



Mekong Express Mail

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THE THAILAND LAOS CAMBODIA BROTHERHOOD, INC.

www.TLC-Brotherhood.org

Recollections of a 23rd TASS FAC

interview and photos by Bill Tilton

MEM visited TLCB member George Getchell, met by many at our reunions and who was a FAC in the 23rd TASS at Nakhon Phanom RTAFB, Thailand, in 1966. George lives 20 miles east of Louisa, Virginia, with his wife, Veronica, near Beaverdam by Lake Anna.

BT George, did you just go straight to NKP [Nakhon Phanom Royal Thai Air Base]?

GG No; I started out in Vietnam, down in IV Corps. Ca Mau was the name of the place, all the way South.

BT You probably knew Glenn Bremenkamp there. He was at Rach Gia.

GG Yes, yes! Sure did! It was just a little further South than where we were, actually southwest, over on the coast.

I got there in early December [1965]. Beaver 27 was my call sign, but I do not remember my Gombey number when I got to NKP, because we had no paperwork. In early April I got a telephone call from the ALO [air liaison officer] up in Soc Trang. He said, "Take your O-1F," (we had two O-1Es and an O-1F), "and everything you own, and fly to Danang as soon as you can. Check in with the FACs there at Danang and they will fill you in. You are on a highly-classified mission and that is all I can tell you." I flew to Danang, and found the FAC guys. They were hidden, like the FACs usually were back in 1966. They said, "Oh yeah, meet back here

George Getchell looks at one of his favorites, a model of the F-86



at eight o'clock in the morning and we'll tell you what you're gonna do. In the meantime don't say nuthin' and we'll talk to you when we get back together."

I showed up at eight o'clock and here is a whole bunch of FACs. It turned out there were 22 FACs that had been brought in from all over South Vietnam all with O-1Fs, to get that extra range with the variable pitch prop. They all had four to six months' experience. That was the idea; you were supposed to be experienced, like yourself.

BT I was not!

GG You were not?

BT No. There was a big argument about it at Bien Hoa. They said, "They're not supposed to go up there unless they're experienced. Well send him up there." I said, "What are you talking about now?" The captain came over and he said, "You ever heard of quad-fifties?" I said, "Well, uh no; well, I guess so." That is all he told me, except he said, "You're going up to Naked Fanny."

GG We all ended up in a room and none of us knew each other at that time. In walks this guy with a [non-standard] hat on. He was quite a character but I cannot remember his name. He rolled this map out and said, "OK, you guys, you're all going to NKP, Thailand." So he drew this line across the [mountains], and he said, "I can't tell you what's going on, but it's very hush-hush. Don't talk about it. When you get there, no cameras. You're going to see all kinds of strange people walking around and flying around. Just don't discuss anything with anybody and you'll get another briefing when

23rd TASS continued next page

NOTE: If you have not yet paid your 2008 dues (\$25) please mail your check now. The address is on page 5 of every MEM. This is the last issue of MEM that will be mailed to members with unpaid dues. Anyone with a problem paying their dues should contact President John Loftus directly at ec121@chancefac.net

you get there. By the way, I'd suggest you go ahead and climb out to six thousand feet because you're going to be crossing very close to a place called Tchepone." He told us at this time, "It's been getting a bit warm down there."

GG There was this map with a line on it. He said, "Here's the heading, but there are thunderstorms on the way, so he said, "You're going to have to navigate your way around those thunderstorms." He said to keep heading generally west and we would hit the big Mekong River. By that time we should be able to pick up the beacon at NKP—as you remember, all we had was ADF [obsolete navigation system].

Somebody asked, "How are we going to do this?" I said, "Just like we always do: flights of four, fifteen minutes apart; except one would be a flight of two."

I had never been above two thousand feet [in the O-1], and all the stuff we got down in IV Corps was small arms (however near the end we were getting some .50-caliber), so here we were climbing out to 6,000 feet and I thought we would never get there. All 22 of us guys were on the same frequency flying around those thunderstorms at 6,000 feet, watching out for Tchepone. Then this one guy called out, "I got engine problems. It's starting to cough and spit and crack."

There was dead silence. "Well, what do you think?" [he said]. Somebody said, "lean it out or hit the carb ice." Then there was more silence. Then he said, "Oh, that took care of it." We would have lost him then—we were well

into Laos by that time. But we chugged along and all of us, miraculously, landed at NKP. The weather was good there, and we all landed.

BT That many? Twenty two! I knew we were growing but I had forgotten it happened that fast. I got there a little bit earlier—the end of March. On my first day I actually flew inside Thailand. I took a Thai pilot over toward Udorn and he was talking to guys on the ground—they were looking for a Thai Communist commander in some caves, and they found him. He called up to me and said, "We can go back now." I asked him what they did with the communist. "Oh, they shot him," he said. There were four of us that went up there from Bien Hoa (AFB, near Saigon).

GG How did you get there?

BT By O-1. They gave me an O-1 at Bien Hoa. The others were Dick Strong, as lead, Nick Kormanik was number two, I was three, and Glenn Bremenkamp was four. We flew up the coast, landed at Nha Trang for fuel and spent the night at Danang. And then next morning they briefed us and they showed us the picture of Tchepone. They told us to go at 10,000 feet; now this was in March. It was the end of March, because April first was my first flight out of NKP, and that was the same day the 23rd TASS was formally activated. But none of us knew it then.

GG The guys that were there prior to you had gone out and they found Route 912 [the 'New Road' through Ban Loboy and Harley's Valley]. Nobody knew where that was and then

NKP RTAFB in mid-1966. Nong Han lake at Sakonnakorn, near the horizon.



all of a sudden that showed up, and they [7th Air Force] said, "We got to get some guys over there."

