

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

Phan Rang AB News No. 84

“Stories worth telling”

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DEROS Dip (jpg)

2015 Reunion Information

Phan Rang Staff Members

President Honors 14th SOW (*Phan Fare, March 21, 1971*)

The President of the United States, Richard M. Nixon, has bestowed the highest unit award, the Presidential Unit Citation, upon a Phan Rang AB unit--the 14th Special Operations Wing (SOW). The award was presented Mar. 14 by Maj. Gen. Ernest C. Hardin Jr., 7th Air Force vice commander, during morning ceremonies at this coastal Vietnam Air Base.

The citation accompanying the honor read: "The 14th Special Operations Wing, Pacific Air Forces, distinguished itself by extraordinary heroism in connection with military operations against opposing armed forces in Southeast Asia....Crew members of the Wing flew one of the most versatile missions in Southeast Asia which included reconnaissance, escort for search and rescue, close air support, psychological warfare illuminations, airlift and resupply. Despite intensive hostile air defenses, inclement weather and treacherous terrain, crews of the Wing, night and day, risked their lives to further Allied goals in Southeast Asia.

"As a consequence of the flight crews' courage, over 33,000 hostile troops defected to friendly forces, more than 3,600 Allied installations were successfully defended, and hundreds of friendly ground teams and patrols were saved from annihilation.

"The professionalism, dedication to duty, and extraordinary heroism demonstrated by the members of the 14th Special Operations Wing are in keeping with the finest traditions of the

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military service and reflect the highest credit upon themselves and the Armed Forces of the United States."

The 14th is unique because its fighting units are the only Air Force units of their kind in Vietnam. Two of the three fixed wing USAF gunship squadrons, the only USAF psychological warfare squadron, and the only USAF armed helicopter squadron are all part of the 14th SOW. With this special force operating seven different types of aircraft from nine major airfield locations throughout Southeast Asia, the 14th has played a versatile and significant role in the fight against Communist aggression in this part of the world. Flying an average of 137 missions every day, aircrews of the wing have participated in every major ground operation in the Republic of Vietnam since March 1966. The Wing's 17th SOS is now training Vietnamese Air Force (VNAF) aircrews in the twinengine AC-119 Shadow gunships at Phan Rang AB under the VNAF Improvement and Modernization Program.

All personnel of the 14th SOW including the 14th Field Maintenance Squadron, the 9th, 17th, 18th, 20th, and 90th Special Operations Squadrons may wear the Presidential Unit Citation ribbon while serving in the Republic of Vietnam. However, only the individuals serving with Wing units during the period covered in the citation can wear the ribbon once leaving the Republic.

At the same awards ceremony, command of the 14th SOW changed from Col. Alfred F. Eaton of Holly Bluff, OISS., who has completed an 18-month combat tour in Vietnam, to Col. Mark W. Magnan of Wauwatosa, Wisc., the 14th's vice commander. General Hardin also pinned the coveted Legion of Merit and the first oak leaf cluster to the Distinguished Flying Cross on Colonel Eaton before the formation was dismissed.

March 14th was a big day for the 14th Special Operations Wing.

120th TFS Proves Itself In Year of Vietnam Combat *(Phan Fare, The Happy Valley Weekly, April 10, 1969)*

On 30 April 1968, the 120th Tactical Fighter Squadron deployed from Buckley Air National Guard Base, Denver, Colo., and arrived at Phan Rang on May 3. The flight was made without a single abort or airborne emergency. This deployment marked the first move of an entire Air National Guard unit to a combat zone since World War II.

In the SAC post-mission narrative, the tanker task force commander stated: "Having been the tanker commander in more than a dozen transoceanic tactical fighter deployments, I believe I

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am qualified to say that the 120th TFS is by far the most professional and accomplished unit I have ever had the pleasure of working with.”

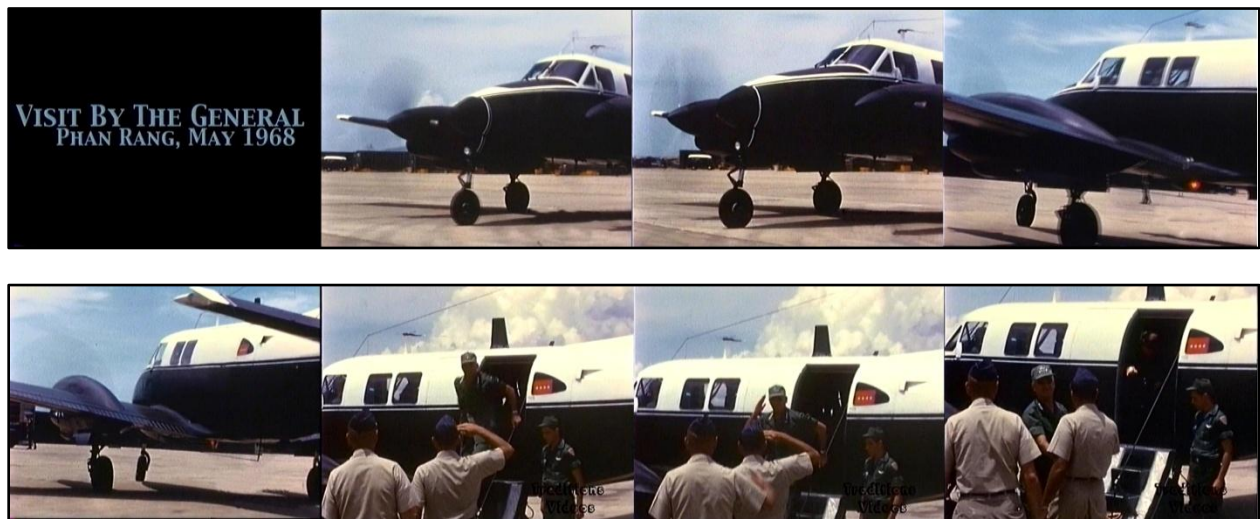
The 120th complement consisted of 328 enlisted men and 31 officers. Of this number, 209 men were assigned to positions within the 35th Tactical Fighter Wing outside the squadron. One hundred and fifty remained with the 120th TFS.

