



Mekong Express Mail

Volume 9, Issue 3

THE THAILAND LAOS CAMBODIA BROTHERHOOD, INC.

www.TLC-Brotherhood.org

TACC-North Sector: “Bandits! Bandits! Bulls-eye west 20..”

By William R. Petersen

The author, aka Willi Pete, was a USAF 1/Lt and Senior Director TACC-North Sector, 1967-68

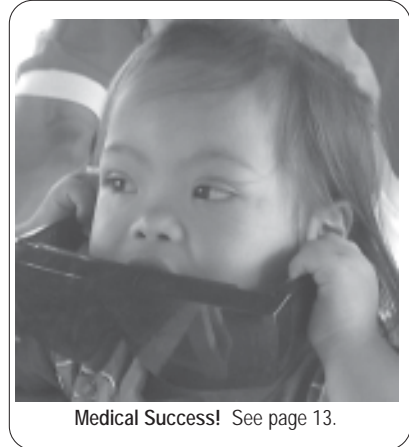
The Tactical Air Control Center – North Sector, reporting directly and immediately to HQ 7th Air Force in Saigon, was the focal point for control of all tactical air operations executed in North Vietnam and Laos. The facility became operational atop Hill 621, Monkey Mountain/Son Cha, 5.8 nautical miles northeast of Da Nang Air Base tower, I Corps, Republic of Vietnam in the Spring of 1967.

The mission areas included all the Route Packages of North Vietnam, but particularly the Air Force segments known as RP I, V and VIA, and worked closely with Yankee Station and the U. S. Navy PIRAZ ship in their Route Packs II, III, IV and VIB. These were commonly known as ROLLING THUNDER. In addition, TACC-NS controlled operations in northeast Laos known as BARREL ROLL and southeast Laos known as STEEL TIGER and TIGER HOUND. Finally, what most people do not realize, the TACC-NS, in concert with tactical control centers at Monkey Mountain/PANAMA and Dong Ha/WATERBOY, had air defense responsibility for South Vietnam defending against the air forces of North Vietnam and China.

If you connect the long range search radars of a number of Monkey Mountain, outside Da Nang, Vietnam



dispersed ships, plus the radar inputs of the E-2C Hawkeye, together under a centralized command & control entity (for example USS Biddle or USS Chicago on Yankee Station acting as PIRAZ (Positive Identification Radar Advisory Zone) and commence tracking unknowns, hostiles, BAR CAP (Barrier Combat Air Patrol),

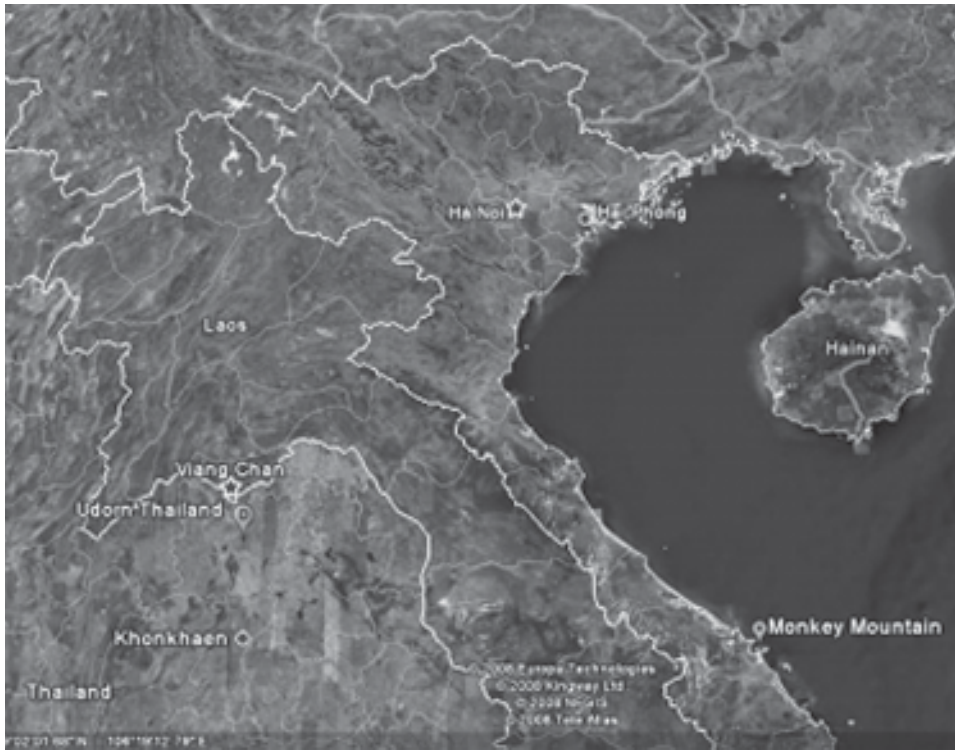


Medical Success! See page 13.

tankers, attack aircraft, etc., then you have the Navy version of NORAD/SAGE. With immediate high-speed transceiver linking to TACC-NS you have now created a total systems architecture for “over the horizon” C³I. The Navy term for that is NTDS (Naval Tactical Data System). To ensure the best management we sent a senior director-qualified officer to work aboard the PIRAZ ship assigned full time to the Navy Combat Information/Operations Center, and the Navy provided us a commander and Lt. commander to work full-time in the TACC-NS Ops Center.

See TACC, continued on page 2

Is this your LAST issue? Please send change of address to TLCB P.O. box! (see page 5).



I was a senior director on the combat crew of TACC-NS, callsign MOTEL. Typically we worked three 10-hour day shifts, a day off, and three 14-hour night shifts, rotating with two other combat crews. Operational requirements, always fluid in war—such as TET 68—changed the routine and we did whatever was necessary to accomplish the missions. U.S. Air Force doctrine specifies the roles and missions of its forces.

The TACC-NS “in-country” mission consisted primarily of air defense of all friendly forces in Vietnam because of our incredible mix of sensor inputs which extended from the DMZ to well inside China. Our assets included two F-102 Delta Dagger NORAD/ADC interceptor aircraft on 5-15 or 60-minute combat alert at Da Nang Air Base, with back-ups. In addition, there were Marine F-4s on alert at III Marine Air Wing, Chu Lai, south of Monkey Mountain. The Marines had HAWK (“Home All the Way Killer”) SAMs for point defense as well.

The principal reason for creating the TACC-NS was the “out-country” missions in North Vietnam and Laos. These consisted principally of counter-air (MiG Kills), strike (Alpha Day and Alpha Night), interdiction, reconnaissance, SAR, Special Operations (LS-85, Son Tay, etc.) and Special Missions (U-2 and SR-71). We also worked missions directly with Lima Site 85 for the several months of its existence.

During the course of the day shift we would report to the ops center for the crew briefing by the departing crew commander. This consisted of on-going SAR emergencies, flights in progress, air defense status (MiGs on Hainan Island, and North Vietnam fields), Special Ops/Missions and the upcoming Alpha Day Strike. Technical briefings included communications, electronics, maintenance, radar and “Special Inputs”. We manned our consoles and began operations at 0700.

The “big show” of each 24-hour day was normally the Alpha Day Strike. This consisted of over 110 aircraft massing for

a concentrated bombing mission in North Vietnam demanding the epitome of aerial choreography. The forces involved were F-105 strike aircraft, F-4C MiG CAP, F-105 Wild Weasel Counter-SAM, F-105 Iron Hand Counter-AAA, RF-4C tactical reconnaissance (pre-strike, and others for BDA post-strike). These forces would be augmented sometimes with a sizeable Navy attack force. The choreography began with reconnaissance, followed by counter air and counter-SAM, counter-AAA forces suppressing the North Vietnamese defense forces. But make no mistake, the air defenses of North Vietnam were the most formidable ever penetrated by any American air forces in our history.

