mean will the potatoes be baked, mashed or french fried; will vegetable be peas, succotash or corn; will the salad dressing be oil, french or vinegar? I’m not against surprises but I’d prefer to have them on Christmas and birthdays. Could the menus be explanted to include this information? Shadow

Dear Shadow, Sergeant Wilson, the club secretary, has been trying to do something about your problem. White letters for menu board was ordered nearly six months ago as were menu covers - - but the stuff has to come from half way around the world. The wheels of progress grind slowly, but be assured, they’re grinding. Nguyen

‘Happy Valley’ Phan Rang AB Reunion Information



**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. 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](#).

Here’s a breakdown of the activities for the reunion:

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- **Tour 1 -10 Oct.** - Davis-Monthan AFB and Bone Yard Tour (See note below). This tour is open to only 54 people (one bus is all that the base will allow) and you can [sign up](#) for that tour and we will request from the participants base points of interest where they would like to visit. In addition when you sign up I also need full name, SSN, date of birth, driver’s license number and state of issue or if you have a military ID just state that as I need to prepare a ‘Guest List’ of all visitors and provide to them five days prior to the planned visit. The transportation cost for this tour is \$16.00 per passenger and is approximately 6 hours in duration. The bus will probably stop at a base restaurant or the BX for lunch and you will be on your own.

- **Tour 2 -10 Oct.** -Pima Air and Space Museum and Bone Yard Tour. You are on your own for lunch at the museum snack bar. Please visit the [museum web site](#) for information about the museum. The cost of this tour for transportation is \$21, \$12.50 for museum admittance, \$6 for Bone Yard tour and \$5 for a docent making the total cost at \$45.00 per person.

- **Tour 3 -11 Oct.** - Pima Air and Space Museum...the bone yard is closed on the weekends. There is a \$16.00 transportation cost for this tour and \$12.50 museum admission cost. The total cost for this tour is \$29.00 per person. You are on your own for lunch at the museum snack bar. Please visit the [museum web site](#) for information about the museum.

- **11 Oct.** - Southwest style Banquet buffet style in the Bonsai-Boojum Room. The cost of the banquet is \$56.00, which includes a 22% service tax and 8.1 sales tax.

- All dates - the hotel courtesy bus is available to the Park Mall as well as all other destinations within a 3-mile radius of the hotel.

Here’s the cost breakdown for the various activities:

- **Tour 1** - Base and Bone Yard Tour and banquet and reunion fee: \$82.00 per person.

- **Tour 2** - Pima Air and Space Museum and Bone Yard Tour, banquet and reunion fee: \$112.00 per person.

- **Package 1** - Includes Tour 1 and Tour 3, banquet and reunion fee: \$111.00 per person.

- **Banquet only** and reunion fee: \$66.00

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Please select from the options above (the cost stated are for each participant) and mail your check to:

Jack Anderson
826 72nd St. SE
Auburn, WA. 98092

If you have any questions, please [write](#) or call Doug Severt at 405-732-5449. Once you decide on what you plan on doing please let [me](#) know as I will be keeping track of participants for each tour. If you DO NOT plan to attend the reunion you DO NOT need to respond. **For Tour 1 participants, I will only consider you as being signed up when all required information is supplied.**



Vietnam Remembrances - Tales of the Flight Line saga continues

This week we are going to jump right to Chapter 15 - **Mortar Pool**

We were getting hit almost every night following the January 26 attack. Things were a little tense, especially around eleven p.m. Between then and two a.m., they would hit. Sometimes there were mortars alone, and sometimes mortars and rockets. Rockets were the scary ones. You never knew when or where they would hit. Normally, the VC "walked" mortars in pairs, each of them advancing about twenty-five feet or so ahead of the last one and twenty feet apart, like giant steps in the sand, right, left, right, left, each alternating and advancing from the previous one. If you could identify where they were and which direction they were headed, they could be avoided, somewhat like avoiding a tornado. Sometimes they would saturate-bomb an area. That was the most nerve-racking, especially if you happened to be in that area.

