



Mekong Express Mail

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THE THAILAND LAOS CAMBODIA BROTHERHOOD, INC.

www.TLC-Brotherhood.org

In ABCCC's capsule over Laos

By Steve Littlefield

Jim Stanitz wrote a really informative article about Airborne Battlefield Command and Control Center (ABCCC) a few issues ago. I want to give a little information about the nuts and bolts of what we did and some examples of what went on in the capsule.

I was a 19 year old, just promoted buck sergeant and just released from Strategic Air Command. In fact, my travel and duty restriction release had not caught up with me yet, so the first time that I ever rode in an ABCCC aircraft was a four hour trip in the pattern doing touch-and-goes so that I could get my flight pay for May 1972. What was interesting was that the pilot for that flight was also the pilot for my end of tour washdown flight. This is what I remember after 35 years.

The time period that I was with ABCCC was right after the 1972 Easter Offensive. I met several of my old workers from Seymour Johnson AFB who were sent TDY and arrived before I did, as I stopped at Clark AFB in the Philippines for Jungle Survival School. As Jim wrote, earlier our schedule was fly, then a day off, mission plan for a half a day, then start all over. As far as the actual flight, the two intelligence personnel would split the flight in the middle, one working the first half and the other the second half. Obviously the officer got first choice. After launch we would set up our big maps of the Barrel Roll or Steel Tiger if we flew down south, but most of this article will just deal with Cricket and the Barrel.

We would cross the "Fence," the Mekong River, at 15,500 feet and our initial orbit altitude was 17,000 feet. Prior to assuming the responsibility of the orbit each position, Director of Airborne Battle Staff (DABS), intelligence, controllers, radio operators and teletype, would contact our corresponding position on Alleycat. Anyone listening in might be a little surprised to hear a call like, "Meow, meow, chirp." We were not trying to surprise anyone, just breaking the monotony. We would get the latest information from Alleycat and then assume the orbit. The intelligence operator would then contact the embassy at Vientiane to see what was new and exciting with them, which usually was nothing that we did not get from Alleycat. We would then call the Air America aircraft that was flying General Vang Pao to exchange information from the night or new things for the day. For the most part it would not be anything much more exciting than an artillery battery being taken down or moved.

One of the intelligence duties was to broadcast both "Arty Warnings" and "Heavy Arty Warnings" on Guard, monitored by all aircraft, and Air America common frequencies. Arty warnings would be a Lao or Thai artillery battery and the call would be something like "This is Cricket on Guard with an arty warning. Such and such a battery is going hot," and give a DME

(Distance Measuring Equipment receiver reading) and radial (compass bearing) from the battery and "avoid by 10 nautical

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A Surprise at Dayton

by Ted "Padre" Ulrich, TLCB chaplain

This year was my first opportunity to attend a TLC Brotherhood reunion. I approached the function with a little skepticism and anxiety because I did not know what to expect. On the one hand, I had a range of visions from a gaggle of rip-roaring drunks dressed in camouflage, bedecked with pins and medals engaged in an effort to relive their "warrior" days to a bunch of boring old men sitting around half asleep. I was relieved to find that I was most assuredly wrong on all accounts.

The drive from Suffolk, Virginia took me about 12 hours of straight through driving, stopping only for nature's call and gas. It was a pleasant enough drive, but long, especially without anyone to talk to. Unfortunately, my wife Judy could not get away from work to join me. After checking into the hotel, my first stop was the Hospitality Room to meet my fate. Mrs. Loftus, the "First Lady" of TLCB, gave me the warmest welcome. I met John Loftus, the President, for the first time as well as Bill Tilton. I got a drink and sat down at one of the tables in the room and introduced myself to those seated there. I was immediately given a gentle ribbing on account of the cap I was wearing that said, "ARMY." I had joined a table full of Air Force veterans. When I reminded them all that the Air Force originally was called the "ARMY Air Corps" and that they needed to honor that heritage, we all laughed together. I felt totally welcome.

See Dayton Surprise, continued on page 8. Also see photo spread from Dayton on pages 6 and 7.

miles,” with a set of map co-ordinates. For “Heavy Arty” which everyone (probably including the bad guys) knew was an Arc Light (B-52) mission. It would be “This is Cricket on Guard with a heavy arty warning,” and finish the same way. We would give the warnings ten and five minutes prior to the battery going hot or the Arc Light TOT (Time Over Target). Well, one day after we gave the warning a Raven forward air controller (FAC) called and asked if he had missed a call on Guard. I asked why, and he said that he had just flown through a whole bunch of bombs, and would be RTB for a fresh set of underwear.

Probably our most important functions were coordinating search and rescue (SAR) efforts. If a pilot had problems he would tell someone, or, if he did not have time, his beeper would go off and the war would come to a halt while every effort was made to pull him out. Usually a FAC would be the initial on-scene commander while he attempted to locate the downed aviator. He would also mark targets, usually AAA (anti-aircraft artillery), for fast movers to eliminate. Then the A-1s would arrive and work up close and personal with the survivor. Once enough AAA had been suppressed the Jolly Green (HH-3 and later HH-53) helicopters would be called in to attempt the pick-up. Most of us have heard about Bat-21, about which a fairly bad movie was made*, as well as Oyster 01B, Roger Locher, who was down for 23 days outside of Hanoi. “King,” an HC-130 that also normally orbited near Laos, did most of the command and control on those

SARs. They were also in-flight refuelers for the rescue helicopters. I took a flight on “King” one time, as I wanted to see how they operated. I was a little surprised to find that while ABCCC had a 13-man crew, “King” flew with a normal four-man crew, and the SAR commander was just the pilot.

* However, Daryll Whitcomb, one-time Raven FAC and TLCB member, has written an excellent and factual book on the same subject, “The Rescue of BAT-21.”