Getting our planes into North Vietnam required aerial refueling by KC-135 tankers deployed from

Okinawa and U’Tapao. These birds flew racetrack patterns on color-coded “anchors” over Thailand and the Gulf of Tonkin. Primary radar sites at Monkey Mountain, Dong Ha and Udorn controlled them and they serviced aircrews ingressing and egressing, as well as emergency fuel for counter-MiG Combat Air Patrol F-4Cs. An all-important element of this aerial ballet was the SAR force, with CROWN and QUEEN as part of the TACC-NS Crew. USAF SAR assets deployed (Super Jolly Greens etc.) to rescue downed pilots in North Vietnam and Laos were given extraordinary support directly from a SAR major and his small staff located in the TACC-NS Ops Center. We had VHF/UHF communications with these airborne forces via the C-135 Radio Relay Aircraft, callsigns LUZON/WAGER.

If all this sounds like a massive and sometimes chaotic job, it was! But add to this mix the B-52 ARC LIGHT missions, the FB-111, EB-66, B-57 missions, and the U-2 and SR-71 Flight Follow missions and you have almost completed the day’s pre-lunch mission. Then came the afternoon and preparation for the Alpha Night Strike, which was normally a repeat of the morning on a somewhat smaller scale. All this choreography was spelled out in the Alpha Day Frag Order, complete with call signs, base of origin, aircraft type, ordnance, target, target type/location, time over target, tanker route and more. This information came in to TACC-NS during the night shift, who “broke the frag” and posted it on the big Plexiglas boards and into the Burroughs/Honeywell/SDC computers. Let us call this mass of information “Input A.” What made TACC-NS special was “Input B”—called “Special Inputs.”

If you have seen a 1960s-1970s tactical control center with radar scopes and plotting boards and technicians working the mission then you have seen PANAMA and BRIGHAM and INVERT and WATERBOY CRCs. Now think about what im-

TACC is continued next page

ages come to mind when I say NORAD.

In 1966 the Air Force and Joint Chiefs, in concert with PACOM, created PROJECT COMBAT LIGHTNING /SEEK DAWN. Individual officers and men of the USAF Air Defense Command were selected for a TOP SECRET SCI (Sensitive Compartmentalized Information) Codeword operation without their knowledge. What they had in common was: 1/1t, Certified Skilled Weapons Director or Air Surveillance Officer, and 18 months experience at a BUIC II site. BUIC (Back-Up Intercept Control) sites were the new generation high-speed air defense operations for NORAD, which were the war-survivable back up to the SAGE Division HQ block houses. The Weapons and Surveillance Technicians had to have commensurate time in grade and experience certifications. That is how they chose the men and the equipment that were to become "MOTEL".

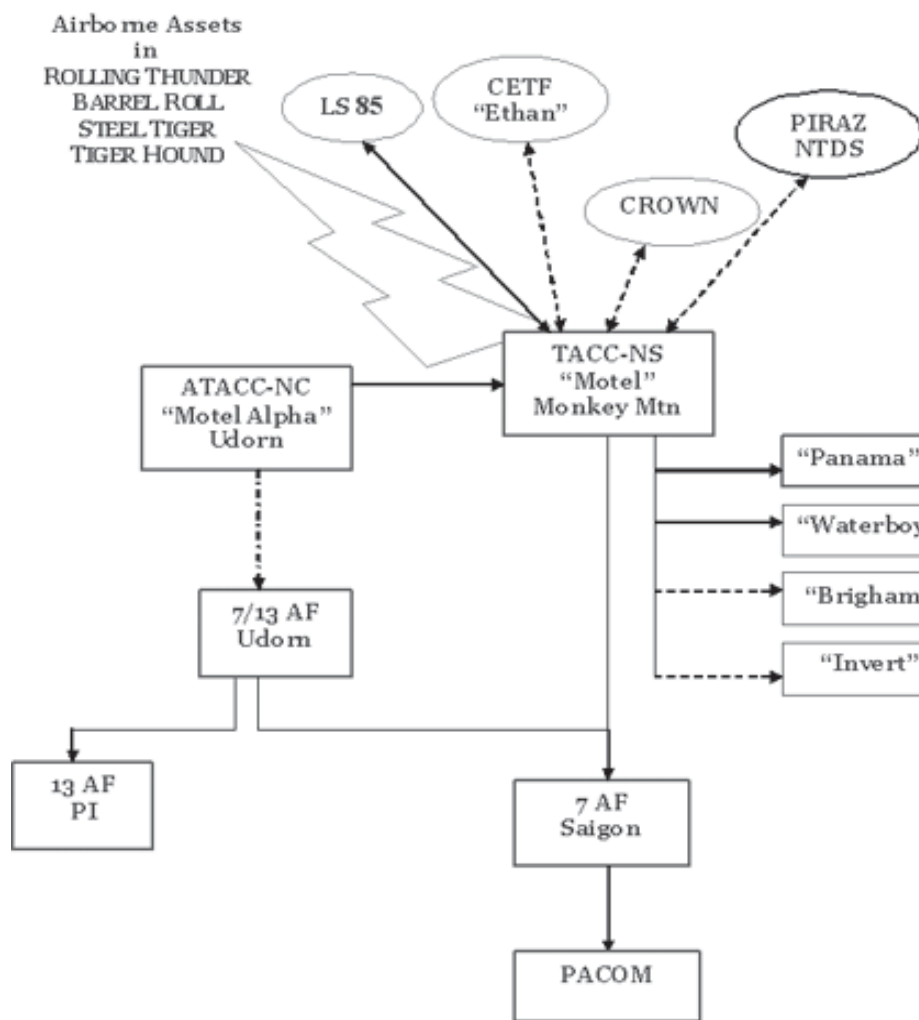
The men reported to a spacious and beautiful office build-

ing in lovely downtown Santa Monica, California in civilian attire with totally innocuous orders. We reported to Systems Development Corporation, were given SCI security briefings and indoctrinations and began a six-week intensive Top Secret operations course. When we went into the SDC mock-up ops center we all instantly recognized our ops and surveillance consoles and the comm gear. As the screens came to life we were startled to see, not the familiar Atlantic coastline or Great Lakes we saw back home at Cape Charles, VA, or Calumet, MI, or Charleston, ME, but, instead, China, Laos and North Vietnam! Now our vague orders began to make sense. We figured out what we would do, we just did not know exactly where.

As the training progressed several important things happened. We all knew radar operations exceptionally well—well enough to know that these scope displays exceeded our known capability. That is when we were introduced to the force multiplier called SIGINT (Signals Intelligence). After a few weeks there was one, probably two, attempted Soviet GRU penetrations which were foiled. Then we were divided into two groups one assigned to Monkey Mountain, and the other assigned to the Alternate TACC-NS at Udom, Thailand—callsign MOTEL ALPHA. When we arrived in Vietnam in May-June of 1967, Hanoi Hannah welcomed us, mentioning some of us by name.