The rockets were something else again. They sprayed all over the place without warning. We never knew when they were coming, there was just a sudden, violent explosion when they hit. In war movies it's said the one you don't hear is the one that will kill you. We never heard the rockets coming before their loud, violent ends. They just appeared out of nowhere. In addition to the total surprise nature of them, the rockets carried at least ten times the explosives of a mortar. Mortars were 81mm, rockets were 122mm. They were serious business. Our internal alarm systems would go off when we heard the sirens. Outside of the times I was pinned down by mortars, I always feared the rockets the most.

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Aside story: Denny and I were at the roach coach (a trailer similar to ones that sell food affairs across the country) getting hot dogs and sodas. It was located in an area just off the flight line. I had just been handed my soda when a napalm rocket hit the vacant lot across the street from us. A rolling ball of fire swallowed everything for hundreds of feet, tens of feet high. We totally freaked out. Denny and I jumped into the flight line van, with me driving. I took a ninety-degree right turn onto the flight line and a ninety-degree left turn toward the bunker—slamming gears while driving a stick shift, mind you, totally focused on reaching the bunker. When we reached our goal, we bailed out of the van and ran into the bunker with heads down. Once inside, I looked down and saw that I hadn't spilled a drop of my drink that I held in a regular paper cup, without a lid (I don't think lids had been invented yet). How does someone do that? Steer around corners while shifting gears, jump out of a van, and run into the bunker without spilling any of an open drink he's carrying in his hand? Weird. Like the TV series that was popular at the time, I viewed it as, *The Twilight Zone*.

Actually, I was most upset that they would gather the gel from one of the dud napalms we had dropped on them and fire it back at us and have it go off in spectacular fashion. That image will never leave me. Had it not been intended to kill me, I may have been impressed.

When the first mortar or rocket would hit, or hopefully soon thereafter, an air-raid siren would go off for a couple of minutes. After that, a very powerful loudspeaker would come on and say, "The base is under attack, the base is under attack. All personnel stay under cover until further advised. All personnel stay under cover until further advised. This is Big Voice, out." They also had a phrase that gave us the all clear or changed the status from red to yellow, but unfortunately I don't remember what they said at that time. This was the only function of the loudspeakers. I don't remember them being used for anything else.

Anyway, back to my story.

We were being hit almost nightly, with some attacks far off and some oh, so close. I came up with the idea of having guys pay a buck and guess the time the first one would hit. If I didn't hear it hit, then I counted when the siren went off. The sirens were radar-controlled and designed to give us about a five-second advance warning before the first mortar or rocket hit. My watch was official and my decision final. Winner takes all. It was a great success. Even pilots and navigators got in on it. They would often ask the crew chief during debriefing what time the attack started to see if they had won. It lasted for several months until the attacks started winding down (they never quit completely). After a few days with no hits, I returned everyone's money for the last bet and called off the betting. I was getting a little tired of administering the whole affair without taking a cut in the action.

I called it the Mortar Pool.

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Sgt. Hardison was really indignant that I was doing this. He thought I was making a joke out of something that could kill any one of us at any time. I told him to lighten up. We were all taking our chances, and having some fun was a good thing in my mind. They had just better hope the mortar didn't hit me directly—I was carrying the money.

My interaction with Sgt. Hardison is a microcosm of why young people are sent to war. I was really cocky with him, cocky with the belief that nothing was going to happen to me. Young people just don't believe anything bad will ever happen to them. I was ten feet tall and bulletproof, or so I thought. Later developments, before I left, would temper my cockiness considerably.

I should mention that none of us showed any nervousness as we got close to eleven p. m. Usually we would be taken by surprise by the sound of the mortars or siren and only react after hearing one of them regardless of when it may occur. Occasionally, someone would look skyward about midnight and say, "Hey! Where are they?"

Others knew their time in the Mortar Pool was approaching and urged the attack to start. Some would act angry that their Mortar Pool time had elapsed and they hadn't won.