BT That is probably why I got sent up there so suddenly

GG Yeah! They said, "If that's there, I wonder what else is there."

BT George, that's a really good piece of information.

GG Other than that it was Nape' [the abandoned Route 8 entry from North Vietnam], and Mugia and straight on down. But when [route] 912 was found, boy, they said, "Whew, there's gotta be a lot more." There was one of the original FACs, a small very wiry guy.

BT I think I know who you mean. He had been the only survivor of the unit he was attached to in Vietnam. He had a story about going out to do his firing range training in the jeep one day and the range started firing back at him. He left the range very quickly! But I never heard him talk about the action that wiped out the whole unit.

GG We all landed and got out and started wondering out loud what we were to do next. But Lt Col Louis Johnston showed up and showed us where the officers' club was first, which was good, and then the hooches. Then before they released us, he got us all together and said, "Now look, this is all very hush-hush. No cameras. Don't talk about what you see or do. Don't talk about that building on the hill there." (Referring to Invert, the NKP radar transmitter.) We were all thinking, "Wow, this is serious." We looked around and there was a T-28 with no markings, a couple of helicopters parked there, and a bunch of civilians walking around. Johnston told us, "You'll get a briefing as we go along."

He added, "It's a very fluid situation here." With all those new people coming in and the new mission, somebody needed to do some thinking about what we were doing. This old idea about having to be a fighter pilot to qualify to be a FAC—they found out that that was not necessary at all.

BT Yeah! I had KB-50 time and C-47 time, and that's all!

GG In South Vietnam we had two guys that had never flown fighters before that were my assistant FACs. As you and I found at NKP, very few of them had fighter experience and they were a great bunch of wonderful guys. They had good common sense, really could dig into the problem, and passed it on to each other so that we did not get ourselves unnecessarily shot down.

So the idea was to first go out and find out as much as we could about the Trail, and accurately put it on one to fifty thousand scale maps—to get it really down on the one-to-fifty so we would really know what the trail was like. But no strikes! Do not put in any strikes until we are confident that we have a good, mapped trail. That took about ten days if I remember right, ten days of just mapping, mapping, mapping. Ten days

and no strikes were put in, and it was pretty good because we did not shoot at them and they did not shoot at us. Finally we had it all down and the next thing was to brief it to 7th Air Force and then bring it all back to the fighter squadrons in Thailand. Several of us went. I went to Udorn. We told them, "That's what's out there folks," and left some maps with them. GG Then it was time to go hit 'em. Before that, it was so tempting to see all those trucks down there; we would say, "Oh man!" but we had to hold off until we were ready. Then it opened up; then we hit 'em. The bad part about that was that they then started bringing in guns—bigger stuff. The good part was that by then we knew where to avoid and where to hit them, and where we could just harass them a little and see if they would shoot. If we had just gone in there cold, it could have been pretty bad.

BT Do you remember when Joe Brown got shot down?

GG Yes. Joe Brown was my roommate, and unfortunately I had to do the inventory [of his personal effects].

BT Colonel Johnston told him—I was there during his briefing—not to go up into Mugia. The frag [operations order from 7th Air Force] directed a sortie into Mugia, but those frag guys were in Saigon—what did they know about conditions up there? Johnston told him not to go, that he was officially taking the responsibility to tell him not to go into Mugia. But Joe said no, it was his orders and he would do it. Johnston pleaded with him and followed him out on the ramp. Then later, the klaxon went off.

GG He was a good guy; smart and full of energy and going a hundred miles an hour all the time.

One of those guys saw the 57mm coming. The guy was flying straight and level and number two, flying above him, saw the 57mm start up from behind and it just walked up, the way they did, just keep firing the 57 and moving it forward, until it just took the back of the airplane off, and I am not sure if it was him or [Lee] Harley. Was that Harley, do you know?

BT No. Harley was two [high man], so lead did not see it. Lee was my best friend. I was in Bangkok when that happened.

BT Lee was giving BDA [reporting bomb damage assessment to departing fighters], reading off, and they were under an overcast coming down from the North Vietnam border area, and lead heard him stop almost in the middle of a word. So then lead knew that either a radio had gone out or something worse had happened. So he turned around and, I guess, saw smoke coming up and went back to look and immediately started getting hosed down and had to dive for the tree tops and zigzag out of there with everything pushed forward. I think he still took some hits. And rescue was not able to get in there. So I know that lead did not see the gunfire until he



LtCol Johnston sings an Irish ditty at his DEROS party.

see **Getchell**, continued on page 8

Kim Manin: TLCB helps child who has had to run her household since age 14

by John Middlewood



back to the psychiatric hospital for treatment. Kim is now 18 and she has been the nominal head of her family since she was 14 years old. The TLCB has been assisting her for the last four years. Without that assistance she would have had to leave school in the 9th grade.

School has not been easy for Kim; she is a loner and does not seek assistance because she does not want to “bother” people. It has taken over two years to find out just some of the problems Kim has been facing and she is now seeking ways to solve some of her problems with assistance. Kim will graduate from high school in 2009. At this point she still is not sure what she will do. She feels responsible for her family and feels like she needs to get a job and go to work so she can care for them. We are trying to encourage her to continue and obtain a 2-year certificate in a job area that interests her so she will be able to earn more money when she starts work.

Kim Manin is an eleventh grade student at the local village high school, Sribuaban High School, near Nakhon Phanom.