A lot of the SARs that Cricket worked in Barrel Roll were a little different. Often pilots in trouble were returning from missions in northern Cricket and we would start the rescue forces their way. At the same time the intelligence guy would be calling on Air America, advising that we had an aircraft with some problems and asking if some helicopters could start that way. Usually, we had more than enough answering up, to assist. Most of the time Air America was not needed and the aircraft recov-

ered at their base in Thailand. Other times an aircrew might have to eject and would be picked up very shortly by Air America. This was often done while also being fired at by North Vietnamese/Pathet Lao troops. These were not the armored and armed helicopters used up north but mostly very old and well-used H-34s. Also, unfortunately, we would have the same results that we had too many times in North Vietnam, where we were unable to rescue the crewmember.

On one occasion I remember that we had an aircraft down on the Plaine des Jarres in northern Laos. We were able to get a Raven and an Air America helicopter on scene fairly quickly. The Raven advised that it looked like the bad guys had the pilot and were leading him away. The AA pilot told the Raven that if he were willing to make a pass and fire off a smoke rocket close enough to distract the bad guys, he would land and hope the pilot would make a run for his helicopter. The Raven made the pass, laid down the smoke and the AA pilot landed. Unfortunately, what we thought

was the pilot was just a tall bad guy and they all started shooting at the helicopter. The AA helicopter escaped.

Another time a Raven called and said that he had battle damage and was attempting to return to LS-20 Alternate. The intelligence guy called Air America and by the time he was on final the Raven had his helicopter escort.

Jim’s article pretty much covered the duties of the intelligence portion of the crew. Normally there was one officer and one enlisted, unless there was a trainee aboard or someone was

having their check ride. There was one exception to this however, when a certain older Director of Airborne Battle Staff (mission commander) was aboard. Since he was in charge of the mission, and the intelligence position was the farthest away in the capsule, yet closest to the coffee pot, he would have the enlisted guy get him his coffee. However, he would not ask the easy way by getting on the intercom. Instead you had to be paying attention to him because he would hold his arm out and if he held out four fingers he wanted a full cup. Three fingers meant 2/3 and two fingers meant a half a cup. Of course you could be busy and you would hear this gruff voice say, “Intel...DABS” then you would see the arm out. He was a little intimidating to a 19 year old, but he turned out to be OK. Rumor had it that he was at the end of his career, yet he wanted to



Later model EC-130 flying over the Statue of Liberty. Photo from the National Museum of the Air Force website.

ABCCC is continued on the next page

have a combat tour under his belt, so, even though he actually had trouble walking, he volunteered for ABCCC.

This Lt Colonel was just one of many interesting folks that I flew with. There was an orbit commander that had previously flown RF-101s out of Saigon. We had a Battle Staff Operations Officer (called the BSOO, or the second in command) that had flown F-4s out of Ubon in the mid 1960s with Colonel Robin Olds. There was another BSOO that had been a Raven and one other that had flown A-1s as both a Hobo and Sandy. We also had a flight engineer that I have kept in contact with and lives in Miami. He told me that he tells people that he started and finished the war, as he was sent TDY to Saigon in 1962 and flew the final flight in Vietnam in 1973. He also flew in C-130s in Vietnam between those two assignments.

As both Jim and I wrote, ABCCC was mainly assigned to Laos. After the truce was signed for Laos we started to fly over Cambodia. On each mission we would land at Phnom Penh and pick up a fairly high ranking Khmer Air Force officer who would validate targets for us. We would land at the end of the orbit and drop him off.

We also had a goofy captain that flew with us. A nice guy, but he seemed to have more than his share of problems. One time he put a can of spaghetti in the early model microwave oven. No problem as long as you pop the top so the pressure does not build up. Unfortunately he did not. Another time, shortly after boarding the aircraft he put his parachute on, pulling the straps into place so that if we needed to quickly don them they would be properly fitted. The only problem was that

after pulling the straps he then pulled the T-handle, popping the chute inside the plane. Fortunately, we had time to get a parachute from another capsule.

One last thing I wanted to say. Probably like most boys I had always wanted to fly. Well, being the great student that I was I knew there was no way that I was going to make it to college, much less pilot training, which I suppose is the reason I volunteered for ABCCC. (Although to be honest, I had no idea what I was volunteering for other than to fly in a C-130 doing something.) Well, after numerous missions I had become a good friend of one of the pilots. I would often go up to the cockpit when I was not working the Intelligence position (or controller, which I cross trained to do after a while) and chat with the pilot and other flight crew. One time this certain pilot asked if I was interested in driving his airplane. I was. I got to do it a few times, and usually the crew in the back knew it too. So, if by chance you ever read this, thank you Pete (I think the statute of limitations would have run out by now!)

I was not the career Air Force type and finished up my commitment in 1974. I did a couple of different jobs and finally got into law enforcement and retired from the Fort Lauderdale Police Department after almost 26 years.



Editor's note: for another perspective, see "ABCCC: we knew them as Cricket and Alleycat, Hillsboro and Moonbeam," by Jim Stanitz, in the June 2006 issue of Mekong Express Mail, on page 3.

Activating Project Big Eagle at NKP

by Randy Ryman

Randy continues his account of the Big Eagle project that he began in the last issue of the MEM.

When the Big Eagle detachment arrived at NKP, we were assigned to wooden "hooches" at the edge of the base. There was no perimeter fence. There were trip flares strung around the perimeter. During the night, we would see the glow of a trip flare going off in the jungle. We wondered what it was. Could have been a dog or other animal tripping it, or it could have been a person.

