

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

Phan Rang News No. 42

“Stories worth telling”

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Doug’s Note

Viet Bound Mail Worth More Than Gold (*Seventh Air Force News, October 2, 1968*)

(This article is very interesting because it gives you an idea of the massive effort it took on a daily basis to get the mail out and it goes along with an article that was in the Phan Rang News 41 titled “APO 96321: A Morale Builder”. I find a lot of these articles interesting regardless of the dateline.)

DA NANG — A letter is worth more than its weight in gold to U.S. servicemen in Vietnam, miles away from family and friends. Thanks to a group of dedicated Air Force postal specialists, such valuable pieces of property get fast and speedy delivery in the I Corps area.

"Mail is our biggest morale booster here," said Capt. Charles T. Fisch, officer-in-charge of the Aerial Mail Terminal at Da Nang, in a recent interview. "We can cope with the heat and rain or the living conditions, but when someone doesn't get a letter in two or three days, that's misery."

Under the Air Force's Headquarters Command, Detachment 1507, Vietnam District Pacific Postal Courier Service is one of three gateways for incoming and outgoing mail in Vietnam. Cam Ranh Bay AB and Tan Son Nhut AB are the other postal points.

"Our job here is to receive, process and dispatch mail for I Corps, primarily," Captain Fisch notes. "Next to Tan Son Nhut, which handles mail for both the III and IV Corps areas, we are the largest mail terminal in the Pacific."

Most of the mail coming into the Da Nang terminal is forwarded on to other sites in northern I Corps. Nearly 90 per cent of all mail handled by the terminal is bound for such isolated spots as Dong Ha, Chu Lai, and Phu Bai.

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"Less than 10 per cent of the mail we handle here is for Air Force personnel," he says. "The Marines, by far, get the most mail. The Navy and Army also get a good share but not as much as the Marines."

The detachment's 75 postal specialists handle up to 12.8 million pounds of mail a month during peak holiday seasons, averaging about 6 ½ million pounds monthly. "Christmas is still our biggest time of the year," he adds, "and this year we expect nearly 18 million pounds of mail to go through our terminal."

Nearly 90 per cent of the mail is handled by Military Airlift Command contract flights. The jets, carrying some 80,000 pounds of mail on a normal flight, unload and load their cargo at the Mail Movement Section, where bags of mail are sorted and sent to their final destination.

Mail from the United States is sent from two ports; Seattle sends mail originating from the northern half of the nation, and San Francisco sends mail from the southern half.

On an average day, the 35 workers of the section handle 100,000 pieces of mail. Once the bags are sorted, they are flown on C-130 Hercules cargo aircraft to their final destination. "This is the point," explained SSgt. John H. Stafford, Lake Butler, Fla., head of the Mail Movement Section, "where we sort—not the actual letters—but the bags of mail to the ultimate APO destination."

"This is the biggest single service of the Air Mail Terminal," added Captain Fisch. "At the Mail Movement Section, all inbound mail is sorted onto separate pallets. From this point on, the 15th Aerial Port Squadron handles the airlift of the mail. I have to give credit to the 15th APS for their expeditious mail delivery in I Corps," he remarked.

Mail bound for Da Nang AB and surrounding units is brought by truck to the Unit Breakdown Section, where it is broken down and sifted out to individual units.

The reverse happens to mail outbound for the United States. "The only difference in the mail going to the United States is that all mail goes to San Francisco," notes Sgt. Herbert H. King, Detroit, sergeant-in-charge of the Unit Breakdown Section.

The Mail Terminal indirectly supports the Vietnam action with hundreds of thousands of morale boosters. It also contributes directly to the tactical operation, handling all weapons systems pouches containing emergency parts and re-supply material.

"These men are the hardest workers I have had serving with me in 10 years," added Captain Fisch. "They realize how important the job they are doing is to the fighting troops here."

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Special Operations Aircraft Scramble, Broadcast to VC (*Seventh Air Force News, October 2, 1968*)

NHA TRANG — Three aircraft of the 14th Special Operations Wing here scrambled to the aid of friendly forces in contact with the enemy recently, forced the enemy to retreat and located two soldiers who got lost in the jungle during the fighting.

It began one night when an AC-47 Dragonship of the 4th Special Operations Squadron, piloted by Lt. Col. Richard C. Lathrop, Sarasota, Fla., was called to defend troops in contact along Highway One between Nha Trang and Qui Nhon.

A C-47 flareship, nicknamed Moonshine, relieved the Dragonship and began dropping flares to illuminate the area.

When word was received that two American Army troops had become separated from their unit and lost in the jungle during the fighting, a U-10 Courier loudspeaker aircraft the 5th Special Operations Squadron was scrambled from Nha Trang.

"We circled over the area where we hoped the missing soldiers were and used the aircrafts loudspeaker system to tell them that the enemy was no longer in the immediate area and it was safe to come out, said Capt. Harles T. Pinkham, Northfield, VT.

Sgt. Thomas C. Abbot, McConnellsburg, Pa., did the broadcasting while Captain Pinkham flew over the area, using the headlights of the ground radio operator's jeep, among other things, to determine the approximate location of the lost troops.

"We had broadcast for only 15 minutes when we were told the two missing men had heard us and emerged from the foliage," continued Captain Pinkham.

"They were safe."

C-123 Crews Aim for Passenger Comfort (*Seventh Air Force News, October 2, 1968*)

PHAN RANG—A maximum effort to improve service and comfort for the 90,000-plus passengers carried each month has been undertaken by the 315th Special Operations Wing here.

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For Better Service

PASSREP improvements such as seat belts and rubber floor matting, newly installed in passenger-carrying C-123 Providers, are checked by Lt. Col. Jack L. Goodman, Abilene, Tex., commander, 310th Special Operations Squadron, and Col. Gordon W. Lake, South Portland, Me., deputy commander for operations, 315th Special Operations Wing.

