

MEKONG EXPRESS MAIL



The newsletter of the Thailand-Laos-Cambodia Brotherhood, Inc. Volume 25, issue 4

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Ending the Vietnam War in an H-53 Part I

As told by Maj Gen Richard Comer, USAF Retired

In a way you could say that I ended the Vietnam War and started the Iraq War, but that's another story. *This was one of the laugh lines from our very entertaining and fascinating banquet speaker at the recent Pensacola annual meeting and reunion of the Brotherhood, in September.*

A retired major general, and president of the Jolly Green Association, Richard Comer was not impressed when first asked to speak to the "TLC Brotherhood." "Tender Loving Care?" he wondered. But when advised about what we are and who we are (and the meaning of our acronym), he said that he became eager to meet us and to share his experiences. We certainly benefited from the occasion! The Mekong Express Mail subsequently asked Gen Comer for his story, and he sent us an article that had been written some years ago, from which we have adapted the following.



Richard Comer

Why the Air Force?

Rich Comer was born in 1951, in Gastonia, North Carolina, making him very eligible for military service in the 1960s, whether he wanted it or not. In his research for a junior high school science project paper, he learned about the Air Force and the Academy, and knew that he wanted to go to college and to join the Air Force. His guidance counsellor had the opinion that his grades would not be good enough, but he applied anyway. That was in early 1968, during the Tet Offensive in Vietnam. In his congressional district today, there would probably be over 100 kids to inquire and over 40 applicants for the one

appointment per year; however, in 1968 the hot warfare in SEA and war protests at home greatly reduced young people's interest in military schools. Consequently, he was one of only three applicants, and he had the lowest grade point average. He said, "I went to the Academy in the summer of 1969 because I was physically qualified to be a pilot. Hence, I became the first person in my extended family to go to college. Lucky timing is the only real attribute of my career which really stands out." Comer's engaging presentation was as admirable as his modesty!

Why Helicopters?

When he was an Air Force Academy sophomore, Cadet Comer got a ride on an HH-53 during a visit to Norton AFB

H-53 continues on page 3

What's Inside:

Editor's Notebook	2
TLC Brotherhood Information	2
Project Lucky Tiger, 1966-1967, Part I.....	7
Newest Members in the TLC Brotherhood	12
The Khmer Republic and Khmer Air Force	
And the Other Secret War, Part I.....	13
TLCB's Newest Citizen!	16
2025 Reunion: Nashville, TN.	16

Editor's Notebook

A Letter to the Membership

On several occasions recently, I have encouraged our members to write to the *MEM*, and this issue and several others have filled with very substantial contributions, for which I am extremely grateful. However, I want to emphasize that submissions do not have to be “novel” length. Shorter items are more than welcome, like the compact letter below. In fact, I would like to see more of them. So write away, long and short.

John Harrington
Editor, *The MEM*
jharrington@nscopy.com

To the TLCB Leaders

Good day,

Recently I donated \$500 and paid \$30 for my next year's Thailand Laos Cambodia Brotherhood dues.

With each issue of our *Mekong Express Mail (MEM)* I am so impressed with the assistance and dedication that the membership of TLCB performs in our area of concern. Last November I travelled to that area of Thailand and Laos to view, among other things, the villages of the hill people.

We were on a Gate 1 trip, but my desire was to go into the northern areas of TLC where we had covert operations in the late 60s thru early 70s.

My annual \$500 donation hopefully gives the students opportunity to learn trades and school lessons that benefit both themselves and their families.

Thank you for the outstanding service you are providing.

God speed
James Ake
USAF

Quilt Winner



Long-time member (August, 2001) Mike Potaski was the lucky quilt raffle winner at the Pensacola reunion in September. At right, Eidy LaViollette, spouse of Ned, who joined at the reunion, helps handle the beautiful 2024 quilt donated by Mark and Becky Schlieder.

Dues for 2025 >>>> Still just \$30

Please use the DUES CARD, that is included with this issue, which indicates if you owe for 2025. Use the TLCB-addressed envelope for convenient payment. This is also a good opportunity to contribute to Assistance.

Dues Rules for the TLCB:

1. Dues are payable in January for 2025
2. Dues are late after January 31st.
3. Membership is suspended if dues are not paid by the end of March.