Monkey Mountain was the home of the 620th Tactical Control Squadron whose icon was the "Wooly Booger" combat jackass with the motto "Sorry bout that!" The primary mission of the 620th TCS was PANAMA Control serving the Air Force missions of I Corps, RVN. The unit had about 280 men, and it was combined with a fairly large contingent of South Vietnamese VNAF radar personnel. There was a U.S. Army Tropo site halfway up the mountain, which linked to Udom. The influx of about 100 MOTEL ops people made for some initial hard feelings with PANAMA because we were in a TOP SECRET, SCI, NOFORN operation in a hut that was off limits to them. The hut became a regular ops building. In no case were any personnel permitted to enter without MOTEL permanent party security badges. Yet we had a very close operational relationship. MOTEL would issue warning of air attacks (twice in 1967-68) and actual control of the air defense fighters was exercised by PANAMA. But MOTEL was primarily engaged in ROLLING THUNDER and the Secret War in Laos.

TACC-North Sector OPERATIONS ORGANIZATION 1967-68



TACC is continued next page

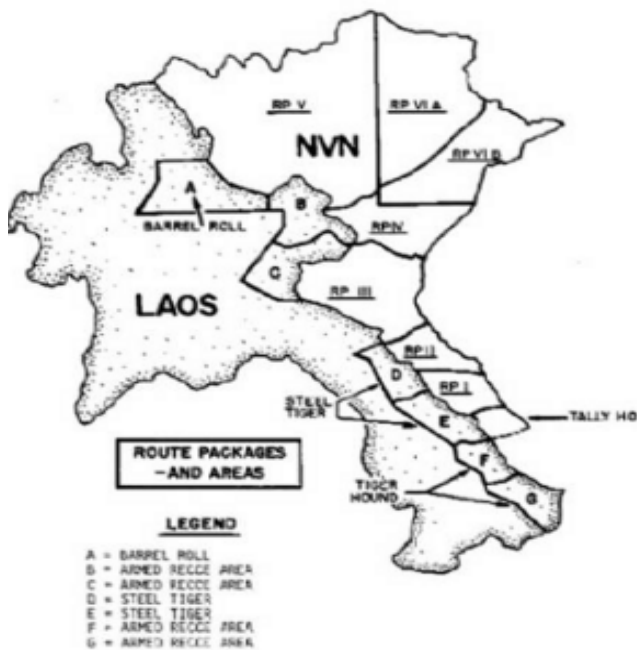
By now you probably wonder what was so special about “Special Inputs”. First, understand that our MOTEL radar was digitized radar processed by a computer with very special software and display capabilities that were more advanced than NORAD BUIC sites. Our software actually predicted the next “return location” of an aircraft radar return, from a C-47 to the SR-71. We saw digitized data with explanatory symbology, not radar sweeps and “skin paints.”

Special Inputs were the Vietnam war equivalent of near-real-time “Magic.” Special sources I will avoid naming, provided communications, electronic and data intelligence intercepts in virtual real time to the “Special Inputs Section” in the ops building. USAF technicians literally typed this awesome influx of dynamic data onto IBM cards and created a river of data inputs into the Burroughs/Honeywell hardware using special Systems Development Corp software. The output became a digitized display on the ops consoles, fully merged with the radar data from the various radar inputs at PANAMA, WATERBOY, Navy RED CROWN/PIRAZ, and Udorn. The main value of this expanded “air picture” was our ability to “see” and operate inside North Vietnam, Laos and China from our Hill 621 location near Da Nang. It goes without saying that this was indeed “Special Intelligence.” At this point, I would like to acknowledge that none of this could have been done without the full enthusiastic and silent support of the National Security Agency.

I discussed the roles and missions of TACC-NS above, but I would like to explain two unique and specific functions of a MOTEL senior director.

The first was the issuance of Border Warnings. These were very important because we were trying to accomplish two things:

OUT-COUNTRY OPERATIONS



keep the Secret War secret, and deny the Chinese an excuse for engaging the USAF or Navy pilots in some encounter the PRC would take to the UN and claim was a provocative cause sufficient to escalate war in SEA. As friendlies approached China we had to discern if our guys were within their rights in accordance with the current rules of engagement—ROE. This decision was made while the fighters were screaming across Route Pack VIA at 480+ knots. We had the outer perimeter marked as “yellow” and the violation zone as “red”. The normal exception was authorized when we were in “hot pursuit” of an enemy fighter and a possible MiG kill was imminent.

The second function of MOTEL operations was to provide direct support to F-4C MiG CAP pilots by issuing “Bandit Calls”. Any friendly aircraft at risk by the presence of MiGs would get a Bandit Call as a protective measure. But now I am talking about the specific ability to provide our pilots an edge that might result in a MiG kill. Some pilots complained that the calls were too vague, or not “callsign specific”. They were right, and we regretted that reality. But we were able to save a lot of pilots and contribute to kills, too. Our pilots were not told how we got the information we provided, as a way of protecting sources and methods. Generally speaking we got our information from MiG pilots, NVNAF tower operators, and the NVN air defense system operators—directly! When we called, “This is MOTEL on Guard—two Blue Bandits Bull’s-Eye” our pilots knew there were 2 MiG-21s around Hanoi. What we wished we could have told them was full disclosure: pilot so-and-so and his wingman are on the Phuc Yen taxiway 1 minute from taking the active runway and they have been cleared for an attack on FORD Flight—the lead F-105 flight of four strike aircraft. Two minutes later they have checked in with North Vietnamese Ground Controlled Intercept operators and we know they are at 11,000 feet, climbing to 28,000 in afterburner, with clearance to attack a “hostile American” who is being tracked by that controller. The senior directors/weapons directors at MOTEL were all certified “skilled controllers” with an absolute passion for aerial combat under “close control” conditions. But with some inherent limitations in our equipment and prohibitions against disclosing sources and methods, we were required to “advise, not control” the MiG CAP F-4s.

There were some significant other activities that happened during my tour from 1 June 1967 to 1 June 1968. Space precludes discussion but a mention is deserved: there was an attempted “air raid” on Da Nang that never got much past Mu Gia Pass heading south but we scrambled dozens of fighters in the black of night in defense. On another night the Chinese Air Force launched fighters from Hainan Island in Tonkin Gulf and shot down unarmed Gunfighter 69, a 366th Tac Fighter Wing F-4E enroute back to Da Nang from Clark AB, PI. I launched 24 fighters in defense and we prevented the Chinese from picking up the aircrew by sinking one Chinese Navy gunboat with 48 2.75 folding fin aerial rockets launched by a pair of F-102s on Air Defense Alert at Da Nang. We were involved in the support of Lima Site 85 and were in comms on their last transmissions. We survived numerous rocket attacks at Da Nang. After TET 68, my 15-year-old Vietnamese barber was shot by a Ma-

TACC is continued next page

rine as he attempted to throw a hand grenade in the window of the hospital at Da Nang.

What was done at TACC- North Sector / MOTEL became the first step in a long path of USAF air superiority based on digital combat C³I capabilities. New steps would be taken with

College Eye Task Force EC-121 aircraft out of Korat RTAFB— RIVET GYM and also RIVET TOP—culminating in the E-3A AWACS. Now we talk about Air Domination!



2009 Reunion Site Announced at Annual Meeting

TLCB vice president and reunion chairman, Gary Beatty, announced proudly that the site chosen for next year's reunion and annual meeting is on the Florida Space Coast, which is where Cape Canaveral, Cocoa Beach, and NASA's space launch center are located. There are many things to see and do, year-round, including a famous museum and a potential for special tours.

This news was greeted enthusiastically by the members attending, and requests for details started right away. Gary said the date will be chosen with consideration of seasonal prices and weather. It will be announced this winter, along with many more details. Watch these pages as details are announced.

2008 Board of Directors election results

At the Philadelphia Reunion the following election results were announced.

President John Loftus was re-elected with 59 votes.