At night, we would peer out into the darkness and listen for any activity. There was a squadron of Huey helicopters stationed on base. At night they would fly around the perimeter, using their xenon searchlight to cover the ground and check for activity. There were sand bag bunkers outside our hooches. We were not allowed to have weapons. There were two conex lockers on base, and we were told that in the event of an alert, we were to run to their location and draw M-16s. I believe there were only about 400 available, so only the fastest 400 troops would get weapons. I only remember once or twice that this happened, and I was one of the lucky ones that got there before they ran out of weapons. Nothing came of either event and we turned the weapons back in each time.

After arriving and getting settled in, those of us in the munitions group, including the ones who got training on the A-26, worked in the bomb dump. Our eight A-26s would not arrive until June 18. They were supposed to arrive sooner, but it seemed

that each plane had developed some kind of problem that required at least one overnight stay at Hawaii.

When we arrived, the only other planes I recall on the base were the A1 Sandys and a couple of Jolly Greens. They were located on the ramp right in front of our armament shack. There were also the O-1 Bird Dogs of the 23rd TASS, or "Cricketts." Bill Tilton was a Cricket pilot, having arrived, I believe, about a month before we did, although I did not know it until joining the TLC. There were also two T-28s that would come and go, and what seemed like about eight or 10 Air Force Hueys. Not long after we arrived, they disappeared. I heard that there had been some deal made to transfer them to the Army.

Walt and I worked the night shift in the bomb dump, receiving all sorts of ordnance and putting it in various locations for future use. Munitions arrived daily. The Thais were con-

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tracted to haul the munitions from the deep-water port South of Bangkok, where they had arrived by ship. We were stockpiling munitions for what was to come once we started flying missions.

At our hooch area, we had a common shower room and latrines located in the middle of the hooch compound. The first few weeks after we arrived, hot water was a scarce commodity. New hooches were being built right in our compound by Thai civilians. There was one chow hall located next to the flight line behind the A1-E "Sandys." All buildings were just screened in wooden hooches with no air conditioning. We ate off metal trays in the chow hall. The snack bar was also a combination BX. It was a small building with various sundries we needed such as shaving cream, razors and deodorant. The one thing I remember most about it was the large steel vats with ice-cold beer outside. That was refreshing in the heat.

On June 18 everyone in the Big Eagle detachment, about 150 of us, including aircrews, went to the flight line for the arrival of the A-26s. The first flight of four A-26s, along with their C-97 "mother ship," approached, a beautiful sight. The C-97 came in with two A-26s flying formation off each wing tip. The C-97 escort ship carried the crew chiefs, mechanics, spare parts and tools for the flight over.

The formation made a low pass over the base to the cheers and waves of everyone on the flight line, pulled up steeply and got into trail formation and started the downwind leg for the runway. The C-97 continued on, making a wide orbit to land after the A-26s were down on the 6,000 feet of pierced steel planking. The remaining four ships flew over with their escort and filed off into the landing pattern. The 26s taxied to the ramp and lined up side by side. One taxied to the ramp, sporting a red scarf flying off the antenna above and behind the cockpit. This was Joe Kittinger. As the planes were being parked, a tug came onto the flight line pulling several flat bed trailers. On the trailers were vats of iced down beer for everyone. Beer on the flight line was unbelievable. The aircrews were handed cold beers as they climbed down from the planes, and the party was on. For the next hour or so, there was much rejoicing going on. Everyone had arrived, safely. We helped ourselves to beer, officers and enlisted alike, and had a good time.

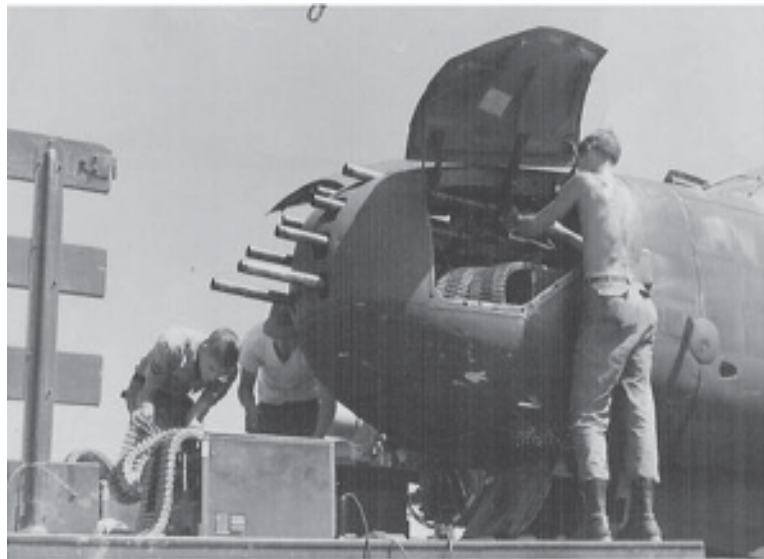
People were even smoking around the aircraft, normally a no-no.

Dominico Curto, our Detachment Commander, was of Cuban descent. He flew in the Korean War, and was a "Loco Ace," having shot up a large number of locomotives. He was a bird

Colonel. Colonel Farmer, the base commander, was also a bird Colonel. It was obvious in the days previous to the arrival of our aircraft, that Col Farmer was not exactly thrilled about the Air Commandos barging into his base. This day was no exception. As we were celebrating on the flight line, he arrived in his staff car. He was obviously not amused at the beer drinking going on, let alone the smoking, which, in retrospect, probably was not a smart idea. Several of us were standing under the wing of one of the aircraft, some with beer in one hand and cigarette