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Reunion 2025: Nashville, Tennessee

H-53 continued from page 1

in California. Waiting to board, he sat on the ramp beside Staff Sgt Stu Stanalan, the pararescue jumper (PJ) gunner. Stanalan told him that the pilot, Major Donahue, was the best pilot in the Air Force. Comer said it was a fun ride, flying low and feeling the wind go through the helicopter. Later that year, the big news was of the Son Tay raid in which four HH-53s carried green berets into a POW camp in North Vietnam. The pilot of the first helicopter to fly through the camp was Major Donahue. Comer read everything he could find out about that mission and was so impressed that he decided he wanted to be an HH-53 rescue pilot. He wanted to be a *Jolly Green!*

In December of 1974, after flight school and H-53 transition training, Lt Comer signed in at Nakhon Phanom Royal Thai AFB (NKP). When he later flew into combat at Tang Island, in May of 1975, they were on the wing of Jolly Green 11, whose tail gunner was the same Tech Sgt Stu Stanalan. Says Comer, "It was then, at precisely that moment, I felt like I had made it and was one of the Jollys!"

The Mayaguez Incident

The last names on "The Wall," the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, D.C., are those servicemen who died during the so-called "Mayaguez Incident" in May of 1975. The U.S. had been officially out of the war since January 1973, when the Paris Peace Accords were adopted, though the fighting between North and South Vietnam and in Laos and Cambodia would continue until the fall of Saigon in 1975.

Following the fall of Phnom Penh on 17 April 1975, the communist "Khmer Rouge" moved to take control of all of Cambodia from the residual Khmer Republic forces. As part of this action, they fought a number of small battles to establish their claims to various islands off the coast of Cambodia, including areas occupied by the North Vietnamese.

Cambodia had claimed 12 nautical miles of territorial waters since 1969 and had boarded ships on this basis. The U.S. did not recognize the 12 nautical mile territorial waters claims in 1975, recognizing only 3 nautical miles, and categorized the waters near Poulo Wai island as international sea lanes on the high seas. Despite numerous Khmer Rouge attacks on ships from various countries, no general warning was issued to the international shipping industry.

The crisis began on the afternoon of 12 May 1975, as the U.S.

Container ship "Mayaguez" with Khmer Rouge aboard, steaming toward, Koh Tang island.



container ship SS Mayaguez, owned by Sea-Land Service Inc., passed through the disputed area en route from Hong Kong to Sattahip, Thailand. Among its load of containers were military cargo and cargo from the U.S. embassy in Saigon, shipped more than a week prior to the embassy's capture by North Vietnamese forces. The Mayaguez was halted by gunfire across her bow and then boarded by a party of Khmer Rouge near the island of Poulo Wai, and subsequently sailed to an anchorage a mile and a half off the island of Koh Tang (or simply, "Tang").

The news soon reached the White House, and the recapture and rescue were ordered, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger having convinced President Gerald Ford that the U.S. needed to react swiftly and decisively to repair our international reputation after the fall of South Vietnam and Cambodia. Also, it being Ford's first international crisis, he needed to establish his own reputation as decisive and aggressive when confronted.

Military Reaction

The initial Air Force plan was to land Security Police (SPs) on the containers on the Mayaguez. This plan was considered risky because the container tops could not support H-53 helicopters, and rappelling troops would be too exposed to defender's gunfire. The plan was then cancelled after the crash of Knife 13, a CH-53 carrying 18 security policemen from Nakhon



Security police from NKP loaded on the ill-fated H-53 with callsign "Knife 13." All were lost, owing to rotor hub failure.

Phanom RTAFB. The crash, from mechanical failure, killed all 23 aboard. The plan then shifted to boarding by Marines from U.S. vessels that had been diverted to the area. The account of the Marine action can be found in various sources.

With that background, we return to the personal experiences of General Comer who flew in the midst of the action, then just a year out of pilot training,

Losing Wars Bigtime

My squadron in 1975 was the 40th Air Rescue and Recovery Squadron (ARRS). We were in Rescue, flew under the Jolly Green call sign, and belonged to Military Airlift Command (MAC). That made us a tenant unit on a Pacific Air Forces

H-53 continues on page 4

H-53 continued from page 3

(PACAF) base at Nakhon Phanom Royal Thai Air Force Base (NKP). The other helicopter squadron at NKP also flew the H-53; the 21st Special Operations Squadron (SOS), flew with the call sign "Knife." The 21st SOS did not have air refueling probes on their CH-53s and were part of PACAF. Both squadrons had participated to a degree in two very big missions in April of 1975, first in the evacuation of Phenom Penh, the capital of Cambodia, and later that month in the evacuation of Saigon, the capital of South Vietnam. We were losing wars big time that month.