Presidential Candidate Chuck Wilcox had 37 votes.

(There were 97 votes cast. One was invalid.)

Re-elected were:

Treasurer Bill Tilton

Bob Santo (At-Large)

Bob Wheatley (At-Large)

President Loftus appointed Frank Marsh (TAG) to be Communications Committee Chairman. All chairmen currently serving were confirmed to continue in their positions.

Dave MacDonald

Secretary

TLC Brotherhood Inc.

Mekong Express Mail ...is an official publication of The TLC Brotherhood, Inc. This newsletter is furnished to all active member households in support of the Brotherhood's objectives. The views expressed in articles published in this newsletter are those of the authors, and do not reflect official TLC Brotherhood policy unless explicitly stated, nor is the TLC Brotherhood, Inc., responsible for the veracity of information furnished by our authors. All rights reserved by The TLC Brotherhood, Inc., in 2008.

The TLC Brotherhood, Inc. is a tax exempt, non-profit charitable organization under IRC Section 501(c)3. TLCB was incorporated in the Commonwealth of Virginia in 1999.

Editor: Dave MacDonald (Dav16Mac@AOL.com)

Distribution: Ray Hayes *Composition:* Bill Tilton

TLC Brotherhood, Inc. Tax ID #54-1932649

Board of Directors and Committee Chairmen (2006-2007)

President: John Loftus

Vice President: Gary Beatty (Reunion Committee)

Secretary: Dave MacDonald

Treasurer: Bill Tilton

Chaplain: Ted Ulrich (Memorial Committee)

Board members-at-large (showing term-ends year)

Bob Santo (2010)

Bob Wheatley (2010)

Les Thompson (2009)

Jim Henthorn (2009)

Non-board committee chairmen

Assistance Committee: John Schillo

BX Shopkeeper: Bob Pruiksma

Communications Committee: Frank Marsh

History Committee: John Binfield

Membership Committee: Mike Vale

Monument Committee: Gerry Frazier

Public Relations Committee: Floyd McGurk

TLC Brotherhood Contacts

Ed Heyliger, Listmaster

[AmazingDrH@webtv.net or Listmaster@tlc-Brotherhood.com]

Bob Norway, Webmaster [examiner@cfl.rr.com]

TLCB Official addresses and payments to TLCB

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:

**TLC Brotherhood
P.O. Box 343
Locust Grove, GA 30248**

Always write *payment purpose* on memo line.

Dues (\$25 per year) **Student Assistance Fund**
Assistance donation **BX purchase**
Monument donation **Medical Fund.....etc.**

Reunion 2009: Florida "Space Coast"

Where does that TRC-24 antenna point?

By Tom Lee

Tom Lee was the USAF intelligence officer and US Embassy target validation officer at TEXAS in 1968-1969

Bill Jirsa's interesting article on his Thailand duty maintaining TRC-24s in the December 2007 MEM prompted what Paul Harvey might have called "The Rest of the Story."

Bill said, "I want to believe that I contributed something that at that time was very, very important to someone somewhere. But I'll never really know for sure."

Bill, I can confirm that you contributed a great deal to operations that were very, very important at the time. Had it not been for you and your buddies providing long haul communications for guys like us located "Across the Fence," a critical piece of the U.S. in-country Laos activities would have been out of business. We were the "someones, somewhere" that your NCOs and officers protected by rebuffing your questions and

curiosity. Well done, my friend! You kept us in the game. Now you know for sure.

The flyswatter antenna Bill mentioned at the Army Phu Mu² signal site pointed to its mate located at the TEXAS site overlooking the airfield at Savannakhet, Laos.¹ TEXAS was the code name for this covert American site supporting U.S. and Laotian air operations within the country. That communications

link provided unclassified and classified voice and message links to the outside world for the site and other Americans located in Savannakhet. The site was manned by U.S. military personnel working under U.S. Embassy/USAID cover. We wore civilian clothes and operated under the auspices of "plausible denial" of our existence since our presence (foreign military) violated the 1962 Geneva Accords. However, we left the niceties of International Accords to the diplomats and lawyers and did our job supporting our piece of the then Secret War.

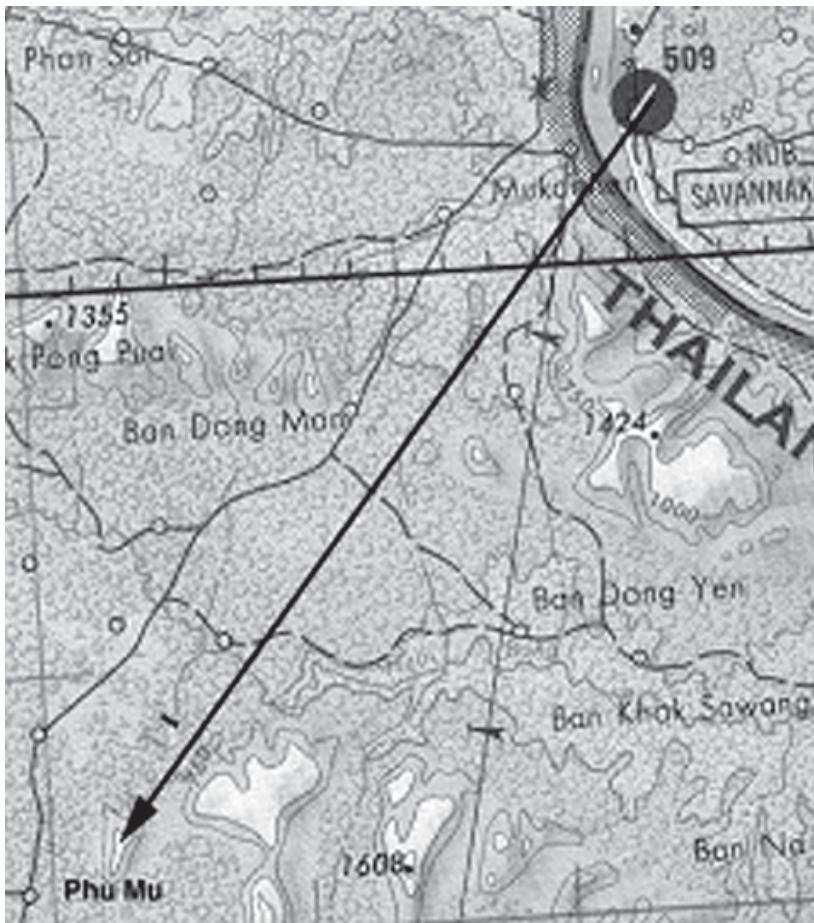
Our operations included providing a resident U.S. Embassy target validation officer to approve U.S. tactical air strike requests in South Laos, supporting the in-country U.S. RAVEN forward air controllers, supporting a squadron of 12 T-28D fighter bombers flown by Laotian pilots, developing the air operations center, maintaining local tactical communications nets, supporting the resident U.S. Assistant Air Attaché and often



Texas Site.
Photo is looking south toward Phu Mu. Photo by T. Lee 1969



Comm Van.
Photo by J. McDearis 1967



While on station I believed that our flyswatter antenna pointed to the USAF radar site (VIKING) at Mukdahan, Thailand across the Mekong River from Savannakhet. However, decades later I learned that the antenna actually pointed to the Phu Mu Army signal site, located approximately 20 nautical miles to the south southwest. While in Laos I had no idea that Phu Mu existed.