Col. John W. Pauly, Albany, wing commander, designated Maj. Robert A. Carlone, Colorado Springs, Colo., to head up project "PASSREP," short for Passenger Service Revitalization Program.

As a result of several meetings with squadron commanders and maintenance chiefs a number of possible improvements were suggested and a program of planned actions drawn up by Major Carlone.

Initially all passenger carrying pilots were briefed on crew "team" spirit, improved passenger comfort and adherence to scheduled takeoff times.

The second stage of PASSREP included outfitting the C-123 Providers with passenger information boards listing the crew names, new rubber floor matting, a plentiful supply of

ashtrays, ear plugs and jugs of ice water.

PASSREP also provides for a standardized all-inclusive briefing for the passengers covering all aspects of emergency procedures.

The Buildup

The ability of its members to adapt to the physical and social conditions encountered was as important to the Air Force's operations in Southeast Asia as tactics, technology, and doctrine. The alien environment of South Vietnam required considerable adaptation, even though it was, in some ways, oppressive to airmen than to those fighting on the ground. The bulk of institutional adjustments took place during the period of the vast influx in 1965 and 1966.

During this time, airmen assisted in raising their working and living conditions to an acceptable, if not ideal, plateau and learned to perform under climatic conditions and within a social and economic milieu they had little power to alter. While the degree of accommodation varied with individuals, the overall reaction to the situation was the emergence of a frontier" spirit, with

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both individuals and units relying to a large degree on their own devices to cope with the uncertainties of the war. The phrase that echoed with the greatest regularity from the reports of the period was "self-help."

During the deployment, the urgency of getting the tactical cutting edge the force into place as quickly as possible was a principal reason why operational personnel were often called on to create and improve their own facilities in the midst of fighting the war. As a result, support units lagged behind by months, forcing tactical organizations to initially provide much of their own support. This situation continued well into 1966, and it was not until late in the year that, as one fighter squadron commander noted, "the attitude has become one of the base supporting the fighter units and not the fighter units supporting the base, which was prevalent at first."

Throughout the year, the Air Force moved gradually closer toward its goal of decentralizing aircraft maintenance and other support functions by locating as many logistic organizations as it could at the lowest possible field level. While this decentralization had been a goal for many years, planning in the 1950s for massive nuclear retaliation or limited brushfire wars did not anticipate the problems that arose in Vietnam, where combat continued not for months but for years.

When the squadrons there were converted from temporary to permanent in late 1965, they at first performed their own light maintenance, while depending on bases outside the country—at Clark in the Philippines, at Naha and Kadena on Okinawa, and those on Taiwan—for heavy repairs, overhauls, and inspections. As the rapid buildup in 1966 saturated these facilities, field maintenance was gradually moved onto bases within Vietnam. The decision to continue to press on toward the goal of "maximum base self-sufficiency" was not made lightly. Enemy mortar and artillery attacks posed threats to units in the country. Nevertheless, the risk was deemed preferable to the amount of time lost shuttling planes thousands of miles across the South China Sea and to the frequent loss of parts in transit from offshore depots. In one instance, when the Air Force contracted with Air America to overhaul its U-10s on Taiwan, the program was seriously delayed because wings were misplaced when the aircraft were dismantled for shipment.

The movement toward decentralization also affected the engineers. When the escalation began in mid-1965, the Air Force's civil engineering contingent in Saigon numbered six people. By the time an adequate logistic and maintenance structure began taking shape near the end of 1965, combat units were already in place and in great need of operational and maintenance facilities. The engineers spent most of 1966 catching up, resorting to several ad hoc measures to bridge the gap until permanent organizations were functioning. Prime Beef teams, which

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were rushed into Vietnam for 120 days at a time, proved a useful expedient, but were far from a long-range solution.

The Red Horse engineering squadrons, 5 of which were in the theater by 1966, provided more permanent help but were often hobbled by lack of supplies. The inventiveness of operational personnel and their willingness to undertake much of the smaller construction went a long way toward easing the situation.

Creation of a permanent civil engineering structure throughout the country was slowed by the shocks the supply system experienced from many unanticipated elements in the Vietnamese environment. In the United States, supply organizations were manned for a system in which many items were bought on the open market and did not have to be handled or stocked. This was not the case in Vietnam where virtually all supplies were brought in from the outside. Supplies for the engineers and combat materiel competed for shipping priorities, both from the states to Vietnam and from the docks of Vietnam to the field. Frequently three to four months intervened between the time goods landed at the dock and arrived at the base where they were needed. In the states, moreover, stocks of supplies were automated for efficient inventory. The absence of adequate computer equipment in Vietnam during these early days often resulted in items being in the country and even on the base where they were needed, but hard to locate. Phan Rang, for instance, when ground crews needed parts for the F-100s, they went to the supply warehouse to locate those they could readily identify from experience. Larger items were found about half of the time after several hours of searching. Delivery times, after the items were located, varied from thirty minutes to six hours.

Finally, competition for the limited number of communication lines inside Vietnam slowed the supply system. The most time-consuming activity in the country was often that of higher headquarters trying to contact the field. At times, it took several days to get in touch with subordinate units.

Although construction in Vietnam came under the supervision of the Navy's Officer in Charge of Construction and the heavy work was contracted out to the combine of RMK/BRJ, these two organizations worked closely with the Air Force's engineering and materiel directorates in Saigon whenever air bases were involved. New bases were constructed according to priorities. "Horizontal" construction (runways, ramps, taxiways, and other elements essential to support the incoming weapon systems) came first.

Second priority was accorded to "vertical" construction of facilities needed to maintain the airplanes. Facilities for personnel and administrative needs were built last. In the interim, these personnel and administrative needs were met by Gray Eagle kits, the initial supply packages

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that contained minimum support equipment such as tents, electric generators, field kitchens, portable runway lights, and vehicles. As horizontal and vertical maintenance facilities were completed, barracks replaced tents and permanent generating plants supplanted the portable ones.