Within two days of its arrival in SEA, the 120th was flying combat missions and within the first five days, the entire unit had completed its combat tactics checkout. Since its arrival one year ago, the 120th has consistently been one of the top units in the wing in bomb damage assessment. While this outstanding combat record was being amassed, the 120th experienced not a single accident through pilot error, materiel failure or maintenance factor.

Three aircraft were lost to enemy fire; one of the ground and two in the air. One pilot was lost and one recovered (*see Phan Rang News 82, page 22 for details*). The 120th spirited determination is reflected in its combat record. Its pilots flew 6,000 combat sorties and 8,950 combat hours during the tour in Vietnam. They dropped 16,474,420 tons of bombs and fired 1,373,600 rounds of 20mm ammunition on hostile targets.

The BDA includes: 703 enemy killed by air (body count); 673 enemy killed by air (estimated); 1,962 military structures destroyed and 1,590 damaged; 2,493 bunkers destroyed and 1,995 damaged; 56 gun positions destroyed: 299 secondary explosions and 346 secondary fires.

Visit By The General...General Williams Childs Westmoreland



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AFVN-TV Channel 78 week of March 22-28, 1971

AFVN-TV Channel 78	
MONDAY	FRIDAY
5:00 - Movie: Requiem for a Heavyweight	5:00 - The Ed Sullivan Show
6:30 - Your All-American College Show	6:00 - The Don Knotts Show
7:00 - News	7:00 - News
7:30 - The Johnny Cash Show	7:30 - Flip Wilson
8:30 - Honey West	8:30 - Hawaii Five-0
9:00 - MACV Notebook	9:30 - 21st Century
9:05 - Iron Horse	10:00 - News
10:00 - News	10:30 - Professional Boxing
10:30 - Mike Douglas Show	SATURDAY
TUESDAY	AFVN News on the Hour until 5:00 p.m.
5:00 - Movie: The Mysterians	12:05 - Flip Wilson
6:30 - First Tuesday	1:05 - Carol Burnette Show
7:00 - News	2:05 - Hawaii Five-0
7:30 - Carol Burnette Show	3:05 - As It Happened: The Key
8:30 - Glenn Campbell Show	3:30 - Sports: NCAA Basketball
9:30 - Julia	5:05 - The Name of the Game
10:00 - News	6:30 - Lloyd Bridges
10:30 - Room 222	7:00 - News
11:00 - Roller Derby	7:30 - The Andy Williams Show
WEDNESDAY	8:30 - The High Chaparral
5:00 - Miss Teenage America Pageant	9:30 - The Detectives
6:00 - Burke's Law	10:00 - News
7:00 - News	10:30 - Movie: Requiem for a Heavyweight
7:30 - Barbara McNair Show	SUNDAY
8:30 - Perry Mason	AFVN News on the Hour until 5:00 p.m.
9:30 - The Doris Day Show	12:05 - Religious Hour
10:00 - News	1:05 - The Don Knotts Show
10:30 - The Name of the Game	2:05 - 21st Century
THURSDAY	2:30 - Professional Sports
5:00 - "Before Cortez"	4:05 - Animal World
6:00 - The Jim Nabors Show	4:30 - The Virginian
7:00 - News	6:00 - Mission: Impossible
7:30 - Hee Haw	7:00 - News
8:30 - The Dean Martin Show	7:30 - Bonanza
9:30 - Dragnet	8:30 - The Bold Ones
10:00 - News	9:30 - Away We Go
10:30 - Laugh-In	10:00 - News
11:20 - Miss Teenage America Pageant	10:30 - Movie: The Mysterians



Vietnam...a Stars & Stripes Part 2, continued from Phan Rang News 83.



The Air War

by bill collies

STARS AND STRIPES STAFF WRITER

THERE IS A BIG, DARK ROOM out at Tan Son Nhut Air Base, on the north side of Saigon, where men are writing the immediate past, present and near future of their air war in Vietnam.

It is the 7th Air Force tactical control center, and it looks much like a house, with tiered rows of seats facing a big, screen-like plastic board that covers most of the front wall. It is clammy cool after the glare and heat of outside,

and little can be heard of the jets and turboprop planes landing and taking off a few hundred yards away.

A score of men sit in the artificial twilight, in the rows of seats, speaking in modulated tones into phones and radios and making ballpoint pen marks on forms and pads of paper. There are long, bare desks in front of them.

In front, other men make and change figures and initials on the big drawing board with light orange and apple-green crayons (water soluble) to show which planes are on what sort of a mission in what part of the country. Still other men tend the banks of electronic consoles that flank the big board, their little lights winking like cat's eyes.

The hundreds of signals and symbols come in from, or are sent out to bases all over South Vietnam and beyond. They tell all that numbers can—which planes are where, what Allied units in what locations need help, to get there, the results of each strike whenever available, what planes are ready for emergency call.

It is all part of a new, supersophisticated kind of air war with a very simple goal.

"Our main business is saving American and Allied lives," said Gen. George S. Brown, 7th Air Force commander. "In this kind of war, it pays off for ground forces to make contact, then let

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the air and artillery handle as much of the fighting as possible. We offer the ground forces a service, and the more they can use it, the more lives will be saved."