Many times I felt annoyed by the attacks. I thought, "Just let me finish this last bolt on this number one fuel pump before heading to the bunker!" Changing a number-one main fuel pump required climbing into the bomb bay and bending my body in all sorts of unnatural positions just to get to the damn thing. Having to climb out of there and head to the bunker wasn't something I would voluntarily do. Even if I didn't run, I would still have to straighten my arm, which was twisted up and around obstacles, just to look at my watch.

I sometimes found the VC's timing to be very irritating.

Our biggest frustration, though, was that we couldn't shoot back. We were always on the receiving end. We could only strike back vicariously through our planes. We always thought that sucked. We wanted to shoot something—anything. Nobody likes being a stagnant target.

Interestingly, with the thousands of mortars and rockets launched toward the Phan Rang Airbase the year I was there, not one B-57 on the ground got destroyed. Also, no 8th Tac Bomb personnel were killed or injured by them. The 352nd, which I was originally supposed to report to, lost some planes to them. I'm not sure if they lost any people or not, but I don't think so.

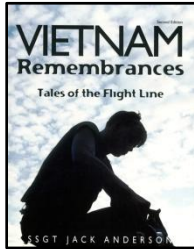
If you want to immerse yourself, please get the book. It's real easy, just click on the link below. Also if you've read the book and or would like to give some feedback either on the book or

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what you’ve read on these pages, please send in your comments. They are welcomed by both Jack and I.



Click on the book or [here](#) to order yours.

Tales of Phan Rang (part 12)

TALES OF PHAN RANG



BY ROBERT CHAPPELEAR

Tales of Phan Rang (Part 13) by Robert Chappellear

Tales of Phan Rang

Published by Robert L. Chappellear at Smashwords

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An account of the author's one year tour of duty flying C-123 cargo aircraft in Viet Nam.
Provides descriptions of life in country and the missions that were flown.

This book is a description of that year providing an insight into what it was like to live and fly in that conflict and during that time of the war.

About Robert Chappellear

Retired from two careers, the first was as a fighter pilot for the USAF; the second as a system engineer for a defense contractor. Accumulated 6000 hours of flying time in 7 different operational assignments including three tours to Asia and one to Europe. As an engineer I worked on the airborne command post, nuclear aircraft carriers, presidential helicopters, and various other communication systems.

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Married with three sons and one step daughter and three grandchildren (1 grandson, and 2 granddaughters). Though I have made 36 moves during my lifetime I am now settled in Minnesota.

Chapter 13 - Bu Dop

Bu Dop was a Special Forces A-Team outpost located in southern II Corps close to the Laotian border. I only landed there once, but that landing was memorable. This airfield was like many others close to the border to which we delivered supplies. The runway ran north and south, it was about 3000 feet long, a bit short for a 112,000 pound cargo airplane, but it was 75 feet wide, plenty wide for a 110 foot wingspan airplane and made of dirt and gravel. There was a dirt turn off to the east at the south end of the runway, a dirt off load area about 100 feet wide by 200 feet long, and another dirt taxi way back onto the runway. I recall from something that happened later that this off load area sloped slightly to the east. The Special Forces A-Team camp was located to the north west of the runway on top of a hill which peaked about 300 feet above the runway. There was a dirt road leading from the runway up to that camp and I later noted multiple coils of concertina barbed wire and sandbagged bunkers arrayed down the hill from the camp. The main part of the camp was surrounded by sandbagged bunkers and trenches. There was a smaller compound in the center of the fortified area comprised of three long semi-dug in buildings forming a triangular area with a circular pit in the middle. If you ever saw the John Wayne movie called “The Green Berets” you have seen this camp. We found out later that there were 11 Americans at this camp and 400 to 500 Montangards.