The transfer of logistic services into Vietnam continued throughout 1966 and into the following year, accompanied by much experimentation and some disruption of personnel and plans. As a result, working space throughout the country was at a premium and conditions were less than ideal as more and more units entered the country. The number of people at the air bases escalated more rapidly than did working areas to accommodate it.

At Tan Son Nhut, the Air Force population skyrocketed from 7,780 at the beginning of the year to over 15,000 at its end; and the U.S. airmen added their own structures to those built earlier by the Vietnamese, the French, and the Japanese. Units vied with one another for existing space—facilities for the new reconnaissance wing, for example, were at first wholly inadequate. Until November, the headquarters staff, whose numbers rose from 55 when the wing was created in March to 839 by the end of the year, operated from an open-air, poorly lighted, and crowded area alongside a busy helicopter pad. Dust and dirt were everywhere. Although the unit moved into remodeled offices in November, ancient French plumbing was unequal to the task. Frequent water outages gave rise to unsanitary conditions. A severe shortage of telephones hampered efficiency; and during a large part of the year, several offices shared the same numbers. It was difficult to contact many agencies because of busy lines.

Demands for computerized information grew steadily throughout the year. Initially installed and equipped to keep track of base supply items, the data automation unit at Tan Son Nhut exploded with requests for information on personnel, maintenance, the payroll system, airlift, and a host of smaller recurring and one-time projects. Yet this sensitive equipment, which was being used around the clock, was housed in a Quonset hut on the base's perimeter, where it was subjected to dust from passing vehicles and to temperatures and humidity changes that led to frequent breakdowns. The absence of dehumidifiers, plus exasperatingly long waits for replacement parts, led to lengthy periods when the equipment was not operating. Although technicians were flown in regularly from other bases to repair the equipment, this provided only temporary relief.

Efforts at self-improvement were at times frustrated by the overtaxed situation. Members of the C-123 squadrons at Tan Son Nhut spent much of their spare time renovating their crowded offices by insulating the walls, tiling the floors, rewiring the building, and installing air conditioners. When the work was complete, however, the power generator failed and the base could not provide a replacement. For 2 months, the airlifters used the modernized building

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without lights or ventilation. Finally, after much cajoling, engineers tied the facility into the base power lines. In another part of the base, the gunship detachment managed to acquire a 3-room air-conditioned trailer as sleeping quarters for its crews, but the nearest latrine was 500 yards away.

Da Nang experienced a similar increase of Air Force people, from 3,300 to 6,200.¹³ Virtually all the office buildings on the base were clustered around the two parallel runways and the taxiways. Work, meetings, and conversation were continually interrupted by the noise from aircraft taxiing and taking off 24 hours a day.

The operations building of the airlift squadron consisted of one large room with two small offices. It served as a weapons storage area, a radio facility for air-to-ground communications, a scheduling and operations office, a storage area for crew and aircraft equipment, a records section, and a sleeping area for the night duty officer, with another area set aside for the paperwork, weather briefings, and for posting the performance data needed by the crews on their daily missions. Squeezed in among all this was a crew lounge and refreshment center, flanked by a bulletin board on one side and a large intelligence map on the other. "It is a most compact structure," understated one officer, "serving as a continual reminder that we are indeed at war here." The squadron's administrative building, badly in need of repair, contained four small offices used by the commander, the administration officer, and the navigation officer.

Adverse weather conditions gave rise to unexpected difficulties with motor vehicles. Sandy soil, kicked up by water during the rainy season, wore down brake shoes and drums within 500 miles. Vehicle lubricants lasted less than a week on the bumpy, flooded roads. Twice as many vehicle maintenance people were needed as had been planned."

Two of the biggest headaches at Bien Hoa were caused by inadequate electricity and water. Available commercial electrical power, set for 50 cycles, wreaked havoc with U.S. equipment, which ran most efficiently at 60 cycles.

Until a new power plant was completed in November, portable generators were used, which proved costly in man-hours and equipment. The water came from an antiquated Vietnamese Air Force system that was in such poor shape, it operated only 4 hours each day. The Air Force purchased a well from the Vietnamese that provided enough water for everything but drinking.

The base engineers processed drinking water at a central point and distributed 30,000 gallons of it to 75 points each day. Large rubber water storage tanks holding 3,000 gallons were set up outside mess halls and clubs to reduce the number of trips by the tankers.'

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By December, Cam Ranh Bay, now a year old, was still working its way out of its growing pains. Some of the earlier operational problems had been solved, but others remained. Although the new concrete runway had opened in November, the taxiways were still of aluminum planking and many flights still used the old aluminum runway, which, in the words of one squadron commander, "continues to be a sporty proposition."

Soft shoulders and the lack of an overrun and aircraft barriers caused planes frequently to sink into the soft sand when they veered off the runway. Air traffic control remained a problem. The volume of aircraft traffic had built up to over 27,000 movements a month, and constant taxiway repairs caused frequent changes of taxi routes and increased ground time.

The F-4 squadrons were assigned offices so small that aircrew members had to carry on their business in their own quarters when they were not flying. Severe shortages of spare parts, a common complaint throughout the country, slowed down operations. The item in most critical demand was aircraft tires, which wore out at a phenomenal rate due to the nonstabilized shoulders of the taxiways, rocks blown onto the taxiway by aircraft, and the additional taxiing that was required to avoid construction.

The base at Pleiku blossomed during 1966 from an outpost of 150 men with no tactical mission to a base of over 2,100 Air Force personnel supporting and flying propeller-driven fighters, psychological warfare planes, gunships, forward air control observation planes, and rescue helicopters. The controller contingent with its 12 Bird Dogs was moved around the base to 3 different locations during the year, ending up in an area devoid of toilets at the opposite end of the base from the living quarters. Difficulty in getting transportation increased reaction time for alert launches; and if the base had come under attack, the ramp area would have been almost unreachable. In addition, there were no revetments to protect the planes in this extremely vulnerable area.