It is all very hushed and efficient in the control center, - and the thousands of numbers and symbols that flow through it each day will eventually become part of the war's history. To the statisticians and time-study analysts these figures, along with similar data from other services, may be the whole history of this conflict.

This would be lamentable. The most complete box score in the- world doesn't really tell how the game was played. And in a time when man is turning more and more to computers for advice on everything from blind dates to the stock market to the defense of nations, he has yet to find the numerical values of courage, of fear, of willpower, of caring; the human ingredients in success or failure. There is no digital equivalent to Horatio at the bridge, nor for the motivation of Benedict Arnold, nor the charms of Mata Hari.

And Brig. Gen. G. W. (Red) McLaughlin, former Tactical Air Control chief for the 7th Air Force, thinks the computers may be shortchanging his men in another area. He thinks they may even be fooling the time-study men.

"They say we can get our planes into the air and over a target where they're needed in 30 or 35 minutes," he said in a recent conversation. "But I really think we do better than that. Maybe 10 minutes better.

"We can divert pre-planned missions and have planes where they're needed sometimes in 10, maybe 15 minutes. Meanwhile, if it's a situation that calls for it, we scramble other planes from one of our bases.

"The scrambled planes may take anywhere from 25 minutes to, say, 40 to get there. But while they're getting there the aircraft we've diverted are already making strikes. Well, you can only make one strike at a time anyway, and half the time in cases like this the scrambled airplanes have to wait their turn because they've actually gotten there too quickly.

"But how do you tell that to a computer? The only figures it gets are on the time lapse between the request for air and their arrival at the target. I just hope they can manage to get a fair answer out those figures, for the sake of our guys."

Here are three stories which are unlikely to get proper treatment from a computer:

Russian tanks are rolling into Prague. Chicago's hotel rooms are full of cigar smoke as Democrats caucus on the eve of the Presidential nominations, and its streets are full of tear-gas

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can also get shot at a lot more and a lot longer than its speedy grandchildren, the jets. On top of this, Spooky works the night shift, when Charlie makes most of his trouble.

The name of the first Spooky pilot to reach Dac Lup that night isn't certain. It could have been Capt. Bill O'Brien, 33, from Akron, Ohio, or one of the 14th Special Operations Wing pilots who have since departed Nha Trang. Whoever it was, Harp, Collins and a few other people want to find him and get him a drink.

"India (Harp's call sign), India . . . this is Spooky," came the voice from the airplane over the subsector headquarters radio. The voice was deep, nasal and laconic.

"OK, Spooky." Harp's voice was a little higher, tighter. "Papa says he's having a pretty hard attack down there." (Papa being the radio code name for the Vietnamese radio over at the special forces compound, a few hundred yards away.)

"You mean he's under attack at this time? . . . I don't see anything. . . ."

"Yes, Spooky. He says it's a heavy attack."

"OK, We'll see what we can do."

Papa breaks in. There is a half-minute of static.

"Spooky this is India! Pap says they're really getting hit over there, 50 meters from the barbed wire. . . ."

Spooky turns lumberingly and swoops to the other side of the hill.

"Rog. We see 'em, and he's right. Three hundred and-sixty degrees. We'll work our way around the perimeter."

The ancient airplane turns again, giving the door gunner the proper angle, and makes a wide sweep of the camp. The gunner opens up and the minigun vomits a stream of hot lead — 100 bullets a second — at the tide of NVA rising around the little hill. The minigun catches the Reds from above and behind. Some of the NVA try to turn back. They turn into a deadly shower that hits them in the chest, the face, the groin. Others try to breach the barbed wire perimeter. Some of these are shot in the back by Spooky's gunner. Some almost make it into the camp before the CIDG riflemen kill them.

Spooky sweeps around the hill and the minigun cuts a swatch like a lawnmower through the attackers' ranks.

"Papa, Papa, how we do?" comes the voice from the plane. There is no answer.

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"Papa . . . We shot number one or number ten?" Still nothing. "We shoot good or bad?" asks Spooky, thinking Papa may be dead.

More static, then Collins is on.

"More of the same, Spooky! More of the same!"

Another turn around the hill, another 20,000 pieces of lead blazed at the Reds, now scattering and falling to Spooky's death-ray of bullets and rejuvenated fire from the compound.

Spooky on the air again: "I think we got a few of them."

Collins, talking now for Papa: "I think you did more than that. There still seems to be a lot of them near where you are now . . . about 50 (meters) to 100 out. Why don't you work that whole area over?"

"Will do . . . say, don't know how many of these bad guys there can be. In the last four days we've sure killed enough of them."

"Yeh . . . we should be giving you a body count tomorrow. .. you guys are gonna have a hatful of 'em."

"Well, as long as we're helping you. That's the thing for us."

"Helping? Say Spooky, our Vietnamese commander here — I wanta tell you he's all man, and when he heard you were comin' tonight he stood there with tears in his eyes. And I tell you, he's all man."

"Roger . . . I think all of you guys down there must be. I wouldn't change places."

"I sure would . . . Say Spooky, please be advised that our people have decided to give you a new name. You might want to pass it along to your uppers when you get home."

"Okay . . . what's our name? Over."

"Guardian Angel, Spooky, Guardian Angel."

This wasn't the end of the battle of Due Lap, but it was the turning point. Before it was over, AC47s had fired 714,000 rounds of minigun ammunition, and one afternoon Capt. Wayne F. Arnold, a forward air controller (FAC) from the 21st Tactical Air Support Squadron, hung his little 01 "Bird Dog" plane within easy range of the NVA guns for 2-1/2 hours to direct 15 sets of F100 Supersabre strikes on jungle-shrouded enemy nesting places.