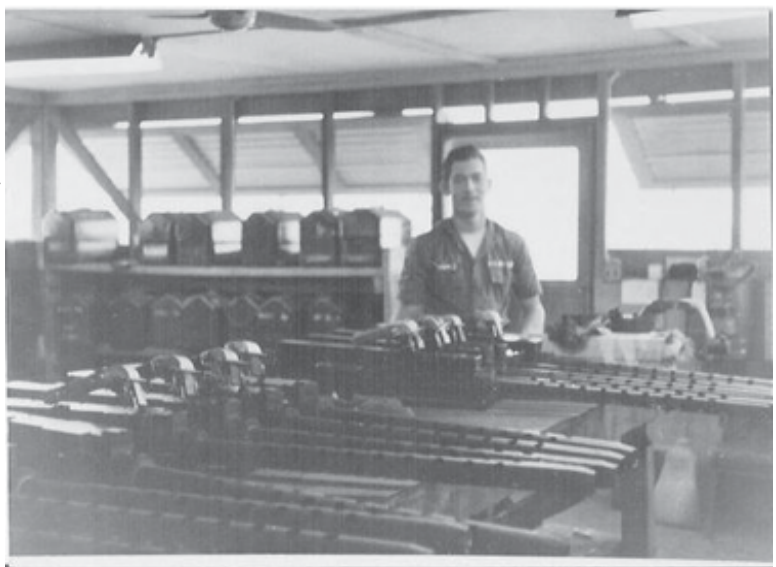
in the other. Airman Roy Woodall was the first one to receive Col Farmer's wrath. Before Roy could muster a salute, Farmer said, "Airman, don't you know better than to be smoking around an aircraft?" "Yes, sir," Roy replied and promptly extinguished the cigarette on the PSP, as did the others who were smoking. Surprisingly, I do not recall him saying anything about the beer, but the best was yet to come.

We had just seen Col Curto smoking a cigarette on the other



Arming an A-26K at NKP for combat sortie. Randy Ryman at right. Photos furnished by the author.

Below, Randy at the gunshop with some .50 cal machine guns ready to be mounted in the A-26s at NKP



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side of the plane, which was where Col Farmer was heading. We followed to see what would happen when Col Farmer got to the other side of the plane, sure enough, there was Col Curto, beer in one hand and cigarette in the other. Col Farmer did blow a gasket. "Curto, I just gave one of your men hell for smoking around the aircraft and here you are, smoking too." Col Curto got right back in his face, and said something to the effect, "Now you listen here. The rest of our group just got here. Everyone has arrived safely, and we're going to enjoy it today. Now you go on about your business." Col Farmer left, and as I remember, was saying something to the effect that Col Curto "Hadn't heard the last of this." The party went on.

Over the next couple days, the aircraft were reconfigured for combat operations. For the long flight over, auxiliary bomb bay fuel tanks were installed in addition to wing ferry tanks. In addition to removing the ferry tanks, other things had to be checked and inspected.

On June 25, during an orientation flight over Laos, we lost our first crew and plane. I was still working in the bomb dump at this time. Bad news travels fast. We learned of the loss. Sketchy details came in, but aircraft # 650 had apparently been lost to anti-aircraft fire. Captain Charles "Chuck" Dudley, pilot, Lt A.F. Cavelli, navigator, and Captain Thomas Wolfe, observer were lost. The next morning we arrived at the flight line with ordnance, and there was an empty spot on the ramp where 650 used to sit. It was right at that moment that I realized that this was the real deal, and they were playing for keeps. From the information we got, Capt Dudley was flying a daylight familiarization flight with another A-26 about a half mile off his wing at about 3200 feet when he was bracketed by 37mm AAA.



"Blown gun" was written on this photo. Crews learned that guns in training did not operate the same as guns in combat.

The other pilot reported that one instant the plane was there and the next instant it was engulfed in flame. The only transmission reported from the stricken aircraft was the words, "We've been hit." The aircraft rolled over and impacted in the jungle. No one was seen to exit the aircraft prior to impact. It was a sad day for Project Big Eagle. It would not be the last.

Within about a week, those of us who were trained on the A-26 back stateside were reassigned to the flight line. This was a positive move as far as I was concerned. It was probably as close to the action as I would get, and I felt like I would be directly contributing to the effort actually getting to work on

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Reunion 2008: Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

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

Dayton, “Return to Our Beginnings”

2007 Annual Meeting and Reunion in photos



At left, TLC Brotherhood, Inc., President John Loftus and museum director, Maj Gen Charles D. Metcalf, USAF (ret), at the first official event. The TLCB presented the plaque seen to the right of the general, seen here delivering a stirring dedication address.



At right, the traditional drawing by our most-trusted agent, Lydia Roth, who is blind, draws the ticket, while President Loftus observes. The very deserving winner was Maty Pierre-Benoist. At right is Rosie Wheatley, who was honored with a plaque of special recognition for her work in making up the Assistance Quilt each year. Quilt raffle donations are an important source of funds for our Assistance program.

Below, guest speaker William Guenon, being thanked by Museum Director Metcalf. Guenon flew the C-130 that led the successful raid on Son Tay POW camp (but unfortunately all the POWs had been moved because of a local lack of fresh water). All photos by Bill Tilton.





Above and right: the ghostly presence of these famous aircraft put a special meaning to the banquet. Many of those present remarked that this was probably the most enchanted banquet the TLCB has ever had because of this setting. The large aircraft in the photo above is "Old Shaky," the C-124 Loadmaster. Under its right wing, and in the photo at right, is the famous F-86 that ruled the skies over Korea during that war. This was the scene to our right. To our left the scene was dominated by the huge B-52D in Vietnam War colors. This is the middle hall of three that currently comprise the main part of the Museum. A fourth such hall is planned.

Below, left to right, new board member Les Thompson; assistant chairman of the Assistance Committee, John Sweet; and BX shopkeeper Bob Pruikmsa cutting up a little during the annual auction to raise Assistance funds. Lower right, Bob Pruikmsa standing by "Patches," the famous C-123 that took over 1000 small-arms hits by the end of the war, resulting in eight Purple Hearts being awarded to crewmembers. This aircraft was specially opened for us before the banquet. You can see evidence of work being done--museum staff are applying nose art to match that of the plane during the war.