Working conditions were equally disruptive at the newer bases as fresh units arrived and older ones were reorganized or moved about. The Air Force population at Phan Rang leapt from 118 in March, when the base opened, to over 4,500 in September, when the fourth F-100 squadron joined the original F-4 unit. The initial units had taken over a base with virtually all facilities still in the planning stage. For example, the maintenance shops were located in tents; and the maintenance people lacked a hangar, a power check pad, a test cell pad, a fuel cell repair area, wash rack facilities, a loading crew training area, and a radar calibration area.

Although there was a parachute loft, it contained no dehumidifying equipment for drying the chutes. As material filtered in during the late summer, tents were set up to house it. Summer rains transformed the dirt around the shops into 6 inches of mud, creating problems with the

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equipment. Many maintenance personnel, lacking equipment, were assigned to such other jobs as filling sandbags, building hootches, driving buses, and laying fences.

The first F-100 squadron, the 612th, arrived at Phan Rang on the first of July, followed two weeks later by the 615th, even though the base was still being built. Squadron members set up tents to house an operation center, an administration office, and flight planning and briefing areas. Clouds of dust, stirred up by heavy construction equipment, settled everywhere, complicating the operation of everything from typewriters to sophisticated electrical machinery. Until engine repair and test equipment began to arrive in October, the squadrons curtailed their flying, since as high as eighty percent of the new engines were rejected. The aircraft parking area was particularly troublesome.

Rainwater gathered under the aluminum matting, displacing the sandy soil and causing dips and ridges to develop. Red Horse teams were constantly at work replacing sections of the ramp. There was barely enough room to park the planes, and aircraft had to be towed or taxied with extreme care. Runups were performed at minimum power settings lest panels, covers, and other loose equipment blow across the ramp. Whenever a plane had its engines running, the exhaust blast forced a halt to maintenance on nearby aircraft. Here, too, there were no concrete revetments to shield the planes from mortar attacks. Until the new concrete runway was finished in October, there was insufficient room to separate the planes to make them less vulnerable. When the new runway became operational, the old aluminum one was used for dispersal.

Although an airstrip had been at Nha Trang for many years, it became a major base in 1966 when most of the Air Force's nonjet aircraft were moved there and placed in the 14th Air Commando Wing. A large part of the increase during the year was caused by the arrival of C-47s which, under the codename Phyllis Ann, began flying radio direction finding missions. The expansion presented problems similar to those experienced at other installations.

The Red Horse team from Cam Ranh Bay built maintenance shops, storage sheds, billets, parking ramps, roads, ditches, and wells to catch up with the population explosion. Between July and December, the team completed twenty-two major construction projects. The familiar trio of dust, noise, and heat rendered otherwise simple activities difficult and slow.

The new base at Phu Cat took shape during the second part of the year. Work progressed as rapidly as materials could be delivered over the narrow, dangerous Highway I from Qui Nhon. In August the base could accommodate 150 Air Force personnel. By January, when the Caribous arrived, the base contained 15 two-story wood frame hootches; a 1,200-man mess hall; a

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dispensary; an administration building; a laundry; a recreation building; and a complete water, sewer, and electrical utility system.

Along with the working conditions, the living conditions of Air Force officers and enlisted men in Vietnam were important for morale and clock, there was constant traffic through the barracks, making it hard for those who worked at night to get adequate rest. Even such simple activities as changing clothes or writing letters were difficult.

Officers at Cam Ranh Bay fixed up the interiors of their Quonset hut barracks. The shortage of such common items as water and electricity required judicious rationing. Each housemaid was allotted two pans of water for each clothes-washing cycle, and water to the shower rooms was cut off for four hours each day. Lighting was restricted to eight 100-watt bulbs in each hootch. Roofing slate, which insulated the huts, was in short supply, causing many aircrews to sleep in hot and humid areas that were not air-conditioned.

Until summer, most officers at Da Nang lived in rented houses and villas in the city. Following civil disturbances downtown in April and May, the city was placed off limits and personnel began moving onto the base. By September, officers, like the enlisted men, were housed in open-bay barracks and screened-in buildings where daytime sleeping was hot and uncomfortable.

There were frequent complaints about rats and mice—in the lockers, running along the rafters, climbing onto beds while the occupants slept, and darting about in broad daylight in populated areas. Dust and aircraft noise were constant companions.

The troops at Nha Trang faced special problems as large numbers of people poured into the existing space. At the beginning of the year, officers and NCOs had to live off base, while the enlisted men were housed in barracks on the base. Untold hours were wasted commuting back and forth to messing facilities and quarters in town. Rising inflation caused those living off base to pay exorbitant rents, and Vietnamese landlords required 3 to 6 months' rent in advance. MACV tried to curb these excesses—a directive issued in January set a maximum price that servicemen could pay for rent and required that all leases be approved by the Judge Advocate's office. However, these rent ceilings were unenforceable. As more airmen arrived at the base during the summer, the amount of available living space dwindled. The American billeting area was adjacent to the ARVN ammunition depot that, while built for 1,500 tons of ammunition, was crammed with 5 times that amount.

After lengthy negotiations, the ARVN agreed to let the Americans have the depot area for construction of 2-story barracks if the Americans would build a new depot north of the city at Chut Mountain. As an interim measure, the Air Force sought more land from the U.S. Army. At

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first the Army told the base commander to restrict the arrival of additional personnel. However, the Army later grudgingly offered 11 acres of land at a location that proved too distant to sustain operations.

By October, when the base was over 1,100 billets short, a self-help program to erect tents began on every available piece of ground on the base.