Kim has a dysfunctional mother and an alcoholic stepfather. She has an older sister who has spent time over the last few years in our local psychiatric hospital. Kim has been supported by TLCB when her grades have been above 2.5 and supported by the local Christian Mission when her grades fall below 2.5. She will be supported by TLCB for her senior year in high school.

Kim’s father died several years ago and her mother has taken a live-in boyfriend. Since this time Kim has had the responsibility of taking care of the family. Kim’s mother is dysfunctional and sometimes normal and sometimes not; she is also very hard of hearing. The TLCB Rep has helped Kim get her mother to the doctor several times for treatment she otherwise would not have got.

Kim has had to struggle in school, because of many outside pressures on her and responsibilities she should not have to have. In November 2007 Kim took responsibility to commit her older sister

During the last 6 months Kim has become a Christian and is a member of the Christian Mission. In mid-January her sister was sent home for a two-week trial and so far indications are that she will be able to stay home. This, however, puts additional pressure on Kim because now she worries about food for an additional mouth to feed.



Right, Kim is presented her Christian Mission membership shirt by John Middlewood after she was baptized. Photos provided by John Middlewood.

2008 TLC Sisterhood Quilt Raffle

by Bob Wheatley on behalf of Rosie Wheatley and the TLC Sisterhood

As most of our members already know, the TLC Sisterhood Quilt Raffle has been a major part of each annual reunion since the 2000 Reunion at Colorado Springs. Thanks to your enthusiastic participation, over the years the quilts raffled by the TLC Sisterhood have raised many thousands of dollars for the TLCB's Assistance Fund. Every dollar raised by this effort has benefited the children of Southeast Asia - the land so many of us fell in love with so long ago. The TLC Sisterhood once again asks your generous participation in the fundraising effort this year. In so doing you give something in the names of our brothers who did not return with us. As you benefit the children of SEA you also give yourself a chance to win a quality hand-made quilt for your home and a beautiful memento of the 2008 Philadelphia reunion. This is certainly a win-win proposition, brothers!

This year's quilt will be offered for raffle in honor of Donna Bartholomew, one of the TLC Sisterhood's earliest members and always a major supporter and participant in this annual fundraising effort. As in years past the 2008 raffle quilt will follow a patriotic theme, and will be done in fabrics of red, white and blue. The central four blocks visually form a diamond pattern that will expand outward in alternating strips of red, white and blue. In keeping with the 2008 reunion's Philadelphia venue, many of the blocks will incorporate images of Independence Hall, the Liberty Bell, and portraits and signatures of many of the signers of the Declaration of Independence and other of the Founding Fathers. Rest assured, this quilt will be hand crafted with "Tender Loving Care" and the finished

work will be a quality piece you can be proud to display in your home.

You will find a sheet of raffle tickets enclosed in this issue of the MEM. Ticket prices are \$2.00 apiece, or one full sheet for \$20.00. Should you wish to purchase more than 10 tickets, you may fill out and photocopy as many as you wish. There is no limit on how many tickets you may purchase, and you **NEED NOT BE PRESENT AT THE DRAWING TO WIN**. Please write "Quilt Raffle" in the MEMO line of your check. Mail your filled-out tickets with your check or money order payable to The TLC Brotherhood, Inc. to:

TLC Brotherhood
P.O. Box 343,
Locust Grove, Ga., 30248

Let's once again join in to help the ladies of TLCS make this year's raffle quilt fundraiser an unqualified success!

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<i>Editor:</i> Dave MacDonald (Dav16Mac@AOL.com)
<i>Distribution:</i> Ray Hayes <i>Composition:</i> Bill Tilton

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TLC Brotherhood Contacts

Ed Heyliger, Listmaster
[AmazingDrH@webtv.net or Listmaster@tlc-Brotherhood.com]
Bob Norway, Webmaster [examiner@cfl.rr.com]

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ALL payments of *any kind*, as listed below, are to be made payable to: **The TLC Brotherhood, Inc.**, and shall be mailed to the treasurer, at:

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Always write *payment purpose* on memo line.
Dues (\$25 per year) Student Assistance Fund
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Reunion 2008: Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

TLCB tax return and board minutes: On web site, in *members only* section. _____

MEM Interviews the Shopkeeper

Mekong Express Mail recently had an opportunity to interview our BX Shopkeeper, Bob Pruiksma, who was assigned to Korat RTAFB to maintain BATCAT RC-121 "Super Connies." Bob also spent a short part of his tour at Nakhon Phanom working on C-123 "Candlestick" flare ships. Bob Pruiksma is somewhat famous in TLCB because he designed and purchased the original tee-shirts for the unofficial first reunion at Dayton, in 1998. He's been doing things like that ever since. Bob and his wife, Phyllis, live in Fayetteville, Georgia. He is looking forward to seeing us all in Philadelphia in August!

MEM We would like to start with your maintenance work when you were at Korat.

BP I was at Korat from October 1969, until July of 1970, and then I PCSed [permanent change of station] to NKP [Nakhon Phanom Royal Thai Air Force Base]. I worked at NKP for three months—they asked for volunteers—on C-123s with the call sign of Candlestick. We dropped flares.

MEM Did you fly?

BP I was on the ground the whole time.

MEM At Korat we understand that the Super Connies [RC-121s] had a real tight fit.

BP We had revetments the planes were parked in, and we had possibly six feet clearance between wingtips. And our planes slung oil so bad that they were washed after every flight. The pilots would taxi the planes to the wash rack, then Thai nationals would wash the planes. We had two spots on the wash rack and sometimes two planes would come in at the same time. So we had to get them washed and get off there as soon as possible.

MEM Why was it important to wash them?