Since this was the first time that I had ever landed at this base I made a low pass from south to north over the runway. I pulled up to the right or towards the east because I knew that the base was so close to the Laotian border that if I went west I would probably “violate” Laotian airspace. Everything looked OK for a landing so I turned to a right downwind leg of the traffic pattern, called for gear down, assault flaps and before landing check-list. I then turned to a right base leg and then to final. Everything looked fine and I touched down a couple hundred feet down the runway. The landing was good and we had lots of room so I didn’t have to use reverse thrust or even heavy breaking to make the turn off that was a couple hundred feet short of the north end of the runway. We were supposed to make four or five more sorties into Bu Dop that day carrying loads from Cam Rahn Bay so I wanted to save room in the off load area and not just drop the cargo helter skelter. I turned the aircraft ninety degrees to the runway and had the loadmaster go out the back on a 100 foot long intercom cord so that he could direct me in backing the aircraft to the edge of the cargo area where we would push the cargo out of the bay and down the ramp. He backed me right to the edge of the ramp and we pushed the cargo out. But before I could pull forward the loadmaster said, “Wait a minute Lieutenant I’ve got to look at something.”

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I then saw the loadmaster standing in front of the aircraft looking under the nose. He looked up at me with wide eyes and mouth gaping open, and then he ran back around the wing to avoid the spinning propellers and back to the cargo ramp where he could reconnect to the aircraft intercom system. He was breathless when he came up on the intercom and said, “Lieutenant, both of the nose wheel tires are flat!”

I said, “What?” I guess that the eastward slope of this cargo off load area and the fact that we were facing to the west, hid the fact that the nose was angled down.

The loadmaster repeated, “Sir, both of the nose wheel tires are flat. It looks like we picked up pieces of mortar or artillery shell fragments from the runway and they are both flat as pancakes.”

The flight engineer then says, “Let me go take a look Lieutenant C.”

I cleared him off the intercom and he left the flight deck to look at the tires also.

I saw him out front and he disappeared out of view as he crawled under the nose. When he reappeared he looked up at me and gave me the “sliced throat” signal to cut the engines. My co-pilot and I performed the engine shut down checklist and we too got out of the airplane to look at this. Just as was reported the tires were shredded. The wheel rims prevented the nose gear doors from dragging in the dirt but only by about 4 inches. I thought about it for a few seconds and then said, “Let’s crank up the Auxiliary Power Unit and get some electrical power on the airplane so we can radio for help.”

We started the APU and while making the initial radio calls to Hilda, I noticed a jeep coming down the road from the Special Forces camp. While I was explaining the situation to Hilda, a jeep bearing the Army Special Forces team commander arrived. He came up to the flight deck and waited for me to finish the conversation with Hilda.



Nose Tires on a C-123

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After I finished he said, “Looks like you got a problem.”

I agreed and told him that we had advised our command center and they would send out some maintenance personnel with spare tires, and equipment. He asked if I had any idea how long. When I replied no, he then said, “There’s a sandbag bunker right over there on the north side of the cargo off load area, when the mortars start landing you can take cover there. When they stop we’ll send someone down to see if there are any survivors. I hope you guys get this damn airplane out of here before we get hit.”

I got back on the radio to Hilda and passed to them the team commanders assessment that our airplane was nothing more than a “mortar magnet” and his hope that we could get it out in one piece rather than leaving it laying there as a melted piece of scrap aluminum.

We made that landing shortly after 0700. It was now about 0800 and since we were in the beginning of the southwest monsoon season the weather at that airfield was starting to deteriorate. Either I or the co-pilot remained on the radio for rest of the day giving weather observations and requesting updates to the status of the repair parts and the mission that would bring them in to help us get out of there. Finally about 1700 I was getting really worried about getting out of that place and I got back on the radio to Hilda. I informed them that I was worried that the relief airplane would not get there before dark and I asked what was the status of that mission. The duty officer calmly informed “not to worry, a special mission was “fragged” to bring us two tires and equipment the next day.” He told us that we should go “check into the Visiting Officers Quarters (VOQ) for the night and they would call us in the morning.” I asked him just where in the hell he thought we were and he replied, “Why you’re at Cam Rahn Bay aren’t you?”

After I pulled myself down off the ceiling I informed the duty officer that we were not at Cam Rahn Bay but rather we were at a Special Forces A-Team camp located about one quarter of a mile away from Laos and then I asked why did they think we had been giving them weather observations for our location all day? He said that they all wondered why our weather reports were not the same as those being transmitted by the Cam Rahn Bay weather station.