The housing situation was still poor at Phan Rang AB as late as September, when the fourth (the 614th) and last of the F-100 squadrons arrived. Only twenty of the twenty-seven tents needed by the enlisted men were available. Of these twenty, only eleven had floors and electricity. Six hootches were available for officers, but one had been stripped of all electrical sockets and outlets before it could be occupied. On the night the squadron arrived, seventeen beds disappeared from the enlisted area." The town was off limits, but there was no compensating recreational facility on the base. The local "Sin Strip" just outside the base gave rise to a high rate of venereal disease."

The housing eased somewhat at Phan Rang in October when the 389th moved its F-4s to Da Nang. However, the personnel moving to the already crowded northern base were packed into three and a half barracks in one area and two tents in another, with hardly enough space to move around."

On a single day in January 1966, 500 officers and enlisted men moved into tents at Pleiku as construction began on open-bay barracks. By September, 13 of these, housing over 900 men, were finished; and 10 more were ready for occupancy by NCOs and enlisted men in October. More Army and Air Force personnel arrived, and the buildings became crowded as soon as they were inhabited.'" Crew members of the gunship squadron, who flew 4 out of every 5 nights from eight in the evening until six the next morning, were averaging 4 hour's of sleep during the day. High temperatures, aircraft noise, building maintenance activities, and sounds from passing vehicles constantly interrupted their rest. Since the average age of these officers was in the 40s, the lack of proper rest aggravated the fatigue factor."

During the buildup, Air Force engineers at many bases relied on Vietnamese from surrounding areas to build facilities, and the U.S. airman's perception of his job and his motivation were affected by his relationships with the Vietnamese people. Given the shortness of tours and the gap between the two cultures, Americans came in contact mostly with Vietnamese who were either workers or domestics on the air bases, fellow fighters against the Viet Cong, or neighbors in the towns and cities where they lived.

Through an aggressive recruiting and training program, the Air Force group commander at Phan Rang AB, Col. Lewis R. Riley, increased the number of Vietnamese working on the base from

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623 in May to over 1,000 by the end of the year. He did this by searching the countryside and visiting villages that had not been previously entered by Americans. As part of his campaign to attract workers, he studied the history, customs, beliefs, and social pressures that were operating in Ninh Thuan Province, where the base was located, and passed this knowledge on to his officers and NCOs at briefings and staff discussions. Through a string of formal and informal practices, he developed good relations with the Vietnamese. He got to know all the white collar employees and many of the laborers, stopped to chat with them during his daily tour of the base, and picked up employees walking from one work site to another. Vietnamese were invited into the clubs for "friendship evenings," and local children attended the base movie theater and used the beaches. The commander frequently dined at the homes of employees and often invited Vietnamese military and civic leaders to the base for lunch or dinner.

At Phan Rang, as at most other bases, Vietnamese worked as carpenters, laborers, maintenance men, painters, masons, electricians, auto mechanics, drivers, warehousemen, equipment operators, cooks, busboys, and kitchen helpers. Thirty of them occupied professional and technical positions. The Vietnamese proved to be quick learners and very receptive to training. The turnover rate for the labor force at Phan Rang was about ten percent each year, only half for lack of ability or inclination to improve. A daily record of absenteeism was kept, as much to gauge sudden increases in Viet Cong pressure as to keep track of the workers.

Over 300 Vietnamese civilians were extremely helpful at Bien Hoa in providing manpower for the building program there. The civil engineering chief praised their ability as tradesmen and artisans. The number of contacts between Americans and Vietnamese increased in the second half of 1966 as new life was injected into the pacification and civic action programs. While individual Air Force members had been helping village and hamlet dwellers before this, they had done so on a piecemeal basis and without formal command support. With the establishment of civic action organizations at ten bases in the summer, voluntary participation in assistance programs increased. Air Force and other U.S. and Vietnamese service personnel supervised the construction and repair of schools, churches, clinics, sanitation facilities, roads, culverts, and drainage systems.

At Tan Son Nhut, efforts to improve the conditions of the people living around the perimeter of the base at first led to estrangement between the U.S. and Vietnamese airmen who worked together on the projects. VNAF members were embarrassed by their inability to match the progress of the Air Force volunteers and were dispirited as the living conditions of the civilians around the base began to surpass their own.

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Even though relations slowly improved throughout the country, many Americans were never able to adapt fully to some aspects of Vietnamese society. One of these was the unsanitary conditions, by western standards, of the country. In an effort to show the citizens of Nha Trang the benefits of cleanliness, a detail from the base helped clean up the streets, parks, and beaches of the city in May. No sooner had the job been completed, however, than people resumed throwing trash, garbage, and human waste in the streets.

Unsanitary conditions in the clubs and messing facilities at Da Nang and elsewhere were attributed to the Vietnamese who worked there. Squadron members complained of workers who washed their hands in the water used to rinse glasses or cleaned their noses with their fingers before handling utensils and glasses. When the base late in the year stopped the practice of hiring Vietnamese housegirls and houseboys to clean the living quarters, there was a noticeable rise in cleanliness.

A further irritant was the perceived dishonesty of many of the Vietnamese, particularly in the larger cities. In Saigon, where the 750,000 people of the late 1950s had swollen to 3 million, mostly refugees from the fighting in the countryside, the more affluent Americans were viewed as likely economic targets. In the view of an NCO at Tan Son Nhut, the Vietnamese he dealt with found the war personally profitable and were not at all averse to its continuation. In his extensive commercial dealings, he found the Vietnamese had two prices for everything—one for a Vietnamese customer and another, vastly higher, for Americans. He found this a curious way for the Vietnamese people to express their gratitude for the defense of their country. It was impossible for an American to proceed far down a Saigon street before being accosted by young and able-bodied procurers, money changers, or black marketeers.