BP No operational reason I know of. It was just that the mission was long and the R-3350 engine leaked a lot of oil. The mission was normally 12 hours orbiting and if the relief plane had a delay it was even longer. There was an oil transfer system. It had two auxiliary tanks in each wing stub, and after each mission we could replenish 80 to 90 gallons in the one tank and 30 to 40 gallons in the other tank. In flight the auxiliary tanks could only fill the individual engine tanks to 28 gallons, so we also had to top off each of the four engine tanks, which had a full capacity of 35 gallons. It was pretty normal to pump between 100 and 120 gallons of oil into a C-121 after every mission.

MEM So, about ten gallons of oil per hour. How about refueling?

BP There were four fuel tanks in each wing that had to be individually filled. There were three main tanks and a tip tank in each wing. I remember the tip tank held 695 gallons. If you did not have two fuel trucks to fill the wings simultaneously you could only fill the one wing part way, and then you took everything down and went to the other wing and filled it all the way. Then you took the truck and hoses back over to the first wing and finished filling it. Normally we had two fuel trucks. They would back up to the wing, with the fuel hose on top of the truck. The truck driver threw you a rope to pull the hose over onto the wing with. If less than a full load was ordered, as you filled each tank you used a spe-

cial dipstick. You put that in the tank and held your finger over the hole on the stick, then looked on the scale for that tank to see if the fuel had reached the right level. But usually all tanks were simply filled full, so you did not have to worry about that.

So we would tow the airplane off the wash rack and push back in the revetment and refuel it right away.

MEM And you were the tug driver for that?

BP I was raised on a dairy farm and used to driving tractors and pulling wagons; I was pretty good at it. My best friend, Steve Peterson, and I, we did almost all the towing. We also went to school on our own time and got engine-run qualified. We had a crew chief and an assistant crew chief. The crew chief would launch the airplane and the assistant crew chief would recover the airplane. But they had a limit of no more than 12 hours on duty. If they did not have their plane mission-ready then they had a support team, of which I was part. We would finish working their airplane and we did all the towing.

MEM What level of maintenance did you have available at Korat?

BP We had a hangar. They did phase checks in the hangar. We had an engine shop and a prop shop. Your organizational maintenance, OMS, was crew chiefs and the support team. FMS was field maintenance, while EMS and AMS were electrical and avionics. They did heavy checks. They had sheet metal people. I doubt that they overhauled the engines there, but they would do cylinder changes, prop changes, engine changes, and they had an engine test stand. As a matter of fact, I think Gene Ponce, a TLCB member living in Thailand now, was either in the engine or the prop shop about the same time I was, but we did not know each other then. We were housed with our own maintenance section and did not get to know the other guys much.

MEM Bob, did you choose to go into aircraft maintenance?



2008: Bob with RC-121 model and photo. Photo: Phyllis Pruiksma

BP No, I took the [Air Force] test and they gave me my scores and showed me where they had openings.
 MEM Were you already in the Air Force.
 BP Not at that time.
 MEM Did you join the Air Force for the same reason almost all of us went in the Air Force?
 BP I went in the Air Force to avoid the draft.
 MEM That is the reason we were anticipating.
 BP They asked, "Do you volunteer to go to Vietnam?" and I put "No," and then they asked, "Do you volunteer to go to Southeast Asia?" and I put "Yes."

Of course Vietnam is in Southeast Asia so they probably could have got around that pretty easily. But, I believe I knew that I was going into aircraft maintenance when I joined, but when I took the test they said those are your scores and we have openings in this field.

MEM Did it appeal to you?
 BP Yes it did. Because I was raised on a farm, we did not have a lot of money, so you fixed your own machinery, so I knew about wrenches and things like that. It was in Basic Military Training that I filled out my first "dream sheet" and chose aircraft maintenance. Then I went to Sheppard (AFB), at Wichita Falls, Texas. But it was while I was in basic that I learned I was going into maintenance of reciprocating engine aircraft, more than two engines, so I knew I was going to be on large propeller-driven aircraft. I was not going to be on jets. At Sheppard I got my orders to McClellan AFB and learned that I would be on Super Connies, and my first reaction was disappointment because I thought I was going to be on some more exotic aircraft. But looking back now, I would not trade it for any aircraft. I enjoyed it.

EM Had you ever heard of Korat?
 BP No.
 MEM So you got your orders, had never heard of Korat, but probably had heard of Thailand?

BP I had heard of Thailand, but had no idea where it was. I left from Travis [AFB, in California] in October 1969, on a commercial DC-8 and landed at Don Muang [airport, at Bangkok] in the middle of the night. They opened the door and the heat just hit us in the face. Next morning we caught a C-130, the "Klong Hopper." When we got to Korat somebody came along in a stake-body truck and gave us a lift. He dropped us off at what he said were the hooches for the 553rd Recon Wing. It turned out to be transient hooches. After a couple of days there they moved us to our open-bay hooches, sixteen men to a hooch. We had two mamasans who did our laundry and every day we got clean sheets and clean clothes.

Two hooch boys took care of four hooches, polishing shoes, keeping the grass cut and keeping the latrines clean. The mamasans got \$6.50 from each man, so if the hooch was full they each got fifty dollars a month.
 I worked the midnight shift, so I had to try to sleep in an open bay while the guys who were on their off-days were playing their reel-to-reel tape players and mamasan was chat-



BATCAT patch

ting with mamasan in Thai all day long. On my off days Steve Peterson and I would get a hotel room in Korat. Our days off only overlapped on one day, so we would get a room for three days and one of us would hang around downtown while the other one slept in air conditioning and quiet and then we would trade.