I then repeated the Army Captain’s prediction that there would be nothing left of this airplane except for a puddle of melted aluminum and advised Hilda that I was going to seek shelter with the Special Forces A-Team. I told them that if we still had an airplane the next morning we would call on the radio.

The co-pilot, flight engineer, loadmaster and I then picked up our flight bags, closed up the airplane and began the walk up the dirt road towards that Special Forces camp. We raised our hands high over our heads and started shouting every obscenity that we could think of as we approached the barbed wire. We had been taught that use of true street level slang was the best method of verbally identifying yourself to another American. We were maybe 25 feet short

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of the barbed wire that had been stretched across the road when a voice over a loudspeaker system told us to, “Freeze, do not take another step!”

As we stood perfectly still we watched two obvious American Special Forces soldiers come out of a trench at the top of the hill and start coming down the hill. They walked a weaving path down the road and moved the multiple coils of razor sharp concertina wire to the side as they descended towards us. The guy in the lead stopped every few feet and bent down to touch something. When they had opened up the last strand of concertina wire the Army Captain that had come down to the airplane approached me and said, “I guess we got four more American guns for the night. You guys follow me and walk exactly where I do.”

He led the way and I followed. We walked a zig zaggy path back up the hill. The rest of my crew fell into single file behind and the Army Sergeant brought up the rear. I looked over my shoulder and noticed that the Sergeant was dragging the concertina wire back across the road and where I had seen someone bend down before and touch something in the dirt, I saw that he was doing it again. This time however, I could see that he was reattaching firing wires to Claymore mines. When we got past the last strand of concertina wire we were met by five more members of the A-Team. There was one 1st Lieutenant and 4 NCOs. The Captain said that he was going to check the perimeter. The Lieutenant and NCOs would escort us to the team “long house” and help us get settled. It is true that we all became a little nervous for all of the Americans kept saying the same thing when they met us. They would each smile and say, “Great – 4 more American guns for tonight!”

I looked around and saw that the outer perimeter was comprised of a sandbagged trench system with small hut like hovels just to the inside of the trench. I saw many little Asian soldiers with wives, children, dogs, pigs, and chickens running everywhere. Every few yards there was a bunker like structure with machine guns pointing out toward the jungle. The whole perimeter was circular in shape and roughly 500 feet in diameter. As we were led toward the triangular fortification in the center I noticed that there were two additional circular trench systems with small huts and sandbagged defensive positions with successively smaller diameters around the center of the camp. This place honest to goodness looked just like the A-Team camp from the John Wayne movie.

We shortly discovered that the triangular shaped fortification in the center of the camp was an Americans only area. It was made up of sandbagged heavy timbered bunkers that were the Combat Operations Center, mess hall, latrine, medical facility, and quarters for the A-Team. There we met the rest of the team and realized that with our four guns we now had 14 Americans in the compound. We were escorted to the COC where the Team Commander briefed us on where they thought the attack would come from that night and then asked us if we had any ground combat experience. I admitted that I had been a slick sleeve grunt in the Army a few years before and he said that he had just the job for me. Neither the co-pilot nor the flight engineer had any specific training except for the introductory course in small arms

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given to all aircrew before being sent to Vietnam but the loadmaster had been a Security Policeman before cross training to become a loadmaster.

We then went to the armory where we were each issued a flak vest, steel helmet with liner, and an M-16 with eight magazines to supplement our .38 caliber standard issue aircrew weapon. The Army guys got a big kick out of the puny little .38 caliber “Combat Masterpiece” side arms holstered in our survival vests. Then we were taken to our preplanned combat stations. The flight engineer got assigned as an ammo carrier for a .50 caliber M-2 machine gun that was actually located in the bunk room where we were expected to sleep if not otherwise “engaged”. The loadmaster was assigned a .30 caliber air cooled machine gun position to man in case of attack. The co-pilot was given a quick checkout on “pulling bags” and setting the fuses for 82mm mortar illumination rounds. He was teamed up with an Army NCO who would actually do the aiming and drop the rounds down the tube. I was teamed with another NCO and he checked me out on fusing, pulling bags, and aiming the 4.2 inch mortar. He was happy to find out that I had been an enlisted guy in the Army and even though I had been a medic instead of an infantryman he thought better of me I believe for I had gone through infantry basic training and jump school. These days it is not so uncommon to see an Air Force Officer who is wearing jump wings for many Air Force Academy Cadets attend Army Parachutist school, but in those days not many Air Force types had jump wings and thus my background raised a couple of eyebrows among the A-Team.