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The fight lasted 11 days. When it was over Harp, Collins and Capt. Tran Ngai, the camp commander, were still in control, and 776 enemy attackers were known dead.

"I thought we were all alone," Collins said a few days after it ended. "But sorta out of the blue, I had the whole Air Force protecting me."

Harp put it more simply: "If it weren't for Spooky, we wouldn't be here now."

It goes without saying that the U.S. Air Force has the most awesome collection of machines ever thought of. The fleets of F4 Phantoms and other bullet-fast attack planes, lordly B52 Stratofortresses that can erase a whole acres of landscape from invisible heights, and monster transports like the C141 Starlifter (not to mention the twice-as-monstrous C5A) that can haul whole companies of men and equipment across oceans in jet time, are things as far removed from World War II aircraft as were the Flying Fortress and Lockheed Lightning from the hot-air observation balloons in Jules Verne's tales of the Civil War.

And amid these winged wonders, like a puppy at a horse show, sits the U10 Courier.

It looks like your kid brother made it from a kit. Flying in it gives the feeling that you're riding the down off a thistle.

But the little plane and the men who fly it in Vietnam have a big, lonely and sometimes hairy job. They call it Psyops.

Psyops, which is short for Psychological Warfare Operations, is the forensic facet of the war. It's trying to do with words what the rest of the Allied forces are trying with muscle — convince Charlie and his friends from the north that he can't have the south, and that there are better ways to live than housekeeping in holes, easier jobs than dying for Uncle Ho.

Talking takes time, and this fits right in with the Courier's forte; the U10 is about as slow a plane as you can find these days.

We took off from Bien Hoa Air Base at about 1 a.m. — Capt. Ron Shaeffer of Flight B, 5th Special Operations Sq. and his guest disc jockey. Destination: the jungle country and seashore about 80 miles east of Saigon.

There are two bucket seats. Behind them are two grocery boxes full of leaflets, one for the VC and one for the ordinary peasants. The ones for the enemy soldiers ask them how they like being hungry, tired losers and wouldn't they like to stop being suckers. The ones for the local citizenry are shaped like spending money (they even have a big dollar sign on the front) and

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mention that an easy way to pick up some money is to turn in their old VC and/or enemy supplies.

There are about 30,000 of each variety. There's a little chute on the right side of the cabin, and it's the copilot's (in this case passenger's) job to get turned around in his seat and stuff handfuls of the appropriate leaflets through the chute. Turning around in that seat is like turning around inside your underwear, and with a parachute it couldn't be done; so no parachute. Real modern.

But the other side of the rear cabin is something else — the answer to a hard rock bandsman's prayer. It's an amplifier and speaker system that can be heard for three miles or more on the ground with the airplane flying at 2,000 feet.

This is where the man in the right-hand seat gets to play disc jockey.

The little plane goes over and around a little clump of mountains, and there is the South China Sea, bluer than a bottle of Micrin, shimmering in tiny waves under the early afternoon sun. "One thing about this job," the pilot says over the intercom, "the scenery is great."

But the inhabitants aren't friendly. There aren't many of them — maybe a company or so — but they're all VC or VC supporters. The U10 is there because intelligence reports indicate enemy elements are holed up in the thick jungle that starts less than a mile from the water. The pilot turns the plane into a wide circle and his companion hunts through the half-dozen tape spools on the dashboard for "No. 629," one of the top tunes on the Chieu Hoi chart.

The tape starts and music blares. You can hear it even with earphones on and the motor roaring. Then the music stops and a man's voice starts telling whoever is below that they're missed in North Vietnam and that nobody loves them here in the south. There is no visible response, which is just as well as far as the pilot and his pal are concerned. Charlie doesn't send in cards and letters. He sends bullets.

Then, about eight miles down the coast, there is a little village. Its borders are rectangular, its political conviction obscure. A few circuits of the perimeter playing "No. 124," (rough title translation: "Won't you come home Victor Charlie, Won't You Come Home?") and then it was time for the dollar-shaped leaflets.

While his partner chucked them down the chute by the handful, Shaeffer maneuvered the airplane in a series of sweeps calculated to let the little papers ride the breeze from the sea into town. "It takes four to ten minutes for them to get down from this height," he said.

"Look at them waiting down there."

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There had been only a handful of people within view when the plane first got there, but now the village streets were filling. From 1,500 feet up they looked like slow-moving fleas. Are psyops leaflets really that big an attraction?

"Yeh," he said. "I think the main reason is that they use 'em for toilet paper. That stuff's pretty hard to get out here in the boonies. I just hope they read 'em first." It was hard to tell if he was kidding.

Three hours after takeoff from Bien Hoa, the little Courier finds a place in the line of big jets and turboprop planes streaming into Tan Son Nhut Airfield and slips down onto the runway, turning off only a few hundred feet from touchdown. Probably no one on the base other than the control tower operator noticed.

The little U10 didn't even rate a parking space. The pilot, a big, easy-going captain, stopped just long enough to let off his passenger, check in with the operations desk, and then was off for Bien Hoa.

For him it had been another lonely little flight. Other than the joy of flying itself, there was nothing much to it. There would be no mention of the 60,000 pieces of paper dropped or the three records played at the evening press briefings; no report on the results of this innocuous sortie. The only way he could have gotten any attention would have been not to come back.

But if just one or two of those leaflets fall into the right VC hands down there in the jungle; if one recorded message strikes a responsive chord in the mind of a villager who knows something, then maybe some lives will be saved.

If you wonder why they call it the Bronco, you haven't flown in the OV10.

After the fourth power dive and "four-G" pullout Chuck White finally showed some concern for the guy in the back seat. "How you doin'?" he asked, as if he didn't know.