BP I was 19 when I went to Korat. I went in and did my work. I think I was pretty good at what I did. I made a conscious effort, where some of my co-workers would come in, high on pot, did not want to work. My buddy and I volunteered for things. I was engine-run qualified as a two-striper

over there. But I did not really *care* what the mission was, when I was 19 years old. I have learned more about what we did since the TLC started. I knew, basically what we did. I knew that the planes went out and flew orbits. I knew that they had to stay on orbit until the next plane relieved it. The humidity was so bad. We would hear them run up down at the end of the runway, trying to clean them out, and then they would try a takeoff and about halfway down you would hear them, "hoooooAAAHHH!" with all four engines in reverse. And they'd come back down and run them up again and try to burn them out and then they would try again. Sometimes they would try three or four times and then taxi back to the revetment and write up some fouled plugs, or something like that. They had engine analyzers. I remember a lot of write ups, like "double shorted secondary," which meant both plugs [in a cylinder] were fouled. They could analyze each cylinder of each engine. They would shut an engine down [in flight] if they had one cylinder that both plugs were not firing. If they shut an engine down they had to declare an emergency even though they still had three running. Many times we had them come in on three or come in on two. I remember one time they blew a jug [cylinder on a radial engine] and it came right through the cowlings.

MEM *Really?*
 BP But the cylinder was still there because the spark plug leads—those were braided stainless steel spark plug leads—they held it even though it had blown through two layers of sheet metal.
 MEM Wow! Which way was it headed?
 BP It was on number two engine headed outboard. It would not have hit anything vital.

[to be continued in a future issue of MEM]



Igloo White sensor as landscaping at a guest house in Gnommarath, Laos, in February. 35-year Pathet Lao Army veteran stands by. Photo by Bill Tilton

Getchell, continued from page 3

started getting it himself, so I know he did not see Lee get shot down.

BT Where did you go after you left NKP?

GG I went to the F-5 squadron at Willie [Williams AFB, Nevada]. It was one fine airplane! It had been sold to 17 or 18—now 30—countries. They had the T-38s at Willie then and it was similar so that is where they put the F-5, but we were in TAC. The squadron commander owned his own maintenance—250 people. He was not your typical squadron commander with just a bunch of pilots. What we did was train the people from different countries that were buying the F-5s. Then we would go over and help them set up their programs, too. It was great.

I was there for nearly four years and then went to Command and Staff [college, at Maxwell AFB, Alabama], to get some learning. From there I went over to Morocco as the F-5 team chief for the Moroccan Air Force for two years. It was great, the best-kept secret in the Air Force. We were the only F-5 squadron, so I knew the guy who replaced me.

Then back to 12th Air Force and JCS exercises, then to Luke in

the F-5 and the F-15. We were using the F-5 as the aggressor there, against the F-15s and the F-16s to try and give them MiG experience in combat training. It was pretty comparable to the MiG-21.

From there I went to SHAPE (Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe) in Belgium and the American Embassy in Germany as USAFE (U.S. Air Force Europe) liaison officer. In between that I was base commander at Hahn Air Base, on full flying status, which was really lucky. That is where I flew the F-16 and, later, at Shaw.

BT Now how did you like the F-16?

GG Very good, very comparable to the F-15, but the F-15 has a much better fire control system and a lot more stuff, like long range missiles. But the F-16, since I flew it, has certainly been upgraded.

BT You were in Desert Storm and retired as an O-6 [full colonel]?

GG Yes, in June of 92. Saddam invaded, I think it was on the 5th of August. We were there on the 7th, fully up. I was at the Air Force headquarters in Riyadh [Saudi Arabia].



JUSMAG was there in 1954

By Bob Rudolph

On August 27, 1954 when the French and North Vietnamese signed their treaty the US Army was on the ground in Southeast Asia.

We had a JUSMAG Special Operations Group consisting of three officers and about 30 enlisted men. The group was the Army Security Agency 327th Comm. Recon. Co. from Japan, mostly Korean War veterans. The 6920th USAFSS from Japan and the 29th Radio Squadron Mobile from the Philippines.

We went in with four C119s loaded with supplies; rations, water buffalos and electronic equipment. We refueled in Saigon and went on to Bangkok and then we loaded our equipment onto some boxcars and headed north to Chiang Mai, Thailand (26 hours behind a wood-burning locomotive) where we set up shop in September and October 1954 and did our job, about which I cannot get further info from the U.S. Government. The website at www.oldspooksandspies.org has my pictures/orders and a hotel receipt from a Chiang Mai Hotel where we stayed. Just click on Photos and Orders under Bob "Rudy" Rudolph. We had passports and civilian clothes.

Just before us there was "Operation Vulture" which is explained in the book "Operation Vulture" by John Prados. I believe our special project was called "Snake Bite". While we were there many French escapees were making their way from Dien Bien Phu through the jungle to Thailand.

We were told we did a good job and they flew us back to Tokyo in a C-54. This was known as a "Black Operation" and I cannot find any reference to our mission anywhere. We also visited several times at a home site of an American family which had some "company" personnel nearby. This was in the Meo (Hmong) tribe area near the Mekong River.

In response to the great article in the Mekong Express Mail, Volume 8, Issue 4, by Bill Jirsa, I imagine the people he did maintenance and repair work for were Army Security Agency personnel and maybe USAFSS. They all had top secret clearances and were very protective of their areas. In Vietnam during the 1960s General Abrams had to go through my friend, Sgt. Warren Noble (dec.) to gain access to one of our sites.