Similarly, I understand the troops at Phu Mu knew us either by “classified location” or “TEXAS” depending on the time period. Mike Mainer’s photo shows the Phu Mu end of the link. Their flyswatter antenna points to Mukdahan, Thailand (VIKING) and Savannakhet, Laos (TEXAS).

Now you know the rest of the story of this TRC-24 link to the Secret War.

(Footnotes)

1 Air America and Continental Air Services (CASI) people and activities.

2 Phu Mu is Pig Mountain in Thai.



supporting the larger American community in Savannakhet. The site provided local telephone and long haul communications for our site personnel, collocated covert U.S. Army personnel, and occasionally USAID and USIS, CIA, Air America and Continental Air Services (CASI) people and activities.

As best as I can determine, the TEXAS TRC-24 link was installed by the USAF 1st Mobile Communications Group (1st MOB) during 1965 as part of the growing “air operations center” at Savannakhet.

The TRC-24 system operated from its container until 1969 when the site communications containers were enclosed in a plywood building (the peaked roof in the photo) to improve equipment cooling and control dust. According to my operators the ever-present laterite dust was wearing down the equipment contacts like emery powder. I presume that the system continued to operate until the U.S. left Laos about 1974.



Phu Mu Signal Site.
 Photo by Mike Mainer 1969-1970
 See <http://ubvet.tripod.com/phumu/id2.html>

The Trail Revisited, 1966—2008

by Bill Tilton
all photos by the author



Karst of Khammouane Province of Laos, as seen from Nakhon Phanom, Thailand, during the Flood of 1966. If you ever wondered what is in those hills, read on.

Summary

John and Nancy Sweet and I travelled to Thailand and Laos from February 12th to March 4th this year. In Nakhon Phanom we toured with John Middlewood. For the Laos portion we were joined by MacAlan (Mac) and Sunee Thompson, who live near Bangkok. We also met with “Mekong Jim” Michener in Vientiane, and with Les and Mayuree Strouse. The trip included visits to Assistance projects, to prospective Monument projects, and to wartime sites of particular interest to several of us in the group, and no doubt to many of our readers.

The three of us flew to Udorn the morning after our midnight arrival at Suvarnabhumi Airport (the dramatic new super-airport that has replaced Don Muang for international air travel to Bangkok). We rode from Udorn to NKP in a van and driver we hired for the first phase of the visit, which was nearly all via paved roads. We took school tours with John Middlewood around NKP. Mac and Sunee Thompson arrived from Bangkok and spent one day visiting the revered temple at That Phanom. On our third day we all rode to Mukdahan, where we crossed into Laos on the new Route 9 bridge.

Route Coloniale 9

Just across the Mekong we attempted to visit a school that Jeff Hudgens and his group have helped near Savannakhet, and then drove to fabled Tchepone (aka Sepon and Xepon) for our first night in Laos. From Tchepone we visited Chokepoint Foxtrot and the area close to Chokepoints Alpha, Bravo and Charlie, then retraced Route 9 to Savannakhet for the night. Next day we rode Route 13 (on the Lao side of the Mekong) up to Thakkek and got on Route 12 to Gnommarath, visiting Mahaxey along the way. Our route included an attempt to visit the Vietnam border in Mugia Pass, then back to a rescue site on Route 28, and to Ban Nahom where Jeff Hudgen’s father crashed in a battle-damaged A-1 Skyraider. From there we returned to Thakkek to commence the Long Tieng phase of our trip, which was reported in the June issue of Mekong Express Mail.

The second stage of the trip was planned to take us as close as possible to the famous “chokes” of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, and to get a good look at Tchepone (sometimes spelled Xepon or Sepon). Tchepone was just south of the operating area of the 23rd Tactical Air Support Squadron (TASS). It was also an infamous center of anti-aircraft weaponry, and late in the war it was the first objective of the ill-fated thrust of the Army of Vietnam when they attempted to cut off the Trail by invading Laos. From Tchepone we would see how far up the old Trail we could go in a car. Our driver was the owner of a comfortable, air-conditioned Toyota van. Her name is Aaa (pronounced “ay”). Aaa had met us when we flew in to Udorn and now she loaded up our bags and off we went down along the Mekong to the second bridge ever built across that mighty river, running between Mukdahan in Thailand and Savannakhet in Laos. The



bridge is upstream from mid-Mukdahani, and enters Laos north of Savannakhet, so you do not enter either town.

We headed east, traveling on a legendary highway past some equally legendary towns. This was Route 9 in the old French colonial road network that connects the Vietnamese port of Da Nang to the banks of the Mekong. Route 9 passes the famous Marine outpost of Khe Sanh that the North Vietnamese army tried to turn into America's Dien Bien Phu. They failed, but we lost many Marines in the siege. The real role of Route 9 that makes it a key point in the war is that the North Vietnamese originally forged their trail down through neutral Laos because the US made it impossible for them to move sufficient supplies across Route 9, which crosses the country just along the south edge of the old DMZ. In the western part of Route 9 the country is fairly flat and infertile savannah. Farming is scarce. The trees are scrubby. But there are some famous towns from the war, known as Muong Phalan, Seno, Muong Phin, Tchepone, and at the border, Lao Bao.

Late in the afternoon the monotonous horizon started to be broken by rising karst formations and soon we were driving through some of the valleys that lead up to the town or towns called Tchepone. A few kilometers before we reached that destination we passed an intersection that was marked as the way to the Oxiana gold mine, and this was our first view of the main route of the original Ho Chi Minh Trail. Our plan was to stay the night in Tchepone, where Skip and Karen Chervak had visited in 2004. Next day we would come back to this intersection and head up the Trail.

Tchepone

There is some ambivalence and disagreement among various maps and between the signs and the maps, and frankly I don't know if we ever really got to the original town of Tchepone. One map showed yet another town east of the river



Original supports for the French steel girder bridge that used to carry Route 9 across the river at Tchepone, taken from the modern new concrete bridge that carries cars, trucks and buses from Vietnam across Laos to Thailand at Mukdahani.

and off the road that is labeled "Xepon." I was very excited when we got to the bridge and looked over to see the piers and remains of the old original French steel girder bridge—that was close enough to Tchepone for me! I felt satisfied. The fence posts in front of the guesthouses in this town added just the right touch of authenticity—they were made of recovered 500-pound bomb casings. I wondered if one could wander out in the paddies and find some of the hundreds of AA gun positions that had surrounded Tchepone.

After we got established in a fairly nice guesthouse we all walked to a restaurant, which we found in a side street near the empty marketplace. We were the only guests and the family

see **Chokes**, continued next page

Chokes continued



Tchepone guest house finds new use for Mk 82 (500 lb) bomb casings.

who owned the place was clustered around a charcoal brazier to keep warm while they ate their supper. Here in the depth of primitive Laos, in Ho Chi Minh Trail country, in one of the most feared towns of the war, they told us they have relatives in the USA.

A Dutch couple came in while we were eating the meal Sunee had ordered for us. We talked with them. They were traveling all over Southeast Asia on bicycles. They had just come down from Thakkek on a route Mac and I had been discussing. It was marked on some maps as passable and was not even shown on others. We were interested because Thakkek (across the river from NKP) was our destination for the next night, and this diagonal route would save many kilometers for us. It is one of the earliest routes of the old Trail. The couple had a quick answer for us: *not suitable for vehicles*. They even had a rough time with bikes. Next morning we were on our way toward Chokepoint Foxtrot.