"Fine," I lied. My cheeks were just coming off my shoulders, which in turn were slowly returning to their proper distance from my pelvis. I knew my face had been flattened for life, but I wasn't going to tell him.

"Good," said Chuck. "I'll show you some aerobatics."

That brief series of rolls, inverted loops and other refutations of Gallileo's pet theory will live long in memory. Dark memory.

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But the wild ride wasn't the biggest thing Capt. Chuck White of the 19th Tactical Air Support Squadron showed that day.

Takeoff from Bien Hoa had been at 9 a.m., with the hour before it spent getting into flight gear (without help, this is a job for a contortionist) and checking out the plane.

It was designed as a counter-insurgency craft, but so far has been used mostly as a forward-air-controller and observation plane. It can carry a ton-and-a-half of armament, but in Vietnam most of its ordnance has been marking rockets.

There are two things the pilots especially like about it. It can go fast enough (280 m.p.h.) to make it tough for enemy marksmen to hit, especially at low altitudes, and it handles like a high-performance fighter. Its one notable disadvantage is that despite a lot of glass for the pilot in the front seat to look through, the rear seat isn't much more useful for ground spotting than a window seat on an airliner, blocked off as it is by the front cockpit, and the passenger strapped almost immobile into his ejection seat.

The spotting, flying and weapons control are necessarily up to the pilot, with the man in the back seat unable to do much more than pick up flying hours.

Chuck White had been in country about five months. Most of this time he had been flying the same general mission as this day's—observation and target spotting south and west of Saigon for the Army's 199th Light Inf. Brigade. He had come to know the area and the people he worked with as well as a policeman knows his beat.

This beat is along the coiling Vam Co Dong River and its tributary streams and canals. The river starts nearly 100 miles northwest of Saigon across the Cambodian border. It wriggles its way down through Tay Ninh Province, then passes close to the "angel's wing" of the border and cuts across Hau Nghia Province, bending slightly eastward to flow 12 miles south of Saigon and on into the bigger Saigon River just before the latter empties into the South China Sea. If this sounds like a likely enemy infiltration route from Cambodia toward the South Vietnamese capital, it is.

We were about five miles upstream from the Ben Luc Bridge, which links suburban Saigon with the Mekong Delta. As all along the lower reaches of the river, dozens of streams and canals criss-cross the countryside here, all of them flowing slowly into the Vam Co Dong. The river itself winds in a series of horseshoe bends at this point.

"When we get past this bend we'll be in Charlie country," White said as we passed said bend.

"There's not supposed to be anybody in this area. If there is, it's likely he's a VC, though sometimes the peasants get permission to fish or dig for eels."

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White had been in touch with his ground contact for some minutes. So far all he'd had to say was "good morning." Then we crossed an intersection of a stream and a canal (the only real difference between these is that canals are straight and streams curl and bend like snakes) and something moved.

It was a sampan, nosing out from the bamboo banks of the stream. Then there was another, and another.

White told the 199th radioman about them and circled to make a closer check. When we got back there were more than a dozen little boats at the intersection. And making the circle White had seen something else —three people making their way across a field just to the north.

Neither the people nor the boats were supposed to be there. "There are two fire bases within range of this area," Chuck said over the intercom. "If these are bad guys we don't even have to wait for the Gunslingers (attack jets) ... Still, it looks a little wide-open for Charlie."

From the ground came word that the fire bases were ready, and that helicopter gunships were already in the area. All they wanted was the word to open up.

"Tell you what," White answered. "Do you have any national policemen around down there? These people look like they might just be civilians who've strayed into the wrong place. Maybe you can bring in somebody to check them out a bit first."

"Okay, if you think so," came the voice from the ground. "We've got a chopper with an interpreter aboard on the way." Even as he spoke, the UH-1 Huey was clattering toward the waterway intersection.

White held us in a circle as the copter landed on the north bank of the stream. The word came in less than five minutes.

The sampans were a fishing party that had gotten clearance at a village 20 miles upstream and had just drifted too far down. The three people in the field were a father and two sons walking home from a visit with relatives several miles away. None of these people had known they were in no-man's land, and none of them knew how close their ignorance had come to getting them killed.

"Well, you won't get to see any action," Chuck said. "But I'm awfully glad we could check those people out before they got blasted."

Then we headed over one of the sweeping curves of the river, and White proceeded to ruin what had been a pleasant, interesting morning with that series of bloody dives, firing four sets

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of marker rockets at old and apparently unused VC bunkers, and his finale of aerial gymnastics, "just to show what the old bird can do."

It didn't occur to him to make further mention of the fact he had saved perhaps 30 lives. Yet if Chuck hadn't known the countryside as well as he did; if he hadn't been that familiar with its residents; if he hadn't cared enough to ask for a double check of those boats and that father and his sons, all those people probably would have been dead 15 minutes after he spotted them.

"We're here to save as many lives as we can," General Brown had said only the day before over coffee in his Tan Son Nhut office.

Chuck White, the Jolly Green Midget of the 19th Tac Air Support, had just saved dozens — by caring.

THE CAPTAIN, VETERAN of two tours as an adviser in Vietnam, thoughtfully lit a cigarette as he watched the Vietnamese soldiers dig in for the night in the jungle. Then he spoke.