We reassembled in the mess hall and while 5 of the Army guys proceeded off to perform other duties the 1st Lieutenant and four NCOs asked us if ribeye steaks, baked potatoes and salad were good enough for dinner. None of us Air Force types had had any chow since about 0500 so we all enthusiastically agreed. There were about 12 refrigerators and upright freezers arrayed about this combination kitchen and dining room. One of the NCO went over to one of the fridges, opened it and removed nine steaks. We watched as he stepped out the door to a 55 gallon barrel that had been cut in half and turned into a BBQ grill. He fired up the charcoal and while we waited for the coals to get ready, another NCO washed and wrapped some potatoes for baking and another started preparing a salad. The Lieutenant floored me when he asked if we would like to have a beer. We again all enthusiastically agreed and he opened another of the refrigerators. We Air Force types almost lost it when we looked inside for there were no shelves in this fridge; instead, the box was full from bottom to top and front to back with “Carling Black Label” cases. We were all very good guests and no one groaned or made any noises but we were all extremely disappointed to see this Carling Black Label stash. Let me tell you that Carling Black Label was the most despised alcoholic beverage ever foisted upon the troops in Vietnam. This stuff we swear was in rusty steel cans left over from WWII. This stuff was so scorned that the Army Class 6 stores (Liquor stores) finally had to make a rule that if you bought any beer of any kind you had to also buy a matching quantity of Carling Black Label. Even with these rules there are probably still hills of Carling Black Label beer rusting in jungle covered heaps where the US bases used to be there in Vietnam. Any way we all tried not to look disappointed, and instead tried to look appreciative as the Lieutenant, with a sly grin on his

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faced pulled out a case, walked over to the table, set it on the table, and then split the top open. Lo and behold!!! There in full glory and surprise to all of us Air Force types were 24 Philippine San Miguel Beers!!! The damn Army was sneaking “San MaGoo Beer” into Vietnam inside Carling Black Label cases. The Lieutenant looked around and said quite seriously, “Now don’t you guys go spreading our little secret about now ya’ hear?”

Now I never told anyone about this while I was there in Vietnam, but from the next day forward I was known to peek inside the cases whenever we transported Carling Black Label beer. I did this especially if I was delivering it to a Special Forces Camp and other C-123 crewmembers wondered why I would sometimes levy “Bookie Tax” and sneak a case of Carling into my flight bag. Oh well, what they didn’t know, wouldn’t hurt them, right?

Well we had a very good steak dinner drowned with a couple of San MaGoos and then we just sat around talking until dark. There was a radio turned to Armed Forces Vietnam playing quietly in the background but the Army guys were more interested in noises from outside. About 2100 I headed off for the bunk room and laid down on a bare mattress, with all of my clothes and boots on, Helmet, flak vest and M-16 close at hand. The A-Team commander and his troops were absolutely convinced that there would be an attack that night and that it would come from the Laotian side of the base.