Our group did not receive credit (ribbons, etc.) for our mission and I would like to hear from any other U.S. military personnel who were in SEA between 1954 and 1961. This would make our presence in the Vietnam War 1954-1975 (21 years) instead of 1961-1975. A couple more details about the U.S. involvement in SEA 1954 includes American POWs captured near Saigon in June of 1954 and an American Airborne Ranger Group that jumped into Dien Bien Phu in November 1953 and got out on the last plane out in April 1954.

Because our era does not have any patches or ribbons that I know of (except the JUSMAG Thailand Emblem) I am wondering if anyone else qualified for SEA service before 1959. I wear the TLCSB cap, but do not know if my service qualifies for the Vietnam ribbon.



To Philadelphia in 2008!

by Gary Beatty, Reunion Chairman

The Brotherhood will meet in the city of brotherly love. This year's reunion will be in Philadelphia on August 7 -10. For those interested in American history, including the history of your respective branch of service, this will be an opportunity to see where it all began.

On June 14, 1775, the Continental Congress meeting in Philadelphia, adopted the American Continental Army with George Washington as its commander. After initial defeats, and near extinction, the army rose like a phoenix after the terrible winter in nearby Valley Forge. We Air Force and Army vets trace our lineage to this first of the American uniformed services.

Congress established the Navy on October 13, 1775, when it resolved that two sailing vessels be fitted out "to cruize eastward, for intercepting such transports as may be laden with warlike stores and other supplies for our enemies, and for such other purposes as the Congress shall direct." The Philadelphia waterfront was its first homeport.

Philadelphia's waterfront is also the home to the most famous drinking establishment in the annals of American military history where, some would say appropriately, the United States Marine Corps was founded. Tun Tavern, renowned at the time for its fine beer, is where Samuel Nichols set up the first Marine Corps recruiting office after being commissioned by the Continental Congress on November 10, 1775, to "raise two battalions of marines." Even more appropriately, the bartender was the first recruiter. Of course the Marines forget they were originally part of the Army—"they be distinguished by the names of the first and second battalions of American Marines, and that they be considered part of the number which the Continental Army before Boston is ordered to consist of."

Our meeting agenda this year will leave plenty of time to explore this historic city, and to debate the attributes of our respective services. There will be a guided tour of the histori-



*2008 Reunion, Philadelphia, PA
Liberty and Freedom*

cal sites (Tun Tavern not included), with transportation from the meeting location so we will not have to fight the city traffic. We are also exploring the possibility of a tour of nearby Valley Forge National Historic Site. There will of course be the annual TLCB business meeting, banquet and famous (infamous?) auction—worth the trip by itself.

The meeting site is the DoubleTree Plymouth <http://www.doubletreeplymouth.com/>. These are not just rooms, they are suites! Prices range from \$109—\$129 per night (depending on occupancy), which includes breakfast, and discounts at the bar/restaurants just for reservations made as part of the TLCB block. We have a block of rooms set aside, so make your reservations now by calling 800/222-TREE (8733). Be sure to tell them you are with the TLCB, so we get credit for the room. Booking under the TLCB block is very important this year, because if we fail to fill our room allocation it will cost the TLCB money. Historical tour and banquet reservation forms are in this issue of MEM.

This is our first reunion so close to New England, so I expect all you Yankees to be there.



New TLCB BX jackets an instant hit

At left are your BX Shopkeeper, Bob Pruiksma in the "sand" colored version, and TLCB treasurer, Bill Tilton, modeling the "navy" color of the newest addition to your BX. This is a light jacket made of soft poly microfiber with an excellent TLCB logo embroidered on the left side. We have found it is perfect for those cool spring and fall evenings, and is not uncomfortable in warmer weather when you just want to "show the flag." All sizes are available, though if they aren't in stock you may have to wait a few extra days while our supplier makes up that XXXXXXL for you. Price is \$49, which includes shipping and handling. Please mail your orders to the treasurer, at PO Box 343, Locust Grove GA 30248. If you know it, it always helps to put your member number on the check.

See www.TLC-Brotherhood.com for more BX merchandise.

Review of “The Nimrods”

a book by
Colonel Roger D. Graham, USAF, Retired, USAFA 1963
Review by Col Jimmie H. Butler, USAF, Retired

“The Nimrods” will transport many Air Force Academy graduates back 40 years to the sights, sounds, and emotions of the Secret War over the Ho Chi Minh Trail. For the uninitiated, Colonel Roger Graham treats readers to a view of what life was like, night-after-night, among a band of heroic and dedicated warriors who flew A-26s during the Vietnam War.

Night combat sorties in SEA were among the most stressful and dangerous flying missions. For those who flew only part of a combat tour in the dark, finishing the last night-mission felt almost like getting a ticket home. The Nimrods were night fighters, living their entire tour in a world where flashes of light triggered adrenaline—and lines of tracers flashed up from massed anti-aircraft artillery (AAA) virtually every time a Nimrod attacked. Some readers may wonder if the dangers Graham describes have somehow grown in memory over four decades. My answer to that question is, “No.”