Chokepoint Foxtrot

Early in 1966 the FACs who were in the little detachment which became the 23rd TASS on April 1st of that year were trying to find ways to interdict the flow of supplies down the Trail. Bombing roads was not efficient and it was very hard to find live trucks, which traveled at night or when the planes were not around. They soon decided to find places where they could concentrate road damage because the alternative alignment options were limited and the terrain was vulnerable to bombing attacks. Alpha and Bravo were fairly close together, and when Bravo got stopped up the bypass was called Charlie (it was so good as a choke point that it was soon abandoned as a road). Delta was out in the open but since it was a creek crossing in very soft earth, it was considered to be useful (it was also very easy to repair). I do not remember where Echo was. Best of all was Foxtrot, the last chokepoint designated in 1966.

Foxtrot was below the point where a network of routes joined together, so that all trucks had to pass through it. And the road in Foxtrot ran for over half a mile on a narrow strip of flat ground between a steep hillside and a river that was 100 feet wide. Once the FACs and then the A-26 Nimrods, discovered Chokepoint Foxtrot it was visited many times in each 24 hour

period, day and night. Bombs cascaded dirt onto the roadway and strafing runs destroyed many trucks that were stuck within the area of the chokepoint. It was so beat up with constant bombing that one had to wonder if it would ever recover.

Recover it has! The lower karst hills appeared as I expected and on the right the river that I had seen so often from a thousand or so feet overhead, moved in from the right to join us. Then I announced to the group: "We are now driving through Chokepoint Foxtrot." We may as well have been driving along a stream in West Virginia! The hillside was covered with trees and bushes. The river was clear and smooth. The road was paved and had guardrails. If I did not know from my charts I would doubt this could possibly be Foxtrot.

We pushed further north, reserving Foxtrot for closer examination on the way back to Route 9. After a visit to the



Chokepoint Foxtrot in February, 2008..



Chokepoint Foxtrot as it looked in late 1966.

Oxiana gold and copper mine (see lead article in June issue of MEM), we decided we had time to explore a little further up the road, which now turned to an unpaved track.

Warren P. Smith

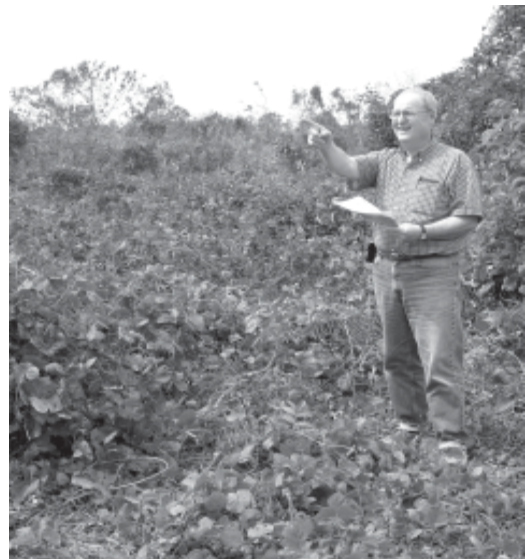
We headed west on the road that is now called Route 28. It is very much the route of the Trail between the original chokepoints and the southern end of the Cricket (23rd TASS) operating area. All of us were curious, and of course I was eager to get as far up into the little hills and valleys as we could. I particularly wondered about Bravo, where a 2000-pound bomb directed by Glenn Bremenkamp made a 70-foot crater and, in conjunction with the rainy season, shut down the trail for two months (the 23rd TASS was awarded the Presidential Unit Citation for that stoppage). So we started out. Very soon the road became dirt. We passed through the nearest village (which appears to have developed to serve the mines) and then the road started to get really rough. Aaa immediately complained about taking her precious van on this road, and I soon capitulated. I knew we would not be able to explore any further without a tougher vehicle.

Before we turned around we came to a little wooden bridge, which we photographed, as it look very much like the many bridges we had directed air strikes on during the war. In studying my old 1:250,000 chart of the area, I realized this bridge crossed the very wet-season waterway that I had seen next to the wreckage of WP Smith's O-1 in June of 1966 after he was shot down right here! I had photos of the wreckage with me. I



Typical wood bridge on the old Ho Chi Minh Trail. Many bombs were flung at these easily-built structures.

stepped out into the brushy area on a path for a short distance—maybe 100 feet—and John took my picture as I was comparing the terrain to my chart. Smith has not been recovered, though they have searched in the area of his plane. John suggested I take a small stone from the area, as a memento to “Willy Pete,” who was one of my best friends both in training at Hurlburt and at NKP. He looked at the path between us and said, “There’s a good one,” and handed it to me. As we rode away I looked at this stone and realized that it must have been a prehistoric tool, having several very well-shaped edges. I remembered that we used to tell WP *he* was prehistoric, as he was then in his third war.



Above, author looking for site of WP Smith wreckage. Below, Wreckage of Warren P. Smith in June, 1966 on the day after he was shot down. His remains have not been recovered.



Walking Through Foxtrot

Mac and John agreed that I should be given all the time I wanted to explore Foxtrot, even though we needed to drive all the way back to Savannakhet for the night. I was eager to walk the length of it. We stopped at the north end and John and I began a tourist stroll through the narrows, the part where the road had to be run close to the river on the East side and the steep hillside on the West side. The signs are still there if you know what you are looking for, but to the everyday traveler through this area it is just a pretty stretch of river along a well paved half-mile of road. It was a poignant moment full of memories, and of course I picked up another stone as a memento of this once very violent place.

At the end of Foxtrot we got back in the van. I was elated to

Chokes is continued next page

Chokes continued

have seen and experienced so much on this amazing day, and I knew that some day I would be back and would also walk through Alpha and fabled Bravo. Of the chokes I once worked on nearly every day, Foxtrot was the best, but we had ignored it until near the end of my tour. Alpha looked good, but in fact that big karst in the middle of it took most of the hits, and it was going nowhere—Alpha was too rocky, I think. Delta was soft dirt with a stream, but was much too easily repaired. Charlie was so good the Vietnamese gave up using it before very long—it was perched on a steep dirt ravine and could not be kept open. Many trucks got stopped in there. But Bravo was where we stopped them in the wettest part of the rainy season, and where Charlie Lutz and I killed a bulldozer with



Chokepoint Bravo, where one 2000 pound bomb made a 70 foot crater and stopped traffic for two months during the rainy season of 1966. See then and now photos of Chokepoint Alpha on page 2 of the June, 2008 issue of MEM.



Chokepoint Charlie briefly served as a bypass of Bravo. Note destroyed trucks exposed on precarious road. Below, side view of Foxtrot, showing road cuts and destroyed trucks.



high explosive rocket warheads, and where our squadron tried to go every day during the worst weather, just to make sure it was not reopened. Some day I want to walk through Bravo, and Alpha too. (And then there are Ban Loboy, the Parallel Ridges, and Harley's Valley). But this was not to be the day.

Route 12

Our next adventure was to be French Colonial Route 12, which stretches across the Lao Panhandle from Thakkek (right across from Nakhon Phanom) to famous Mugia Pass and into Vietnam. We had heard that much, if not all, of it was now paved, but we did not know how far we could get. Our plan was to drive from Savannakhet up Route 13 to Thakkek, then out past Mahaxey to the Route 8 juncture near Gnommarath, and then return all the way to Thakkek for the night. Then the next day we would go back to Gnommarath and out along the long valley to what is now called Route 28, and then, we hoped, at least part way up into Mugia Pass itself. While out there we wanted to visit Ban Nahom, the first village Jeff Hudgens and his church group had helped, which is near the base of the karst that his dad's A-1 Skyraider had crashed into when he was shot down.