About 0300 I was awakened by the “WHUMP, WHUMP, WHUMP” of incoming mortar rounds. I rolled off the bunk, put on the flak vest, helmet, grabbed the M-16 and headed for the 4.2 inch mortar pit. Enroute to my assigned station I saw that my co-pilot, flight engineer and loadmaster were all going to their assigned stations as well. There was lots of noise as the Montangards were also scrambling to the sandbagged bunkers and the trenches surrounding the camp. “WHUMP, WHUMP, WHUMP” three more rounds impacted. I expected at any second to hear an explosion of 2,000 gallons of aviation gasoline for I just knew that the airplane was the target. The A-Team commander called for three rounds of 81 mm illumination and for the Army Sergeant and me to prepare three rounds of 4.2 inch high explosive. “THUMP, THUMP, THUMP” the three rounds of 81 mm were fired in close succession. “POP, POP, POP”, was the sound they made as they illuminated and started their gentle descent as slowed by the small parachutes that are attached. You could hear them hissing as they descended. From my position right smack dab in the middle of the camp and surrounded by the A-Team’s bunkered quarters, mess hall, armory, and COC I could not see a thing except for the illumination rounds descending off to the west of the camp. My flight engineer and loadmaster who were stationed at defensive positions looking to the west later told me that they and a couple hundred Montangards peered intently toward Laos. They saw nothing. The A-Team commander then called for three rounds of 81 mm illumination to the north. The same thing happened, “THUMP, THUMP, THUMP, POP, POP, POP, and SSSSSSSSS, SSSSSSSSS, SSSSSSSSS” as the illumination rounds were fired, illuminated and descended to the north. Again nothing was seen. “WHUMP, WHUMP, WHUMP” were the impacts of three more incoming rounds, but this time we all realized that the rounds were impacting at the airfield at the bottom of the hill. Three 81mm illumination rounds to the east confirmed that all incoming rounds were indeed landing on the

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airfield runway. Then things got quiet. We remained at the defensive positions until sunup and though the Special Forces A-Team members had early versions of night vision devices they never saw any movement nor was there any ordnance fired on the camp itself. The co-pilot was the only one of our crew that actually got to fire anything that night, and his contribution was to “pull bags” for the illumination rounds. At about 0600 we “stood down” and part of the A-Team and us Air Force guys assembled in the mess hall for a little breakfast.

After breakfast the A-Team commander and I had a little talk. He assigned two of his NCOs and a couple of squads of Montangards to escort us back to the aircraft. When we got to the airfield I was surprised to see that the aircraft appeared unharmed. We could see small impact marks on the runways and we could actually count all 9 impact marks. The hard clay and gravel of the runway caused surface detonations of the mortar rounds and thus there were not even any real “craters” in the runway. The Montangards set up a defensive perimeter while I and the flight engineer approached the aircraft carefully. We walked slowly around the aircraft at a short distance and saw no holes in the skin, nor any signs of digging or other indication that there might be “booby traps”. I carefully opened the crew entrance door and looked inside. When I saw nothing out of place, the flight engineer and I entered and performed a closer examination. He actually went out the overhead emergency escape hatch and examined the top of the aircraft and I inspected the interior closely. The Special Forces NCOs and my co-pilot and loadmaster did a “FOD walk” of the runway. They found several pounds of mortar round shrapnel and tossed it off to the side of the runway. It had been mortar round shrapnel that started this whole adventure by puncturing my nose wheel tires in the first place. Just as they finished the “FOD walk”, the flight engineer and I completed the aircraft inspection we heard another aircraft overhead.

The flight engineer had already inspected the APU and so I started this electrical generator and turned on the radios. I called on the ALCC HF radio frequency for the aircraft circling Bu Dop Special Forces camp and they answered back as “Bookie 522”. I was surprised by that because we were “Bookie 522”. The AC on that other airplane said to relax, they were the new “Bookie 522” and that they had repairs on board. They asked for a assessment of the situation and I advised them that we had cleared the runway of pieces of metal, that we had walked the entire length and saw no indication of mines, and that when we had parked our airplane the day before we had moved it far enough back in the parking area that another C-123 would be able to get into and out of the area with ample clearance. It was probably this extra clearance from the runway that we had made which protected the airplane from the mortar rounds that had been fired at it that night. That other “Bookie 522” landed, turned off into the parking area and stopped right in front of us. The cargo door opened, the cargo ramp went down and they did an “engines running” off load. Six maintenance men, a gasoline powered air compressor, two large rubber bags, several tool chests and two new nose wheel TIRES were off loaded. The new “Bookie 522” AC came up on the radio and said, “See ya!” as he was taxiing back out to runway and then he wasted no time thundering down the strip and departing the area.