Dayton Surprise continued from page 1

At the unbelievable time of five AM the next morning, we were all awakened by a fire alarm. This gave us an opportunity to have our first unofficial “meeting” as we all gathered together in the parking lot to await the fire trucks and/or permission to re-enter our rooms. I met John Sweet and Nancy, his lovely wife. Finally, after what seemed like hours (but was not), we were released to go back into the hotel. Later as I was leaving for breakfast, I had a chance to meet Paul Oyler and we had breakfast together. Paul and I share much in common and it was a delight to get to know him.

Later that morning, we all met at the Air Force Museum to dedicate a plaque in honor of the TLC Brotherhood. This was a very solemn and moving moment for me.

We were then free to visit the museum and I had a very hard time getting out of the book section of the gift shop. I was signed up to take the “Presidential Tour” a tour of four of the presidential aircraft and the Research and Development section of the museum. This was most impressive. I also took the three-hour “Behind-the-Scenes” tour of the restoration area of the facility later that same afternoon. My group’s docent was the wife of Museum Director Major General (USAF, Ret.) Charles D. Metcalf.

The next day, Saturday, we had our business meeting, a well-run meeting with a number of initiatives raised and discussed, as well as the election of new officers. I was running for my second term as chaplain and I am pleased that I was re-elected. I helped to count the ballots. After the meeting I returned to the museum gift shop and was finally overcome by temptation and spent a considerable amount of my “allowance” purchasing a handful of books.

That evening our formal banquet was the highlight of the reunion for me. The program was very well planned and the meal was outstanding. The venue was inside one of the large hangars of the museum and magnificent aircraft surrounded us. I was finally able to go inside a 123 Provider aircraft like the one my father flew in Laos with Air America. That was a special moment for me. Our guest speaker was William A Guenon, Jr., a Commando pilot who led the raid into Son Tay.

On Sunday we held a memorial service for those members of the TLC Brotherhood who have passed on to their ultimate reward. This was a poignant service for me because one of the names I read was my father’s. After this service, many of us started the checkout process and the return home. I left around 1100 and drove to Pennsylvania to visit my mother before returning home to Virginia.

This reunion was a remarkable time for me. I enjoyed every aspect of it from meeting new friends to visiting a museum I have dreamed about visiting since childhood. One of the most enduring aspects of this reunion to me was to finally grasp the scope of the service represented by all the veterans of the “Silent War.” those who offered and gave so much without, in many cases, receiving proper recognition. This is truly what America is all about and it makes me tremendously proud to be a part of it. I am already planning to attend the reunion in Philadelphia next year. For those who have never attended a TLC Brother-

hood reunion, all I can say is that you are cheating yourself.

One of the nicest things about the reunion group was that so many wives were also in attendance. The whole group was a fun and warm bunch of people to be around and I never felt like a “newbie” or a stranger. It makes me proud to be a part of the organization.



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the planes. There were enough people in the bomb dump to keep up with the munitions deliveries, but more were needed to load the aircraft.

We learned that the primary role of the A-26 was to interdict truck traffic on the Ho Chi Minh Trail where it came through Laos. One of the primary targets that I heard talked about regularly was a place called Mu Gia Pass. Our missions would be flown from dusk to dawn, for better protection under the cover of darkness. Walt and I worked loading the planes during the day, as did the other armament crews, preparing for the night sorties. Sgt. Gilbert Handley was our NCOIC on the flight line. The goal, as I understood it, was to keep aircraft loitering over the Trail and take out anything moving supplies on it. This started at about dusk and continued to dawn each night, with usually the first or second aircraft returning being turned around, refueled and reloaded for another sortie. The other armament crews worked nights rearming the aircraft that came back first. It was hard work and long hours, but it had a purpose, and no one complained. Everyone worked together. Walt and I worked as a team. We learned to load about anything that the A-26 could carry.

The normal armament configuration was fragmentation or GP bombs in the bomb bay. On the outboard stations of each wing, MER (Multiple Ejection Racks) were installed, for carrying the MK-25 magnesium parachute flare. The pilots would take their own daylight with them. The MK-25 produced an enormous amount of light. The flare canister contained a timer, which would be preset for a certain delay after release. After falling for the prescribed amount of time, an ejection charge would kick the flare from the canister, the parachute would deploy and the flare would light, illuminating a huge area on the ground to daylight conditions. I had seen them used at the Eglin firepower demo.

The idea was that the A-26 would loiter over the target area, and periodically drop a flare, then swoop in under it, just as it ignited, and take out anything that happened to get caught in the light. Each aircraft carried 12 flares, 6 on each MER. Inboard of that would be combinations of napalm, GP (general purpose) bombs, white phosphorous bombs, 2.75” rockets, with various warhead configurations, fragclusters, CBU-14s etc., anything that could be used to inflict the maximum amount of damage on the enemy.

I enjoyed loading the aircraft. Walt and I worked together for some time. We hand loaded the bomb bay, up to the 260# frag bombs. We would roll a small trailer in between the bomb

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bay doors, with the bombs on the trailer, then each of us would get an end and hoist it up into place.

Several weeks after our arrival, our detachment commander, Col Curto, summoned the entire detachment for a formation on the flight line. He explained that he was being ordered back to the states. He did not say why. He offered that he did not want to return to the States and did not want to leave this detachment, but he had no choice. We surmised that the earlier confrontation with Col Farmer the day the A-26s arrived might have caught up with him. Our new commander would be Lt. Col Albert Howarth, also an A-26 pilot. One of Col Curto's last statements to us was that when we returned from Project Big Eagle, we would be granted leave whenever we wanted, and if it were denied, we were to call him personally. I did not think much about the offer at the time, but it would become very useful later.