Many Americans found it difficult to reconcile the presence of this untapped supply of manpower with the concept of a country struggling for survival in a supposedly popular war. Quickened by the inflation that accompanied the U.S. deployments, the black market thrived as American goods appeared for sale all over Saigon. Airmen at Bien Hoa complained that the black market was draining numerous items from the exchanges and supply warehouses. As Pleiku built up, neither the hut maids, nor the prices they charged, came under supervision. A girl fired for theft or incompetence was often quickly rehired by occupants of another hut. Gradually these maids came under the purview of the billeting office. There was a set price for their work and those fired could not be rehired.

Living conditions, as uncomfortable as they were at times, did not appreciably hurt morale. A series of personnel practices, both formal and informal, more than offset the harsher elements of the situation. In many cases, the challenge of constructing their own housing and recreational facilities motivated airmen by giving them a goal. In addition, the knowledge that

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many U.S. soldiers and marines were living under tougher conditions helped to place the situation in context.

Despite its drawbacks for operations, the one-year tour was frequently cited as an excellent policy. The rest and recuperation program was very popular, with airmen flown at Government expense to spend five days with their wives and families at Pacific areas outside Vietnam, such as Hawaii, Tokyo, Singapore, Bangkok, Hong Kong, Australia, Taipei, Manila, Kuala Lumpur, or Penang. Family separation and the inevitable drudgery of war were also partially alleviated by the generally efficient flow of news, the privilege of free mail, and the slow but steady growth of recreational facilities.

Financial incentives also helped ease the strain. Foreign service pay and family separation allowances were added to regular salaries, as was a monthly combat pay of \$65. Those living off a base received a cost of living allowance. In addition, airmen on bases that did not have mess halls received a daily subsistence allowance of \$2.57, which dropped to \$1.30 a day when government messing facilities were available. The enlisted man’s total pay was exempt from income tax, and the first \$500 of an officer’s pay was similarly excused. By enrolling in an overseas deposit program, all military personnel received 10 percent interest on savings at a time when normal bank interest hovered around 4 percent. The proliferation of excellent medical faculties and adequate libraries, churches, base exchanges and clubs throughout the year helped to dissipate much of the boredom.

The continual shifting of personnel around the theater disquieted many of the fighter pilots. For the most part, pilots remained in squadrons for only a few months and then, when they became proficient in the mission, were transferred elsewhere and replaced by new men. Of the forty-six pilots that passed through the 416th Tactical Fighter Squadron at Bien Hoa between July 1966 and March 1967, for example, only sixteen completed a one-year tour with the squadron. Six came from other F-100 squadrons and spent less than a month with the 416th before returning to the states. Three others joined the unit for a few months to complete tours they had begun as forward air controllers. The remaining twenty-one pilots served with the squadron for an average of less than four months before being reassigned elsewhere in Vietnam. Only five of these pilots stayed longer than six months; one pilot was with the squadron for only one month, five others for only two.

Eager to do the best job they could, the fighter pilots' enthusiasm was often diminished by the paucity of information they received on the nature of their targets before they took off and on the results of their mission after they landed.

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Pilots also chafed at the minimum altitude restrictions under which they had to operate. Since most of the planes that were lost were downed by ground fire, the pilots were ordered to stay above 1,000 feet when using napalm or strafing and above 400 feet when releasing high drag weapons. After each pass, they had to return to at least 2,000 feet. Many of them saw a direct conflict between this emphasis on safety and their ability to carry out the mission. As minimum altitude increased, effectiveness decreased. In their view, the potential of both napalm and strafing was almost totally negated by the restrictions. Dropped from such high altitudes, the effect of finned napalm canisters covered an area only 10 feet in diameter, the size of a good campfire, rather than the 200-by 25-foot area that could be covered at lower altitudes. Strafing at the higher altitude hindered the pilot's ability to see the target and often caused the rounds from the cannon, designed for a smaller slant range, to fall short. The requirement to return to 2,000 feet after each pass prevented pilots from seeing the result of their strikes. Many felt that unnecessary sorties and expense were being used to destroy targets. More confidence by higher headquarters in their ability and judgment, according to them, would have increased their initiative and morale.

Some forward air controllers were unhappy with the existing situation in which their commanders were not their bosses. The tactical air support squadron provided the FACs with planes, maintenance, and logistical support, but the pilots were under the operational control of the Seventh Air Force through the direct air support center. This situation often led to confusion and much duplication of effort.

In addition, the controllers resented the requirement to call in a psychological warfare plane to warn villagers before directing strikes on them. By relinquishing the element of surprise, this made it virtually impossible to call in immediate air strikes on villages filled with enemy troops discovered on routine visual reconnaissance missions.

Another frequent complaint of the controllers was the lack of spare parts for their Bird Dogs, which resulted in canceled missions. The absence of an automated supply system produced chronic shortages of carburetors, piston and cylinder assemblies, propellers, windshields, starters, brakes, tires, and wheel assemblies.

In many units, the manning documents, which spelled out how many and what kinds of people were needed, were unrealistic and slow in adapting to the wartime environment of Vietnam. Ideally, each squadron was to have one and a half crews for each of its airplanes. However, some units exceeded that rate, for example, the sixty officers of an eighteen-plane F-4 squadron at Cam Ranh Bay. These officers, at the most, flew only every other day, but the need for combat crews to perform many administrative jobs in the squadrons as additional duties detracted from their concentration on combat and discouraged some. Typical was one of the F-

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100 squadrons at Phan Rang where the pilots, after finishing one or two sorties a day, took on responsibilities for mail, mobility, small arms control, the central base fund, security, paying the troops, education, controlling ration cards, physical training, voting, squadron transportation, disaster control, information, on-the-job training, unit casualty reporting, awards and decorations, classified document control, and a host of other assignments.

Maintenance unit manning was also slow in adjusting to wartime conditions and the radical organizational changes of 1966. With the establishment of permanent wings in Vietnam early in the year and the gradual movement of maintenance facilities into the country, it took experimentation throughout the year to align the right numbers and kinds of people with the requirements of the new situation.