Graham has chosen a unique approach to telling his story of dangers in the Vietnam War, then coupling lessons-learned to dangers facing America forty years later. He intertwines his experiences as a professional combat aviator with the personal challenges many of us faced in leaving loved ones behind as we ventured into an unknown future in battlefields half way around the world. He has chosen from his more than 180 com-

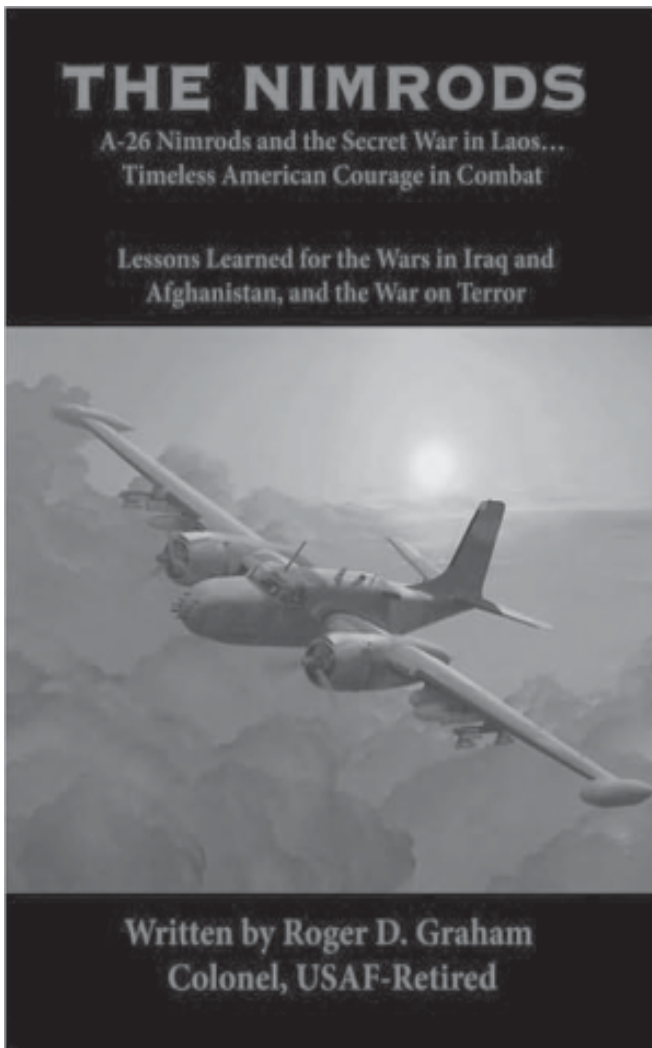
bat missions in the A-26 to tell short tales of flights into the dark skies over Laos. Readers will meet many crewmen he flew with as part of the brotherhood of men in combat. In telling us these vignettes, he illustrates what most combat veterans learned long ago: Sometimes the good guys die—and we and their families carry the memories with us the rest of our lives.

The last few weeks of my combat tour as a Forward Air Controller at NKP overlapped Colonel Graham’s first few weeks. I felt a kinship with the Nimrods, and I know Graham’s tributes to his fellow fliers are well deserved. Many Vietnam vets who still enjoy life in America avoided being listed on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall because the bullets with their names on them never arrived in South Vietnam. Many of those bullets were incinerated in fire rained down from the darkness by a Nimrod swooping over a truck-filled Laotian road.

Having experienced a war in which American servicemen and women were undercut by a national media that misled the American people and by ambitious politicians who didn’t understand the meaning of Duty, Honor, Country, Colonel Graham talks about the parallels that Vietnam Vets see in today’s media and politicians. As I read his list of what Americans need to do today to win this generational War on Terror, I agreed with each item—as most combat veterans would. Unfortunately the list won’t convince those who deny that America is faced with such danger. I fear the list is more of a blueprint that a united America finally will apply after the next major attack on American soil kills tens or hundreds of thousands.

Colonel Graham provides great war stories (and pictures) and a well-based historical perspective on the deadly challenges of today and tomorrow. If you have ever wondered what it was like to fly at night through deadly, flak-filled skies, climb aboard an A-26 under the call sign Nimrod and share Graham’s view from the cockpit.

“The Nimrods” is available through the Brotherhood BX and commercial sources.



Nimrods is continued next page

Some personal insights about the men who flew under the call sign, Nimrod.

During my combat tour in Thailand, the Nimrods squadron lost five of its twelve A-26s and nine brave crewmen. James L. McCleskey (USAFA 1961) was one of only two Nimrods to survive those five losses.

Colonel Graham mentions the loss of two American heroes the morning of 22 February 1967. I still remember that morning. As I approached the Tactical Unit Operations Center to brief for my 11th combat mission over the Trail, I witnessed sheet-draped stretchers being removed from the ambulance and taken into the dispensary. The heroic actions of Captain Dwight S. Campbell and Captain Robert L. Scholl helped save the lives of James McCleskey and Leonard Scruggs. Thirty years later I dedicated A Certain Brotherhood to Captains Dwight S. Campbell and Robert L. Scholl.

I remember sharing a few minutes in August 1967 with Nimrod Squadron Commander, Lt Col Bruce Jensen, as I gave

him a ride to what was to have been his next-to-last mission briefing. It turned out to be his last briefing and illustrates that the combat commanders at NKP routinely took the same risks as the rest of us. Less than a week earlier, Burke Morgan (USAFA 1961) had gone down on an A-26 in the same area of Northern Laos, and he remained missing for nearly 40 years.

When I flew night missions over the Trail, I was very happy whenever an A-26 joined up as we hunted trucks carrying war supplies to the battlefields of South Vietnam. Whenever I had a Nimrod circling in the dark overhead, the bigger convoy we could find, the better. We would drop the first flare, put a marking rocket near the lead truck, then hold off to the side and watch the Nimrod make pass after pass until all the trucks were burning or had disappeared into the darkness. The Nimrods were the best truck killers in Southeast Asia until the AC-130s became fully operational in the late 1960s.