At some point, and I do not remember the circumstances, Walt went from the flight line back to the bomb dump. I was assigned to work with Sgt. Gerald Salazar. We made up the gun crew for the day shift. Cleaning, dearming, loading, etc. We mostly did the cleaning and replacing of them to relieve the armament crews of that job. They had their hands full with other loading tasks.

The caliber .50, M2 Browning Machine Gun, Aircraft Basic was a very durable weapon, especially when the eight installed in the nose of an A-26 came to bear on a target. It was, as far as I am concerned, a fairly easy piece to maintain. It did require maintenance, especially at the rate they were being used on the A-26. The gun had a firing rate of 850 rounds per minute. Make that times 8 guns, and you could put a lot of lead on target.

As the night missions got under way full bore, gun malfunctions developed. Guns were jamming, locking up and creating all sorts of problems. We also had a spares shortage. Some guns would come back jammed with cartridge cases blown off about 3/4" in front of the base—cut cleanly off. It appeared that the rounds were firing without being completely chambered. Part of this was due to improper head space. That problem was corrected, but pilots were still coming back complaining about jammed guns. The problem was eventually traced to something that had fallen through the cracks during training. While the M2 machine gun had a firing rate of 850 rounds per minute, it

could only fire short bursts at a time. Otherwise, the guns would overheat and would become so hot that the rounds would start "cooking off" before they were fully chambered. So it was determined that the fault lay with the pilots getting trigger happy, which did not set well with them. Their answer was that they had never been told anything about this during their stateside training, and furthermore, they had not experienced the same problems stateside. The armament personnel at NKP that had loaded the aircraft while stateside training was going on agreed there were no problems like this stateside.

Finally, the mystery was solved. During stateside training, the pilots were only given 100 rounds per gun to fire. They would line up on the target and hold the firing button until the ammunition was expended, typically in 6 to 7 seconds. In combat, the ammunition boxes were fully loaded for each gun. That, coupled with the fact that the guns were not being shifted to the hold back position after a run, explained the rounds cooking off. The hold back position brought all the breeches to the fully open position, which extracted the last round in the chamber, and allowed cooling air to flow through the barrels for cooling. After these factors were known, the jamming problem diminished significantly.

There were few spare guns available for changing. For a while, spare guns and parts were critical. Someone in the detachment knew that there had been spare guns shipped to NKP but no one seemed to know where they were. Finally, I believe it was Carlos Christian, our Detachment First Sgt., went on a scavenger hunt and the spares were located tucked away in one of the warehouses on base. We now had enough guns to have at least two spare sets cleaned and waiting to change. After a predetermined time, we would change out all the guns on an aircraft with a clean set, and take the others to the armament shack for tear down and cleaning. Our gun cleaning area was less than state of the art. It consisted of a tent behind the armament shack. Inside was the vat we soaked the guns in. The vat consisted of a 55-gallon drum split in half and welded together to form a trough. This is where the parts would be soaked, brushed and cleaned prior to reassembly. The tent was not air-conditioned.

[Project Big Eagle to be continued in a future issue]



Soaring with the Eagles, NKP 1966

by Bill Tilton

Like many veterans, I put together a personal memoir of my first SEA tour some years ago. Mine is organized by months, and the first of them is included in the legendary "Callsign Project," put together by Larry Hughes (and available on CD from the TLCB BX). That was March and April of 1966. Starting in June there were references to the famous Project Eagle, Air Commando A-26K outfit that deployed to Nakhon Phanom RTAFB and flew with the callsign "Nimrod." This article is nearly all collected excerpts from that memoir, with some editing to bring it up to date. The memoir was written from memory in the 1970s, augmented with facts and dates using letters to my

See **Soaring**, continued next page

wife and my parents, maps, input from friends, and anything else I could find. The point was to collect all the facts I could, and in my retirement I am going to insert my photos into the memoir so that if they ever want to, my kids and grandkids can learn all about it. Explanatory notes are inserted within brackets in these excerpts below.

June 17th, 1966

The Commandos got combat planes at last. Eight A-26K bombers arrived, accompanied by three C-97s (Georgia, Tennessee, and New York Air Guard planes) with baggage and spare parts. These were modified A-26's: they had wing reinforcements and numerous attach points, and reversing props. The bomber nose was replaced by the gun nose— eight .50 caliber machine guns. The lead plane was flown by their stateside squadron commander, who came over to make sure they got set up right. He was a real gentleman and a great personality. But first he had to let Colonel Farmer know who was boss, which he did. We were gleeful.

I saw a sign for a new area, put up by the busy Civil Engineer teams (called Red Horse); it was to be called Arctic Acres Estates, because it would have air conditioned shelters for the A-26 crews, who were to fly nights. Arctic Acres was to be reached by a new road that went up the rise past Invert [the radar site] and down the other side toward the scrub forest and base perimeter to the East. On that road were to be a new club and an amphitheater good enough to get Bob Hope, and lots of new hooches— including one for [23rd TASS pilots].

June 25th, 1966

The A-26 unit had got its planes in shape and its crews rested up and briefed, and had begun daytime orientation in our area. Being the only combat crews on base, we hit it off immediately. They asked to have Cricket FACs fly sorties with them to teach them the good targets and places to avoid. Later they would engage in armed reconnaissance at night. By this date a few other FACs had flown with them, with mixed reactions. Today was my first opportunity and I actually enjoyed it, despite the cramped jump seat and passenger-status.

We climbed up the side and into top-opening clamshell openings in the canopy. The jump seat was behind the navigator seat. The navigator mostly did co-pilot duties, like gear, flap, and power settings on command of the AC [aircraft commander]. That I did not like, because navs are not trained enough in engine operation. On one of these flights the nav overboosted the engines, momentarily, by neglecting to set the rpm to a combat-maneuvering range. Any pilot trained to fly reciprocating engines would avoid overboosting at all times—even in most emergencies it would only tend to make things worse.