There were inequities at first, and some units had too many people. The wing's maintenance squadron at Nha Trang, according to its supervisor, had enough chief master sergeants to man the organization for five years—authorized twenty-six, there were forty-two on duty. Twenty master sergeants were assigned, while there were but six slots. Other units, on occasion, had the wrong type of people. Flight mechanics at Nha Trang, whose principal job should have been to troubleshoot aircraft maintenance problems when away from home, were assigned to flight crews where they did little more than refuel the planes. This put an added burden on ground crews. "There are many disgusted and disillusioned personnel," noted one maintenance supervisor, "as to the urgency of their need in Vietnam and the waste of manpower when they could be used at many bases in the states." The wing's First Sergeant echoed these sentiments. Alluding to the inflated number of senior maintenance NCOs, he pointed to a morale problem caused by transferring so many from stateside bases, where they were needed, to jobs where they felt they were not useful.

At Phan Rang, twelve senior officers, half of them with previous experience as chiefs of maintenance at stateside bases or numbered air forces, were assigned to eight slots in the field maintenance squadron. Morale suffered. Unneeded enlisted maintenance people, about one hundred strong, were detailed to assist the Red Horse outfit and the base engineers with self-help construction projects. At first this was beneficial. However, the precedent had been set, and as the number of assigned people came to match the authorizations by year's end, it became difficult to keep these other projects going.

At the same time, other units were short of men. The civil engineers at Phan Ran were constantly undermanned. The number of skilled automotive mechanics authorized for the transportation squadron at Da Nang would have been adequate for a base that size in the states, but was woefully small to keep vehicles operating in the unfriendly terrain and extreme climate.

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As nettlesome as many of these factors were, they represented little more than adaptation pains of the Air Force settling down to a war different from the one for which it had been preparing. Sporadic discontent among some airmen had little detrimental impact on operations. In spite of crowded conditions, imbalances in manning, periodic bottlenecks in the supply system, and less than ideal living conditions, the Second Air Division/Seventh Air Force kept seventy-five percent of its attack planes flying in Southeast Asia throughout 1966, well above the seventy-one percent the Air Force used as a standard.

TALES OF PHAN RANG



BY ROBERT CHAPPELEAR

Tales of Phan Rang (Part 17) by Robert Chappellear

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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

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command post, nuclear aircraft carriers, presidential helicopters, and various other communication systems.

Chapter 17 - Fini Flights

The last operational mission flown before returning to the States was nicknamed a “Fini Flight”. These missions were always special. For the fighter pilots these were the missions that were met by the fire trucks, and when the pilots got hosed down by those trucks and the bottles of champagne were passed around. For the Bookie birds, a crew member flying his last mission was allowed to select the crew that he wanted to fly with and the mission that he wanted to fly. Of course upon return to home base the Fini Flight would also be met by the fire trucks and appropriate antics and traditions would also be enacted upon return to home base.

There were two truly memorable Fini Flights during my tour at Phan Rang. The first that I recount is one that I should have been involved in but due to aircrew scheduling I missed. I stated early in this book that I went to Viet Nam as part of a fairly large group of replacement pilots so it turned out that the group was due to rotate back to the States at the same time. There were twelve of us that had all been upgraded to Aircraft Commander and were scheduled to fly our Fini Flights on 1 October 1969. Unfortunately I was also scheduled to fly on 30 September. I have mentioned how sometimes we would be diverted to emergency resupply missions or such, and this happened to me on the 30th. Because of this I received a “Crew Duty Day Extension” and was then removed from the flight schedule for the 1st of October. However, I knew what the “Fini Flight Plan” was and so I was sitting on the patio of the O’club as the clock closed on 1730 (5:30 PM for you civilians). I knew that the eleven aircraft commanders on their Fini Flights had coordinated a rendezvous point and time and had officially “briefed” for a formation flight. This made the formation that they flew “legal”. Now fighter aircraft fly what is known as an “overhead traffic pattern”. This is a fast efficient method of getting a formation of jets back on the ground. Cargo aircraft normally fly “box” patterns for landing. The “overhead” means that the formation comes down “initial” in the direction that they will land and at the approach end of the runway, the flight leader “breaks” into a high G turn away from the flight and the rest of the flight follows at four second intervals. Each aircraft completes a 180 degree turn to a downwind leg headed in the opposite direction of landing, lowers the landing gear and extends the flaps before commencing a descending turn back toward the runway and then completes the landing. Cargo aircraft instead usually enter the traffic pattern from a 45 degree leg basically in the direction opposite to the direction of landing. They then turn to a “downwind leg” and lower the gear, extend the flaps, turn to a “base leg” and then turn on to a final approach.

This is slower than an “overhead pattern” and gentler on passengers should any be on board. For these Fini Flights however, there were no passengers.

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So at 1730 plus or minus 30 seconds there came a radio call that went, “Phan Rang Tower – Bookie 513 is 6 mile initial with a flight of 11”.

Phan Rang tower answered back, “Bookie 513, winds are 040 at 10 report the break”.

And there in the distance we see 11 C-123’s in echelon right formation, with “officially” 5 foot wing tip clearance, flight lead was lined up with the center of the runway and all others on the right wing. They came down initial with the jets set at 100 per cent power and lead’s recip engines at probably 2350 Brake Horse Power. With both jets and recip at high power the formation as probably doing about 230 knots indicated.

Lead radios “Bookie 513 in the break”.

Tower replies, “Report base with the gear”.

At four second intervals each other airplane reported “In the Break”. And the tower told them all the same thing, “Report base with the gear”. At that speed and with four second spacing between each airplane the last airplane was well beyond the end of the 10,000 foot long runway when he was “in the break”

Each airplane put the landing gear down on the downwind leg and each airplane made the radio call, “Bookie XXX, base gear down”.

And Phan Rang tower dutifully instructed, “Bookie XXX winds 040 at 10 knots, clear to land”. In the final turn each aircraft commander raised the landing gear, retracted the flaps and advanced the power to “METO” (Maximum Except for Take Off).