***Jimmie H. Butler, USAFA 1963
Colonel, USAF Retired, Nail 12/59, Nakhon Phanom RTAFB,
7 February 1967- 5 January 1968***

Monument Project Changes Focus

by Gerry Frazier, Monument Committee chairman

In 2001, the TLC Brotherhood decided to undertake a project to build a monument in Thailand. The intent was to create a physical object in North East Thailand to commemorate our Brothers who were lost during operations during the war, those who are still missing, and finally, all who served. Lots of effort went into this project, but some seven years later, we have very little to show for it, and time is moving on. Accordingly, some difficult choices have been made about how to proceed.

The idea for a monument came from several members, but most of the suggestions were idle talk. The TLCB project began spontaneously, when a member acting independently, made a comment about the desirability of a monument during a casual meeting with the then-Governor of Nakhon Phanom Province. The governor endorsed the idea and promised to set aside a plot of land on which a monument could be built. This unexpected decision prompted our Board of Directors to take steps to fulfill the vision of building a suitable memorial on the land promised by the governor.

Within a few months, we learned that officials at NKP wanted to include the monument in a park to be built on an undeveloped site in the growing town of Nakhon Phanom, where many TLCB members had served. TLCB members participated in a formal site dedication in 2001(?) which seemed to set in motion actual development.

Here in the States, a committee was formed to address design of a monument, and fund raising. Jim "Dusty" Henthorn drew up a rough design. The late Chris Jeppeson, a professional computer-aided designer, turned Dusty's sketches into beautiful professional construction plans. Other members provided insight into construction details, artwork for brochures, fund raising, and other tasks.

Regrettably, in 2004 two of our strongest supporters, Chris Jeppeson and Jim Bartholomew passed away within a few weeks

of each other. Ironically donations to the Monument project increased because Jim had asked that gifts in his memory be sent in support of the Monument project. Roughly 75% of all the funds collected to date are directly related to the efforts and/or the memory of Jim Bartholomew. However, while money was being raised here in the States, in Thailand, progress seemed to stop.

TLCB delegations traveled to NKP in 2003 and 2005 to coordinate our Monument project with the Thai park developments. After both trips, we returned believing we had firm points of contact and official commitments to complete site development in a short time. But, after both trips, communications quickly dried up and progress returned to a standstill. In spite of serious efforts over some five years, today, the original park site is still undeveloped.

Hoppy Hopkins tried to shift to an alternate site. He was given reason to believe that we might be allowed to transform the old control tower at NKP Airbase into a combined museum and memorial. For a time, it looked as if the Royal Thai Air Force would support that plan, but they decided against it, and now we understand the old tower has been demolished.

So, what is going on here? First, I we suspect our Thai partners have had money problems they do not care to discuss. That is regrettable but understandable. Second, politically, times

Library Monument is continued next page.

have changed in North East Thailand. We remember a time of regional conflict. But, today, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and a unified Vietnam are all members of the Association of South-east Asian Nations (ASEAN). New bridges link Thailand and Laos at Nong Khai/Vientiane, and Mukdahan/Savannakhet. Laos exports hydroelectric power to Thailand from UN-built dams on the Nam Ngum River, 50 miles north of Vientiane. In other words, the old military adversaries are now economic partners. We Americans are still welcome to visit, but overt signs of our past activities against Thailand's neighbors may be a bit embarrassing.

So where does that leave our project? We have collected about \$23,000 that was donated specifically for some kind of memorial. A physical monument now seems out of the question for the foreseeable future. One member suggested we should keep on collecting funds and wait for attitudes in Thailand to change again in favor of a monument. The biggest problem with that is that our membership is not getting any younger. To maintain faith with the existing donors we need to find a suitable memorial project on which to spend the funds we have, and we need to close this long open item of business.

The money collected for a monument is on deposit, drawing interest, but the prospect of using that money for the original purpose now seems very low.

John Middlewood, who spearheads TLCB Assistance activities in and around NKP recently identified several schools lacking libraries. He suggested that the memorial project shift from an increasingly unlikely physical monument to a symbolic memorial. Investing monument funds in library facilities and books for a number of deserving schools would be a creative way to use the funds. They would remain Monument Funds rather than be mixed with TLCB assistance efforts. Each school library receiving Monument funds will receive a suitable permanent plaque citing the TLCB Monument project as the do-

This wall, below, was being completed in February. TLCB provided the materials under our Assistance Program, which many members support with donations. Needed to keep animals out of the kitchen and dining areas, the wall was built entirely by parents from the two villages served by the school. This is the same sort of cooperative effort that will be expected in the TLCB Libraries Monument Project. Part of the objective is to teach the children proper care, respect and maintenance of a good school library. Photos by Bill Tilton



nor, and every book donated will have a label applied in the front cover to note the donation is in memory of those who served the cause of freedom in Southeast Asia. In this humble way, we can hope that the children whose lives and educations are improved by the Monument Fund donation of books and library facilities will serve as a living memorial to our service in SEA during the Vietnam War.

In January 2008, the TLCB Board of Directors passed a motion to drop the unsuccessful effort to build a monument, and switch to a symbolic memorial through the provision of libraries for deserving schools in Nakhon Phanom Province. All Monument donors who could be reached were sent a letter to ask for their concurrence in this change. They were given the opportunity to request a refund of their donations. No such requests were received.

Bill Tilton has just returned from a visit to some of the schools that will benefit from the new libraries. Look for more information about this major program in future issues of MEM, as the details are worked out and a pilot program is completed.



Above and below are pictures of the existing libraries in two of the schools we have been helping under our Assistance Program. Bill found that the books are mostly more than 30 years old and are of little or no interest to students, consisting largely of teaching materials. One library was in the kindergarten building of a school and was not readily accessible to students who are now reading.