We climbed out very flat at first, until the airspeed built up pretty well. The orientation was hard work because of the high speed, very poor weather, and near total ignorance of the area on the part of the crew. But it was also fun, and the best part was being able to direct strikes on favorite, difficult-to-hit targets from inside the cockpit. The eight .50-cal. machine guns in the nose were very impressive: the whole plane shook hard, of course, and the greasy brownish-gray gun gases poured back over the windscreen as tracers probed in a downward-curving stream into the target. We hit truck parks, possible fuel dumps, and other roadside attractions. A few times there was a dull

thump from the nose after we pulled up from a run on a target. It was a chambered round cooking-off in one of the hot guns after they had been used particularly hard.

After we landed I got greasy brownish soot all over my hands and fatigues as I climbed down. We had fired the guns out and the top of the fuselage was coated with the stuff. [I logged three hours and forty five minutes for this sortie.]

June 26th, 1966

Once again I flew with an A-26 crew on an orientation, logging my 86th combat mission. And again we went from target to target like a honey bee visiting flowers. I sat in the jump seat gleefully directing the pilot onto difficult-to-get features. On the other hand I was a little frustrated because they seemed to have trouble remembering some of the really dangerous places we had been trying to teach them. (There were some incidents of lots of sheet-metal holes before they really learned well!)

June 28th, 1966

As I noted, riding the A-26 as trainers to the area was a great opportunity to take real firepower to our favorite targets, and we believed that was what [23rd TASS FAC] Tom Wolfe was doing when the A-26 he was riding in attacked guns in Harley's Valley. They were seen to roll in, fire their guns, then level off a little. Then they dropped their nose again and fired guns continuously all the way into the ground. The A-26 folks believed the pilot was hit before he leveled off. It was a severe blow to lose Tom, and some of us had gotten to know and like the A-26 crew he went in with. The Commandos took the loss very hard, being their first.

July 18th, 1966

This morning the [enemy] activity was everywhere. Trucks were found stranded or destroyed in all three of the chokepoint group Alpha, Bravo, and Charlie. The work had been done by the Nimrods (Eagle A-26 callsign) during the night.

There had been one last serious incident of effective enemy action against Nimrods after the crash Tom Wolfe was in. The commander came back from a routine sortie with thirty or forty little bullet holes. They were mostly in the engine nacelles and fairings, and if any bullets hit the cockpit or engine armor they did not penetrate. The pilot told us he realized too late he had strayed into an area one of us told him to avoid.

July 25th, 1966

At just about midnight last night, the exact same time I heard the strange thunderclap, one of the A-26s crashed in the storm. He had been landing to the south, on a GCA (ground controlled approach; i.e., radar guided landing). He was still carrying a full load of "frag" antipersonnel bombs. The controller told him to abandon the approach because he was too low, but he never responded. They hit the ground a mile short of the runway, just at the edge of the cleared area, and burned. Firemen

saw the navigator on the ground, waving feebly and trying to crawl toward them. But the ground was littered with frag bombs that were expected to start cooking off at any minute. The pilot was apparently killed on impact, and eventually the navigator died too. He was of oriental extraction, Japanese I think, and very much liked here. He had a wife and kids, too. I think the pilot was single.

Later a Nimrod IP told me he blamed himself for the accident; he said the pilot was not yet strong and the A-26 was not a forgiving aircraft, particularly when low, slow, and heavy. He did not think the pilot could handle the storm and the A-26 at the same time. Others speculated something happened to the pilot to incapacitate him on final approach, and the navigator was unable to correct the problem.

August 12th, 1966

[Bad weather kept nearly everyone on the ground, or on short sorties into Laos] ... but Glen [Bremenkamp, a TLCB member] managed to fly way out, to Harley's Valley, where he located the wreckage of the A-26 that Tom Wolfe had been riding jump seat in.

August 19th, 1966

The A-26 crews of the Commandos were getting very proficient in our area now. Usually they flew at night, with flares, fragmentation and HE [high explosive] bombs, .50 caliber guns, and other ordnance. When we had a chance to direct them on a target we were delighted. We knew the crews, they knew the area, they were heavily loaded, and most of all they were slow and stable enough to be extremely accurate, though they did not match the A-1s and their very steep dive angle. In a way it helped, too, to be able to picture the cockpit activity, which some of us could do because of our orientation flights when the Eagles first arrived and needed to learn our combat area. The pilot flying and firing the yoke-mounted trigger, and the navigator in the right seat, setting switches and throttle settings.

September 20th, 1966

In the morning the weather was clear and we crossed to Mahaxay. Once again we laid in some strikes. In the afternoon an A-26 Eagle contacted us for some targets and we directed him in on some very accurate strikes.

November 19th, 1966

The Tchepone "sand pile" was turning out to be nothing of the sort. It was a first-rate chokepoint, safely up the road from the sometimes heavily defended Tchepone area on Route 9. As noted earlier, we soon designated it Chokepoint Foxtrot, and it started getting lots of attention. The Nimrods (A-26s) found it excellent hunting at night because vegetation was thin and the river reflected a little light so they could find it. The "trail" was a single dirt road at this point, coming down from [choke point] Delta headed southeast, then turning south along a small river; actually between the small river and a low ridge of karst. The ground was soft and deep, and cratered very nicely. We started finding stuck or destroyed trucks there on our dawn patrols

On this occasion I was on such an early sortie, assigned to sweep our southernmost sector on a routine VR [visual reconnaissance] mission, my 190th. As the sun rose, I heard the

Nimrod commander, with his clear polite accent, broadcast a comment that may have been meant for his navigator, on intercom. It was something like, "There gentlemen; that ought to keep you stopped up for a few hours!" I had ridden jump seat with him on one of their orientation missions. He could be talking that way and firing his eight nose-mounted machine guns at the same time. I heard this comment just as the morning sun was about to break the horizon to the east, ahead of me. At that time of day he had to be leaving his target and heading for NKP.