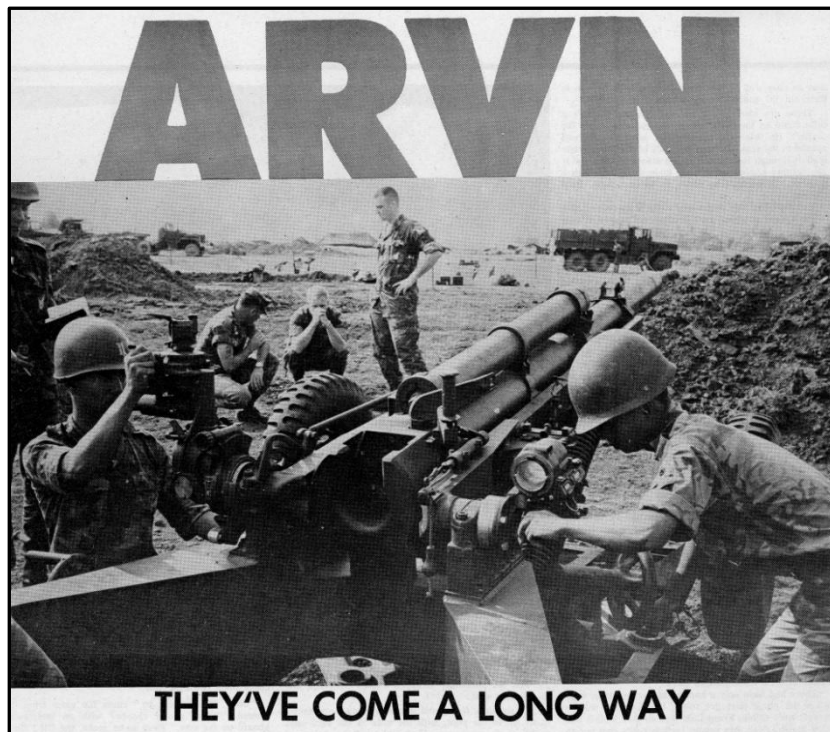
"They've had it tough. They've come a long way — but they've got a long way to go. The question is, can we help them make it in time?"

The question is a big one and concerns far more than

just the battalion advised by the captain. It is a question being asked by top officials in both the American and Vietnamese governments.

It is a question of when, or if, an army built literally from scratch in the midst of war will be able to go it alone in defending South Vietnam against its powerful enemies.

"The answer is now, if you limit it to local Viet Cong units," said a senior U. S. officer who works closely with the Vietnamese Army.



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“Stories worth telling”

"I not only think the South Vietnamese Army could handle the Viet Cong, I think they could give them a decisive beating.

"But against massive North Vietnamese infiltration — well that's another story. That will depend on how much progress is made and how fast."

Progress has been made in building the Vietnamese Army (usually simply called the ARVN) into a more powerful and aggressive fighting force. Evidence of the improvement can be seen every place in the country.

And the improvements cover every aspect of the Army. It is bigger in size, better equipped, trained and its performance in combat reflects the improvements.

Some of the progress, such as bolstering the Army's equipment, has taken place at almost breathtaking speed.

But, as advisers point out, it is also clearly obvious that there's plenty of room for more progress.

"You've had to be here for more than one tour to understand just how fantastic some of the progress has been," the captain commented.

"On my first tour in Vietnam, a couple of years ago, the outfit I advised wasn't bad — it was unbelievable. The troops were armed with our cast-off World War II weapons, the officers changed more often than the weather, morale was zero and desertions sky-high and the last thing anybody wanted to do was fight.

"The outfit I'm with today is something else. The troops have new weapons and they know how to use them. My counterpart (the Vietnamese battalion commander) has been with the outfit long enough to know it and he's aggressive.

"Morale is good. When we go into action everybody is on line and a couple of times we've hurt Charlie bad.

"If things keep improving it won't be long we'll be a man-for-man match for any unit the enemy's got."

What the officials who guide the U. S. military advisory effort in Vietnam are working and hoping for is a kind of chain reaction that will make the improvement in this one unit typical of all units in the Vietnamese Army.

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These officials themselves point out that wide discrepancies exist in the quality of Vietnamese units.

Vietnam's elite military units, such as the Marines and its Airborne Division, have over, years of hard fighting gained a well-earned reputation as quality troops.

And the best of the Army's regular divisions, the 1st Div. in the far north of the country and the 21st Div. in the extreme south, have excellent combat records.

But others are far below the standard they will have to meet if they are to stand alone.

One of the principles that advisers are banking on to speed up the improvement of the Vietnamese Army is as old as the phalanx. It's the military axiom that good units help make the others around them better.

Another key part of the program is the crash project to provide the Vietnamese with the best in modern U. S. military equipment.

Part of this project has placed in the hands of the ARVN soldier the M16 rifle that for the first time has made him the match in firepower of the North Vietnamese regular.

Other parts of the accelerated program are seeing the South Vietnamese get more and newer artillery, armored personnel carriers, fighter-bombers, river patrol boats and helicopters.

"I've heard plenty of gloom and doom talk about the ARVN but a lot of it I put down to the kind of bitching you hear in any military outfit," another adviser said.

"Don't think that these new weapons we're giving them aren't making a difference. Realize that for the first time we're giving the Vietnamese soldier something to really go after Charlie with.

"Just think how much difference giving ARVN divisions the package means."

"The package" is a term for the flight of U. S. helicopters, 10 troop-carrying, four gunships and a command and control helicopter, usually detailed daily to an ARVN division to give it at least a share of the mobility enjoyed by U. S. divisions.

"Yes, the new weapons are making a difference," a high-ranking adviser answered, "but to me the biggest improvement came in the area where there was the most room for it — leadership. This has always been the ARVN's weakest spot.

"When the new ARVN general arrived here the first thing he told me was 'I'm a soldier, not a politician.' I could have kissed him.

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"I'm not saying there aren't some political officers left. But the training programs, along with the determination and stability of the Vietnamese government, are starting to pay off. The quality of officers is improving and it's being reflected by the performance of troops in the field."

But rank itself continues to cause a major problem in most Vietnamese units, U. S. advisers say.