Low and on short final approach each airplane then made the radio call, “Bookie XXX on the go!”

Each airplane then made a high speed pass down the runway at altitudes of approximately 10 feet and when they got abeam the last airplane on the down wind leg they called, “Phan Rang tower Bookie XXX request closed”.

The tower answered back, “Bookie XXX cleared closed”.

With this radio call each airplane then performed a Chandelle or hard climbing 180 degree left turn back up to traffic pattern altitude onto another downwind leg.

Once more each airplane lowered the landing gear and flaps, started the descending left turn to final approach and called, “Bookie XXX, gear down, full stop”.

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The tower replied to each, “Bookie XXX cleared to land, welcome home.”

The fini flight airplanes each turned off the runway and taxied far enough down the parallel taxiway that the entire flight could assemble and then they taxied back into the revetment area as a formation. There they performed a simultaneous engine shut down and exited the aircraft. At this point they got hosed down by the fire trucks and the party started.

All of us C-123 pilots and the F-100 fighter pilots except for the Fighter Wing Commander enjoyed the show. But the participants in the informal air show just said, “Hey what are ya’ going to do? Make me a 2nd Lieutenant and send me to Viet Nam? - - That won’t work – ya’ already did it once.”

My own Fini Flight though delayed by a day was also memorable (at least for me.) My final mission of that tour was one of delivering 105 millimeter howitzer shells to Katum. I made 14 sorties into Katum that day and delivered 225,000 pounds of artillery ammo. I felt that I made a contribution. Upon my return to Phan Rang I too called, “Bookie 520, 6 mile initial” and I too was going as fast as all four engines would take me.

Tower came back with the standard, “Bookie 520 report the break.’

At the approach end of the runway I went into the break and made my radio call, “Bookie 520 in the break.

Tower replied with, “Bookie 520 report base with the gear.”

I lowered the landing gear and flaps radioed, “Bookie 520 base gear down and locked.”

And the tower came back with, “Wind 050 at 10 cleared to land.”

Here too I raised the gear and flaps, advanced the engines to METO power and called, “Bookie 512 on the go.”

Tower came back with, “We expected that Bookie 520, you’re cleared closed.

Now I had a smart Flight Engineer and Loadmaster on board so we were a little different from then on. My Flight Engineer had previously duct taped four red smoke grenades to a broom handle, then turned on the environmental control unit and set it to “Vent and Anti-Ice”. Then he cracked open the overhead emergency escape hatch and after pulling the pins and letting the spoons fly from those smoke grenades he poked the broom handle and grenades just outside the aircraft. This meant that the bright red smoke was sucked into an air scoop on the top of the aircraft, went through the vents and came out of the wingtips. So we go down the

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runway as fast as we can go with smoke spewing from our wingtips like a Thunderbird jet. We did the Chandelle turn back up to downwind like the flight of the day before but still with the

smoke streaming from the wingtips. We passed low over the O’club (low enough that some of the smoke settled to the patio and left a little red smudge on some table cloths). Then we lowered the landing gear once again and dropped the flaps.

I called, “Bookie 520, gear down and locked, last stop, full stop, bye Viet Nam”

Tower told me, “Winds calm, cleared to land.”

But we were not quite finished. My loadmaster had fastened one of the crew parachutes to the floor of the cargo ramp and raised the cargo door so that we had an open tail at the back of the airplane. After touchdown my loadmaster pulled the rip cord and threw the parachute out the back of the airplane.

He called, “‘chute’s away!” over the intercom.

With that I got on the radio and called to the tower, “Tower, tower, did my ‘chute deploy, I don’t know if I can stop without my “drag bag”!”.

I know that I heard laughter in the background as the tower operator answered back, “Bookie 520, you’ve got a got bag, ‘Chute is deployed!”

We were one of the few C-123s ever to land with a braking parachute and I’m sure we were a sight taxing back to the ramp with a parachute out the back and smoke coming out of the wing tips.

The next day I and some 23 other 315thSpecial Operations Wing crewmembers flew to Cam Rahn Bay to catch the freedom bird back to the states the 4th of October 1969. Thus after 1000 combat hours and 1000 combat sorties, so ended my first tour in Vietnam.

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Front Office of the C-123



To buy Robert Chapelear’s book, click [here](#).

Reunion Note...a few words about the tour. Many people have talked about wanting to see the type of airplane that they worked on while in Vietnam when they go on the Bone Yard tour. The purpose of Aerospace Maintenance and Regeneration Group (AMARG) is to provides critical aerospace maintenance and regeneration capabilities for Joint and Allied/Coalition warfighters in support of global operations and agile combat support for a wide range of military operations and not to just store airframes. The bottom line is they do not have Vietnam Era aircraft except for those that continued to be operational long after Vietnam such as the C-141 and C-5. The AMARG web site does have a complete list of aircraft that are on display.

The Pima Air & Space Museum does have on display a B-57E, WB-57F, F-100C, C-123B/K and a C-119C. You can visit their web site to get a complete list of air and space vehicles that are on display at the museum.

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Doug’s Note: All articles reproduced here are from various sources and the book material is used with the author’s permission. Previous issues of this newsletter are available [online](#) or on the “Happy Valley” Phan Rang AB Facebook group site. Comments or suggestions are always welcomed and can be sent to [Douglas Severt](#). Some have asked who edits this newsletter because of errors and possibly inaccurate information and I have to accept all the blame. I very seldom wear my glasses but I do use a larger font so that both you and I can read it better and I can possibly find typos, but I don’t profess to know or see it all. Also sometimes my arthritic fingers get a little crazy and hit keys I never intended to hit. I take most of the articles appearing here from newspaper archives and the Phan Rang AB newspaper the PHANFARE. If you find that I’ve included some inaccurate information please notify me by email what the error is and I will correct it in the next issue.