A thin column of very black smoke led us south toward Tchepone first. When we arrived at Foxtrot it was just getting light enough to see things distinctly on the ground. There were five hulks strewn around, and one was even on fire. Nimrod had left here very recently. There was one wheel off by itself, well apart from the truck it must have come from, and it burned in a little circle of yellow/orange fire and dense smoke. There were several good craters in the road, which is probably what caused the trucks to get caught. Nimrod probably had dropped napalm or incendiary bombs on them.

[During the first week of December we conducted the night test of the Starlight Scope, in which we attempted to employ A-26s on the next to last night. See "Night vision on the Ho Chi Minh Trail" in the September and December 2005 issues of MEM. My final mention of the Eagle Nimrods was an unusual runway sweep on foot, done because of rock damage the A-26s were sustaining from our perforated steel "PSP" runway.]

November 20th, 1966

That evening a few of us were sitting in the porch area in the center of the building drinking some beers and talking about the A-26 bunch, whom we admired generally very much. We decided they needed a song, and chose the tune to "Ghost Riders in the Sky." The typed result says it was "Written by 4 old Gombey's in Naked Fanny Cricket hooch lounge." When we had composed it, we walked up the road (which was by now heavily oiled to keep down dust) to the Eagle trailers, to the Operations Officer's trailer [that would be the legendary record-holder Joe Kittinger] and pounded on the door. He got up and let us in, and we sang our ditty for him. He thought it was great, he said, and we left so he could go back to sleep for his night mission. Somebody typed them a carbon copy next day. [The song is on the TLCB website].

December 18th, 1966

The A-26s were getting a lot of serious damage to props and windscreens from the pebbles coming up through the two inch holes in the PSP [pierced steel plank] runway surface. The base commander ordered all base officers to come out and walk the runway, picking up stones. Virtually every available officer did, and many enlisted men voluntarily came out too.

We lined up almost shoulder to shoulder across the runway, each carrying a bag for stones. The Chaplain was beside me. Behind us Civil Engineering had a trailer of hot tar. As we moved along, picking all the loose stones out of each little hole, they put a squirt of tar in the holes.

[I left NKP on January 9th, 1967.]



Board Approves Transfer to Assistance

At the most recent board of directors meeting, by unanimous vote, the TLC Board directed the treasurer to transfer \$8000 from the general treasury to the TLC Brotherhood Assistance account. This is the first such transfer in two years and will provide a good cushion for the Assistance Fund.

Each month the Assistance Committee approves expenditures up to \$2000, and sometimes more, for our charitable activities in Southeast Asia. As reported to the TLCB Annual Meeting, in 2007 most of these funds are being devoted to improvements in rural schools in Northeast Thailand. Watch for photos and extensive coverage of our Assistance Program in the December issue of Mekong Express Mail.

Reunion 2008

At the 2007 Annual Meeting President John Loftus announced the site for our 2008 Annual Meeting and Reunion. It will be held in **Philadelphia**, Pennsylvania.

Newly-elected Vice President Gary Beatty is automatically chairman of the TLCB Reunion Committee and will be announcing dates, agenda, and exact site in the next few months.

TLCB Annual Election Results

At the Annual Meeting of the TLC Brotherhood, Inc. on August 11, 2007 in Dayton, Ohio, the TLCB's trusted agent, John Duffin, announced the following results of the vote of the TLCB membership. The year following marks the expiry of their terms.

Vice President	Gary Beatty	(2009)
Secretary	Dave MacDonald	(2009)
Chaplain	Ted Ulrich	(2009)
At-Large	Jim Henthorn	(2009)
At-Large	Les Thompson	(2009)

President Loftus has made the following committee chairman appointments.

Assistance	John Schillo
BX Shopkeeper:	Bob Pruiksma
Communications:	Hap Wyman
History:	John Binford
Membership:	Mike Vale
Monument:	Gerry Frazier
Public Relations:	Floyd McGurk
Budget (ad hoc)	Jim Henthorn

New at Brotherhood BX

New items, new lower prices, and special new name



New! Instead of stick-ons, our Shopkeeper has stocked a supply of these great magnets, (left) complete with our new logo (dollar not included). See BX page on our website to see the magnet and new hat and polo shirts in full color (see photo below for hat and shirts).

Please take a moment to go to our web site and click on the "Brotherhood BX" link. You will notice a change. Due to the insight and efforts of Jim and Donna Bartholomew, we are able to offer you the items that you see displayed on this page.

We thought it fitting to re-name our BX, *The Jim Bartholomew Memorial BX* after Jim's passing from this life. Jim and Donna used money from their own pockets to get the BX started. You will see a photo of Jim and Donna. We urge you to keep Donna in your thoughts and prayers as she fights her courageous medical battle.

We have a new item for sale. This is a 5¾ inch magnet that you can display on your vehicle, your refrigerator or any other metallic object. Be watching the web site, as we will continue to offer more items such as jackets and more color options on our golf shirts. Our jackets will be a zip-up style. We may offer women's sizes if there is demand. Please contact the shopkeeper at rspusaf@bellsouth.net to let me know if you would be interested in a jacket, in men's or lady's sizes. I will post a photo of the jackets once the style has been chosen.

Bob Pruiksma, BX shopkeeper



Moved? Moving Soon?

Don't miss an issue of MEM--send address changes to MEM, PO Box 343, Locust Grove GA 30248.