There is an almost traditional reluctance of commanding officers at regimental or division level to delegate authority to small unit commanders.

This reluctance is often reflected in the inability of ARVN junior officers to mount their own actions against the enemy or to respond freely to enemy actions.

U. S. advisers religiously preach the doctrine of freedom of movement for junior officers by pointing out the successes it has gained in ARVN units where it is used.

One difficulty in the advisory program has been conquered thousands of times, and will be a challenge countless more times to each new U. S. adviser. It can be summed up in one word — difference.

"I was sent down here to advise but I spent a hell of a lot of time learning," a young officer said. "The first thing I learned was that these are a different people with a different culture.

"You can no more expect Vietnamese to think and act like Americans than you can expect us to think and act like Vietnamese. That was a lesson both I and my counterpart had to learn and once we both got the message things began to click.

"I remember how baffled I was by one Vietnamese officer when I first got here. He was good, knew his stuff, but I thought he was too cautious and not aggressive enough.

"Then it dawned on me. I'd be going home in a year but he'd been in combat for years and through more battles than he could remember. I guess in his shoes I'd think the same way."

Opinions on how the Vietnamese armed forces will meet the tests of the future are as varied and easy to garner as comments on the weather.

But none seemed clearer and more to the point than one by a grizzled advisory team sergeant on his third tour in his third war.

"The ARVN can turn out damn fine soldiers and those who don't think so are forgetting what language the people we're fighting speak. But they've been building their army for something like 20 years and we've been at it here for five.

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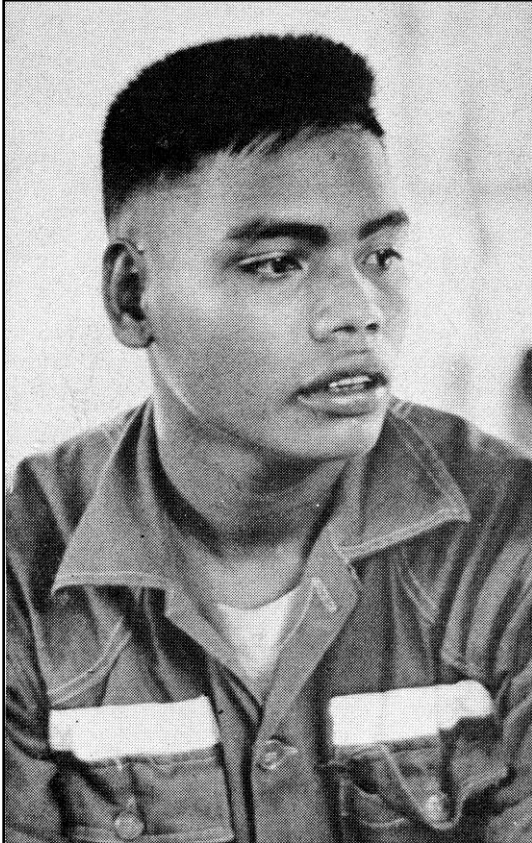
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"The only difference is they've had longer to get their stuff together but we're catching up, fast."

by al kramer

THE DEFECTOR



KSOR MEO HAD been in the Vietnamese Regional Forces for only 10 days and his uniform still had a green, oversized newness about it, without the pale and faded color of many cold water washings.

Near him, as he shuffled off to a work detail, other troops of the paramilitary citizens force snapped to motionless attention as a loudspeaker blared their national anthem over the red dirt parade ground of the Phu Bon Highland Training Center.

They thrust out their rifles in salute. Perhaps Ksor Meo missed the heavy but easily borne weight of a rifle — something that had made indentations in his back and shoulder since he was 11.

No one would trustfully hand the 20-year-old Montagnard tribesman a rifle. A year before, his might have been the face that peered through a clump of bamboo at them as they struggled up a mountain path in the thickly-forested Central

Vietnam Highlands. The hand of Ksor Meo might have dropped to trigger a shattering volley that wiped them out.

For almost half his young life, Ksor Meo was a Viet Cong. He was a faithful and efficient guerrilla from his early teens to his young manhood — until he discovered that, to his leaders, he was little more than an expendable statistic. Although he got a huge reward for returning to the government fold under the Chieu Hoi (Open Arms) program, he had something larger and more important to win — the faith and trust of his fellow soldiers.

It won't be easy. Ksor Meo knows it. Winning his way in this new life will be as difficult as surviving in the one he knew before — the bitter existence that began the day armed strangers came into his village in Tuy Mon Province ...

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"I was just 11," Ksor Meo begins, his dark face as blank as unmarked slate. "They came into my home and took me out. A draft call. They took my father, my 15-year-old brother and myself. My father was taken before I was. They told me I must go to Hanoi. They had jailed my father because he would not fight. He would die if I did not.

"For four years, I went to officers school to learn tactics. The political education was a year and a half. I was very young. No, this was not unusual. There were people in the school younger than I was. Young people are always the easiest to convince and train.

"I was told I would get a medal for any American I captured. I could turn them in for money after the war. Each medal would bring enough money for a whole year.

"I believed it all.

"I met Ho Chi Minh, He shook my hand on the day I graduated from officers school. By this time we were near the Laotian border. When Ho Chi Minh said one sentence, we had to study it for three days so we would learn it and never forget it. He told me, 'Now you must go back to the south and fight the enemy.' I studied it hard and remember it still. I can recite it exactly.

"I went into Laos with three Russians." Ksor Meo smiles at an American visitor. "Like your advisers, they did not speak our language. There were four Chinese. They spoke good Vietnamese. They trained us in weapons and tactics and taught us political theory — us and the Pathet Lao."