Thakkek astounded me by how large and busy this city is, having only seen it as a dingy-looking village perched on the opposite bank of the mile-wide Mekong. In 1966 from overhead, it just looked like a drab version of NKP, only smaller. Today this place is thriving and actually looks more attractive than Savannakhet, even though it is not connected to Thailand by bridge (only Savannakhet and Vientiane are near Mekong bridges, anywhere. But a third bridge has been announced and is to finally connect NKP and Thakkek with a highway, to be built in the next few years).

As we headed out Route 12, I spread out my UTM¹ charts. In a way, this would be the most fascinating part of the trip for me, because it was to cover the very familiar landmarks we 23rd TASS FACs passed on nearly every mission. It started with a plunge right into the snaggle-tooth hills that are so familiar to



Driving into the karst so many have seen from NKP.

¹ Land navigation charts used by ground forces are Universal Transverse Mercator projections that use a unique grid reference system and show many surface features. FACs use UTM charts.

Chokes is continued next page

Good News for Jiraporn

On July 25th of this year John Middlewood, our official agent in Thailand, told us about a little girl named Jiraporn. He described her as a 4-



year-old heart patient who has Down syndrome. At that time this unfortunate child was at the heart center in Khon Kaen, awaiting heart surgery. (Khon Kaen is a settlement where the first Friendship Bridge crosses the Mekong from Laos to Thailand, and it happens to be home to a fairly large number of

tired American military).

John had been told the specialized surgery would give her a “50/50 chance,” whereas she had “no chance” without it. On August 17th he told the Assistance Committee that Jiraporn was still waiting for her surgery. He had learned that Khon Kaen has only one surgeon who does this particular type of surgery, and he spends much of his time performing his work in other places.

On September 17th John told us that he hoped to bring her back when he went to Khon Kaen for his own visit for a checkup, if she had had her surgery. Then on the 25th he learned her status. She had gone to the heart center on July 22nd and finally had the needed surgery on August 27th, coming out of intensive care on September 16th, when she sat up for a few minutes for the first time since her surgery. We look forward to hearing more good news of Jiraporn’s progress.

Chokes continued

anyone who has looked across the Mekong at Nahkon Phanom, whose name means “City of Hills.” I used to have a dream of some day returning to drive my wife on a tour in a Land Rover through this area. Of course my wife has died, and Laos still is not exactly wide open for travel (but it is getting hard to find restrictions). Now here we were in a Toyota van, running along a highway through what was once virtually no-man’s land.

The first thing we wanted to check on was a giant Buddha in a cave—something we FACs had discovered and wondered about, that is now a tourist attraction. Soon our zipping along ended abruptly as we came to subgrade road. Long stretches

Member generosity brings new funds for Assistance

By Bob Wheatley

One of the main objectives of our annual reunions is to raise funds for our TLCB Assistance Program. This year for various reasons, many of our members were unable to attend. Even so, those not in attendance were there in spirit, and together we found a way to participate by way of an on line pledge drive. As always, many eagerly stepped up to the challenge, and almost all who pledged made good on their promise. Over the three-day weekend a total of \$1345 was raised. A heartfelt thank-you goes to all of you who helped make it a success.

Meanwhile, at the Reunion in Philadelphia, the TLC Sisterhood Quilt Raffle resulted in donations to the value of \$2,142.17.

Also at the reunion, a noisy, hilarious Auction conducted by John Sweet, Les Thompson and Bob Santo, for which members donated their treasures, including cans of beer bought at Mugia Pass, resulted in spectacular receipts of \$2,596 from those attending.

During their July 7th meeting, the TLCB board of directors voted to transfer to Assistance the amount of \$7,000.

of this part of Route 12 were under construction and were graded but not paved. This really slowed us down, and it was very dusty. When we passed the road to the cave Buddha we decided it would be too much of a diversion and the road looked even rougher than the main one. It was nearly noon by the time we came through the beautiful karsts to the cutoff to Mahaxey. This I definitely *had* to see.

Mahaxey sits by the side of a river, which has cut a deep bed, so that the town sits about 30 or 40 feet above the river during the dry season. Frankly, progress has not arrived, but

Chokes is continued next page

Looking across main square of Mahaxey from open restaurant where we had lunch..



Chokes continued

we were able to get a decent lunch. We continued on the road, headed more northward now, toward the junction of Route 8 at the very old town of Gnommarath. This area had been pocked with old bomb craters and four-hole anti-aircraft positions, long-abandoned by the time I first saw them in April of 1966. I was told by some of the original FACs that the Trail had come down through Nape' pass and through here at one time, but when the FACs started flying, the Vietnamese had to abandon this route—it was just too close to NKP. Abruptly we came to well-paved road and Gnommarath. After an attempt to drive up Route 8 to the top of the plateau, we again turned back because of poor road. Nobody wanted to ride that rough new subgrade all the way back to Thakkek for the night. Changing plans, we found a rather nasty guesthouse in Gnommarath, putting us much closer for our attempt on Mugia Pass the next day. We could only guess how long that would take.

Into Mugia Pass

Next morning at our guesthouse, Mac discovered an old guy who said he had been in the Pathet Lao army and the Lao PDR army for forty years (see photo on page 7 of the March issue of MEM). Mac mentioned that he was lucky to have survived, and asked if he had been scared when the warplanes were bombing. The old soldier said with a laugh that when you are 18 you think nothing can hurt you. He was near the most remarkable war-relic we saw on this trip. There, as though it was a decorative shrub, was a sensor. This was one of the types of devices that were dropped along the Trail by Navy P2V Neptunes, and that were listened to by technicians in the super-secret "Igloo White" building at NKP—the once-famous "McNamara's Wall" that was used to listen to trail activity so we knew where to send the air strikes. This sensor had a wiry, branched antenna that was designed to look somewhat like natural vegetation, and I have been told it would have been equipped with an explosive that was to go off if anyone jerked on the antenna.

Back on the (excellent) road to the east, we soon went up through the first line of karst and saw the front of the high plateau that culminates in the high pass called Mugia (we always said "moo-gee-uh," but the correct name is "moo-zuh"). There were occasional settlements along the way, on this road that had been all but abandoned in 1966. We passed the iron buffaloes that have replaced water buffalo everywhere for farm hauling and plowing, and we saw many loose farm animals, including pigs, chickens, many goats, and a few idle buffalo. I was most fascinated by the karst itself, but either my memory is very poor or it looks different from the ground.

We arrived at last where the road now called Route 28 heads south, and Route 12 has a big new sign reading "To Vietnam Border." Route 28 goes south from this point all the way down to Tchepone, following what I call the original route of the Ho Chi Minh Trail. But actually Route 23, further west, was used before that, and this was not called Route 28 but rather Routes 91 and 911. South of here, nearly down to Choekpoint Alpha, it is joined by what we first called The New Road," until it got a number: Route 912. It had been discovered in March 1966,

coming under trellises through Harley's Valley, Ban Loboy, and around Diamondhead. Up here at the junction where Route 911 forks south and is now called Route 28 we chose to go straight ahead to find out, first, if we could get all the way up into Mugia Pass. Ban Nahom village is several kilometers off this road.

As we drove further east so that we could see the valley up the pass, yawning under a heavy cloud cover, we passed the spot where Joe Brown's Birddog was shot down early in April of 1966. As George Getchell and I discussed recently (March MEM), Joe had attempted to go into the pass even when our squadron commander told him he should not follow the demands of the "FRAG" order. (Joe was our first shoot-down.



Starting up Mugia from the base, the scene reminded us of the cover of *A Certain Brotherhood*. The upper part was obscured by wet clouds.