While the other aircraft was departing a Chief Master Sergeant came over to me and said they

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had brought extra tools and personnel just in case there was something other than just nose wheel tires that need to be replaced. It was an interesting operation to see that the big rubber bags were unfolded and slid under the nose of the aircraft both in front of and behind the nose wheel. Then the air compressor was started up and it inflated the bags. The bags were super jacks and lifted the nose high enough that a couple of the maintenance guys went under on their hands and knees and removed the old nose wheels. They rolled the old wheels out and other guys pushed the new wheels in. Then they deflated the air bags, pulled them out from under the airplane and folded them up. I looked at the Chief Master Sergeant and he smiling said. “Let’s go Lieutenant.”

I replied, “Not so fast Sarge – let’s load up the gear and then I and my crew will start the airplane up. We have not found any booby traps on it but, I don’t think you guys would like us to find one just as we started the airplane or taxied it out.”

He looked at me and replied, “Good idea Lieutenant!”

We loaded all of the gear aboard and the flight crew and I went through normal engine start procedures while the maintenance guys watched from the far end of the parking area. We got started and everything was OK, then I taxied over to the waiting maintenance crew. The loadmaster opened the cargo door and lowered the cargo ramp and the others loaded in and strapped down in those famous side facing canvas strap seats. As I pulled onto the runway I glanced to my left and saw the Army A-Team commander setting there in a jeep. I waved and he gave a quick grin and waved back. We ran the jets to military power, advanced the big recip engines to METO, released brakes, and rolled.

This seems like a good place to finish this story but it doesn’t quite end here. After climbing to 5000 feet, leveling off and setting course back to Phan Rang we made our standard radio call to “Hilda”. I reported that, “Bookie 522, the mission from the day before was airborne from Bu Dop, with 6 Pax, and maintenance equipment on board. We estimated Phan Rang in about 30 minutes.”

Hilda acknowledged the call and told us to contact Happy Valley ALCE ten minutes prior to landing. I began to get suspicious at this instruction.

We continued our trip back to Phan Rang and when we were about ten minutes away I called Happy Valley ALCE. They asked how much load we could carry for the next sortie. I replied, “Negative load, this is mission termination.”

There ensued an argument over the radio with Happy Valley ALCE insisting that I should take a load of something or other from Phan Rang to Dalat, and me insisting that we were terminating our mission. I tried repeatedly to tell them that even though we had the call sign of “Bookie 522” we were the mission from the day before and that we were already exceeding our crew duty day. Happy Valley ALCE refused to believe me. They kept saying that there could not be

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two missions with the same call sign on the same day. I then told them that I was going to land and taxi to the east side of the base. I said that I would call them from my wing command post. We landed and taxied to the east side. We shut down the aircraft and while the maintenance guys were unloading their equipment I walked to the wing headquarters and into the building. The highlands of Vietnam had red clay dirt that looked a lot like Georgia or Alabama. The Special Forces camp was devoid of all vegetation and all four of us crew members who had spent the night there were covered in red clay/dust. None of us had shaved, showered or looked anyplace close to half presentable. I walked up to the command post door in this slovenly disarray and picked up the telephone that calls inside to the duty NCO. The upper half of the door is a one way mirror and I know that the people inside can see me. Instead of the Duty NCO answering the telephone, the door opens and the Wing Commander is standing there. He says, “Chappy it looks like you had a hell of a night.”

I said, “You’re right sir. We got hit with mortars and while there was no ground attack last night it was not exactly restful, now Happy Valley ALCE thinks that we should fly the rest of the day.” The Colonel said, “Don’t worry son, you and your crew get back to your quarters, get cleaned up and may be I’ll see you at the mess hall tonight then you can tell me what happened. I’ll take care of Happy Valley ALCE and Hilda too!”

Thus ends the saga of Bu Dop and Bookie 522.



Authors In Our Midst

<p>By Steve Janke...click</p>	<p>By Robert</p>	<p>By Jack</p>	<p>By Vic Markle...click to</p>

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