Ksor Meo was only 15 when he traveled to Cambodia and crossed the border back into his homeland. He still had in his mind the softly-spoken words of an old man — the bland sentences that were revered like holy scripture or mystical poetry. Before he turned 16, Ksor Meo was placed in command of a 130-man company in the Viet Cong 303rd Bn. He had the vigor and blind devotion of youth. He believed passionately and fought hard.

"We attacked Buon Tring Village. It had American Special Forces and there were two companies of Vietnamese Special Forces. I don't know how many we killed. We just ran in, shot the place up, grabbed the weapons and ran. We took three submachine guns, four M1s, six carbines, two automatic rifles and two radios. I had one man wounded and lost an AK47.

"My superiors were very angry. They didn't care about the weapons and radios I brought back. The whole company had to take a long orientation on the importance of not losing a weapon.

"We attacked Binh Ho, a Regional Forces camp, and captured a 60mm mortar and machine gun. I lost one man and another was terribly wounded. This time my leaders were happy. They gave me a big party. Weapons were always more important than lives."

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There were many attacks after that — the kind Ksor Meo's superiors regarded as successful, low-cost affairs. Lives were nothing when weighed against valuable weapons and prestigious victories. Ksor Meo captured no Americans but killed many Vietnamese and always returned with far fewer men than he went out with. Toughly indoctrinated and indifferent to hardship, Ksor Meo was looked upon by his leaders as a comer. Until...

"They told us to attack Buon Tlun — to charge right into a battery of artillery."

Ksor Meo pushed doubt and misgiving aside. His men flung themselves on the guns. The sweating defenders threw canister rounds into the breeches and ducked low as lanyards were pulled.

Bolts of whistling, bone-cutting steel tore into Ksor Meo's ranks, blasting hideous gaps in them. Human beings were flayed apart like rag dolls in a blast furnace. Ksor Meo mindlessly ignored screams of agony and terror. He pushed on; the survivors of a flash rain of steel vaulted over the guns and into the battery. Shattering rifle and carbine fire smashed into them from all sides.

Something broke inside Ksor Meo, the mindless robot who had been powered by empty phrases — the crudely-tuned fighting machine that had been used too much and abused too often.

His soldiers went down in writhing heaps around him. He suddenly realized that he could no longer wad up human beings and throw them away. With a sweeping motion of his hand, he ordered a retreat — stumbling back over a ghastly confetti of torn limbs. He left behind 30 dead and as many priceless AK-47 rifles.

"Siu Giao, the division commander, wanted to send me to jail. I was very angry at the way they had thrown my men away. They did not care about my life or the life of anyone. What kind of a cause was this? What kind of a life? What kind of a faith?"

Ksor Meo was suddenly a man without a faith — and perhaps had a short and unpromising future. While his leaders pondered his fate, he cannily waited his chance. With the stealth of a guerrilla, he slipped out of the Viet Cong camp on May 25, 1968 — and 15 days later walked into Hoinmalin Village, the birthplace he had been taken from almost a decade before. Government troops heard his story and followed him back to the VC camp. They captured 35 weapons, each of which carried a hefty bounty. Ksor Meo got 280,000 piasters.

He had a small, heart-shaped stone set into his teeth — a badge of wealth and prestige in a small mountain community. He made one grateful discovery after walking out of a long nightmare — his father, whom he protected by submitting to impressment, had been liberated by government troops.

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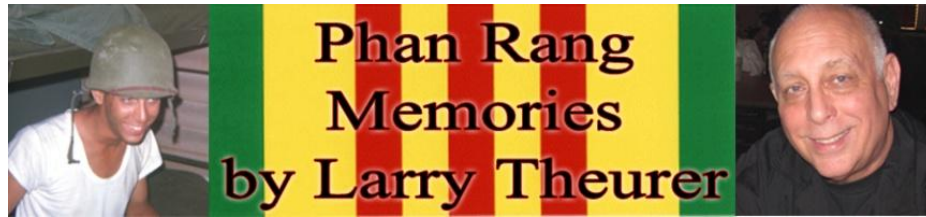
But his brother is still in the Viet Cong — still fighting for what Ksor Meo believes is a false faith and a lost cause.



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THE MULE

I arrive on the revetment ramp one day for work and over beside the line shack a small group of guys are gathered around a strange vehicle trying to get it running. It was a small thing that looked like a flat table top on four small tires with a wire basket sticking out in front where there was a steering wheel and the gas and brake pedals. The engine was underneath. It had four wheel drive and four wheel steering. They said it was an Army “Mule”.

Someone asked where it had come from and someone said they thought an Army tank crew had come by and traded it for a 20mm cannon. That story sounded odd to me because 1) with the rate of fire of our 20MM aircraft cannon being 3000 rounds a minute, I didn’t see how a tank was going to carry enough ammo for it, and 2) I thought the Air Force might notice if one of its cannons went missing.

Anyway we all poked around it for a while and got it running. We all took turns driving it including me. It was an absolute blast to drive. I hadn’t had so much fun in a long time. I loved it.

It kept dying on us and we would get it going again and were having a ball riding it. Finally it stopped and we could not get it going again. I went to work my shift.

A few days later it disappeared and no one knew where it went. Someone said MSgt. Badger confiscated it for his personal use back at his barracks. I never saw it again. I still get a kick whenever I see one in a magazine or on film.

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DEROS Dip (Date Estimated Return Over Seas) by Steven Chavez



Last day at the Bomb Dump, returning to CONUS next day. “I do believe this was the AT Forklift crew 1969” said Steven Chavez.



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(This newsletter was compiled by [Douglas Severt](#), unattributed graphics and photographs by Douglas Severt. I try very hard not to repeat a story and if I do it might be from a different perspective or news source I will always site where that story has previously appeared.)