His body has been recovered by JTF-FA and returned to his family. Karl Worst had a middair several weeks earlier.)

Then we swung around to the north and started to climb. Near the base it reminded me very much of the cover of Jimmie Butler's book, *A Certain Brotherhood*. As we got higher the air got cooler and a little rain fell. The road was pretty twisty at times, but is well paved. We could see why, as we passed a number of trucks that were hauling freight in from Vietnam. Near the top we passed an elaborate border control that is still



Author, John Sweet, and MacAlan Thompson pose to show that Vietnamese beer and candy was really bought in Mugia. Trucks are arriving from Vietnam, one kilometer away.

under construction. It has islands for cars and several large buildings. Apparently this border crossing will be open to cars at some point in the future, like the one at Lao Bao on Route 9, beyond Tchepone. Soon after that we came to a busy low point in the road, which was crossed by a pole barrier. There were a few low buildings on both sides. Inside a small café were some guards, and Mac chatted with them. They told us the actual border of Vietnam was one kilometer further up the road, but we were not likely to be allowed up there (they were right; the un-amused customs officials across the road told us “no.”). So we took pictures of each other and we bought some Vietnamese candy and beer to sell at the Assistance auction at our next reunion.

Next we dropped back down from the near-summit of the pass and returned to the junction with Route 28. We had got much further than we expected to, in less time than allowed for, so our next objective was to seek out a cave Jeff Hudgens had told us about. In this cave hid a shot-down fighter pilot who had become so aggrieved and guilt-ridden when would-be rescuers were killed that he begged them to leave him. Jeff wanted Mac to get him a GPS coordinate on the cave. The road south from Route 12 was well-maintained dirt, good in the dry season at least, and we soon found the cave near a large river and in the midst of some very beautiful karst formations. Jeff had warned us the cave itself had not been cleared, and indeed we found areas that were taped off because of the UXO danger. Mac got his reading. Near there we encountered some boys



Busted! Boys with illegal scrap and metal detector look a bit uncomfortable about having to stop to have their pictures taken.

with an illegal metal detector and a small load of UXO scrap they had found.

Our final objective was a visit to Ban Nahom, where Jeff Hudgens has provided assistance on several occasions. The village is very near the site where Jeff’s dad crashed an A-1 into a karst after being hit by anti-aircraft fire. With the help of villagers, Jeff once fixed a bronze plaque on the base of the karst to honor his dad. Visits to Ban Nahom and assistance work there has been reported extensively in previous issues. On this trip we found that our van was not going through a ditch at the edge of the little village that we came to before Ban Nahom, so we were compelled to rent the services of the vil-



Top, Sunee Thompson expertly shows how she wove roof thatching as a childhood chore in her village in Thailand. Middle, author, John Sweet, Mac Thompson, Nancy Sweet, and Sunee Thompson on “iron buffalo” cart as our only alternative to walking last kilometers to Ban Nahom. Above, approaching Ban Nahom across paddies and paddy dikes. Village is in trees ahead.

lage iron buffalo, which added a little adventure to our trip. While we were waiting for the villagers to ready this beast we got a demonstration of roof-thatch weaving by Sunee, who demonstrated that she could do it just as deftly as the young lass who had been working away there. This kind of thatch is very water-tight for about six years, and then must be replaced. Sunee grew up in a little village East of Bangkok, near the Cambodia border, and clearly this was one of her girlhood chores.

From there we returned to Thakkek. The next day we set off for Long Tieng (June issue).



Election Reform Proposed for TLCB

Board of Directors needs your attention

The Board of Directors has determined the process by which nominations, and election, of Officers and Directors, needs to be changed to increase efficiency; and assure access to all candidates. To accomplish that goal will require a three-step process: Amendment of the Articles of Incorporation to then permit amendment of the By-Laws, to then allow the Board to establish a written protocol to be followed in all future elections. The ultimate goal is to eliminate any confusion, and controversy, by codifying what has (in the past) been merely custom.

All of the proposed Amendments were compiled by a Committee, appointed by President Loftus, which I chaired. The other Committee members were Bill Tilton, and Jim “Dusty” Henthorn. The amendments recommended by the Committee were then adopted by the full Board of Directors.

Because amendments of the Articles and By-laws requires a 2/3 vote of the membership, we intend to expedite the process, and alleviate the need for you to each have to mail a vote, by utilizing an “opt-out” voting method. By that we mean you will not be required to mail a vote on the proposed amendments, unless you oppose them. We will then presume the amendments are acceptable if we do not receive opposition from at least 1/3 of the membership, in which case the amendment will fail. Each of the steps in the amendment process will be published, and voted on separately.

If these Amendments are approved, the proposed Amendments to the By-Laws will appear in the next Mekong Express Mail (MEM). The first of these changes—the proposed Amendments to the Articles of Incorporation—are below, each followed by the Committee explanation of the change. (The current Articles can be found in the “Official Documents” section on the Thailand, Laos, Cambodia Brotherhood website)

Additions to the current language are underlined. (Deletions are in italics in brackets)

Article V - Bylaws.

The members of the Thailand-Laos-Cambodia Brotherhood shall adopt, and may from time-to-time amend [add, or delete] such bylaws as may be required to carry out the objectives [defined in Article II] of the [se Articles].

Committee Note: As you can see, the language of the current Article V can be interpreted to mean the By-Laws can only apply to Article II. That was never the intention and this amendment clarifies that—as well as making some grammatical adjustments. The result of this Amendment will be to permit Amendment of the By-Laws so that the Board may then adopt the written procedure for carrying out elections.

Article VI. Amendments

Amendments to [the constitution] the Articles of Incorporation and the By-Laws of the Thailand-Laos-Cambodia Brotherhood may be proposed by the Board of Directors, or by any members by petition to the Board, signed by at least twenty percent of active members. Amendments to these Articles shall

be adopted if approved by a [t] super-majority of 2/3 of the active members [at least 2/3 of active members shall vote in favor].

Amendments of the By-Laws proposed by unanimous recommendation of the Board of Directors shall be adopted if approved by a simple majority of the Thailand-Laos-Cambodia Brotherhood membership. Amendments recommended by less than unanimous recommendation of the board of directors, or by petition of the membership, shall be adopted if approved by a super-majority of 2/3 of the Thailand-Laos-Cambodia Brotherhood membership.

Committee Note: The first clause of the proposed Amendment to Article VI is merely grammatical, and does not change the substance of the current language requiring approval by a 2/3 supermajority of the membership for Amendments proposed by member petition.

The second clause is entirely new, and provides for different required majorities necessary for approval of Amendments proposed by the Board of Directors. The Committee felt that if a proposed Amendment is satisfactory to the unanimous Board, then it was probably reflective of a majority of the membership—and can be approved by a simple majority of the members. But if a proposed Amendment did not have the unanimous support of the Board members, then the Committee felt such an Amendment should have to be approved by a super-majority of the membership.

* * *

These are the two proposed Amendments to the current Articles of Incorporation. Discussion of these Amendments will be permitted on the Mission Server, or you can address questions to me directly at beattygd@yahoo.com.

If you support these Amendments you do not have to do anything. They will be adopted unless opposed by at least 1/3 of the current membership.

IF YOU OPPOSE EITHER OF THESE AMENDMENTS, you must send your written vote in opposition to the official TLCB address: PO Box 343, Locust Grove, GA 30248. Votes in opposition must be received by December 1, 2008, to be counted. If sufficient votes to defeat these proposed Amendments are not received by that date, the Amendments will be deemed to have been adopted.

Gary Beatty
Vice-President