Notably, the two Jollys had made it into the landing zones (LZs) at the Cambodian embassy while the Knives had been put into a holding pattern north of town. They never got in; they just were told to orbit until needed, and later went back to Thailand when they ran low on fuel. The Marines did most of the evacuating, flying from ships to the south. The AF had only a little play. In Saigon, the PACAF guys got first call and placed all their aircraft on the aircraft carrier Midway. The Jollys got the two spots left over, and only two of our ten aircraft played in that mission. Phenom Penh was on the 12th of April; Saigon on the 29th. Those deployed to the ships got back to NKP on the second of May. With that, the SEA war was officially over, and we all expected to rotate home very soon.

Surprise Action

The SS Mayaguez was halted and boarded by Cambodian forces on May 12th and made the news on the 13th. Up at NKP we didn't take much notice, and there, it was just a regular day. My crew, with Captain Barry Walls as the crew commander, had tried to get airborne all afternoon for a scheduled day/night training sortie. Our bird was "broke," and the maintainers were moving very slowly.

Nothing had seemed to matter much, and nothing seemed important. We had lost the war and were just awaiting the call to go home. All training lines were cancelled that day, as

On Koh Tang Island, Marines abandon the shot-down "Knife 22."



nothing was flyable. At about 5:30, Barry, who was the chief of flight scheduling, said that everything was cancelled, and everybody should go back to the hootch (quarters). We had a bar at the hootch, and we had just arrived there when the phone rang. When Barry hung up the phone, he said that we should all go back to the ops building.

At Operations, the squadron commander said that we were going to send three aircraft and crews to U-Tapao AFB on the southern shore of Thailand, to be part of a task force to recover the Mayaguez and its crew. The 40th ARRS was to be a search and rescue (SAR) force to back up an assault force, which would be carried by the 21st SOS. We were to launch and go to U-tapao and would be briefed further down there. The three crews chosen to go were Wall's crew (us), Wayne Purser's crew, and Joe Gilbert's crew. We were excited to go, as none of these crews had flown the earlier evacuation missions in Phnom Penh and Saigon, and now, we had our chance. We got our stuff and went out to the flight line where the maintainers now had 6 or 7 Jollies ready to fly.

We took off at about 9:45PM and dodged thunderstorms most of the way. We overflew Korat Air Base a little over two hours out and observed the two Jolly Greens, who were there on rescue alert, as they took off. I called them on squadron common radio and Hank Mason, co-pilot on Bob Blough's crew, told me that one of the Knives had crashed when leaving NKP, and that they were heading north to help. We discussed what was going on and figured that there were plenty of helicopters going toward the crash, and that we should proceed on to our mission at U-Tapao. Blough's aircraft and his wingman proceeded north toward the crash and our three-ship formation continued south. [All 23 on board, the crew and 18 security policemen, perished in the crash of Knife 13, which was caused by main rotor head failure. ed.].

U-Tapao

We landed at U-tapao just before 2AM and were advised of a mission briefing at 5:30, and that the chow hall would open at 4:30. We piled into the crew buses he had there waiting for us and got checked into billeting. Most of us had just enough time to take a quick shower, then chow down.

At the 5:30 brief we found that there were 4 more helicopters and crews there from the 21st SOS. We learned that the SS Mayaguez was anchored near Koh Tang Island, about 140 miles out to sea from the Thai coast. The 21st was to carry a force of some Army guys and mostly Air Force Security Police out to Tang Island. The Jollys were to carry Security Police to the SS Mayaguez and hover over the containers low enough for the SPs to jump off onto the vessel. Little resistance was expected at either place. After dropping off the SPs, the

H-53 continues next page



On the beach at the north end of Koh Tang Island, two CH-53s were shot down and crashed, as seen here.

Jollys were to provide a combat search and rescue (CSAR) airborne alert, refueling from HC-130 air refueling tankers. The Army guys apparently could speak Cambodian and were to negotiate the release of the Mayaguez crew, which was assumed to be on Tang Island. We looked at the pictures and could see that only two small strips of beach could support H-53 landings. Those of us who were to hover low over the ship worried about being sitting ducks if there were a bunch of armed guys there to defend it. But the PJ gunners seemed to yearn for a real gunfight.

Emotional Roller Coaster

We went out to the aircraft and prepared to crank up for the launch which would be at 7:30AM. The enlisted guys had gone out first while the pilots had stayed back for a formation procedures brief. When we all got together at the aircraft, about 20 or so SPs showed up and the PJs briefed them on the aircraft and passenger procedures. I compared notes with an NCO on what we all understood from the briefing. Our squadron operations officer, second in command, LtCol Gordon Hall, and his assistant, Captain Vern Sheffield, briefed us. They were both greatly respected. Colonel Hall told us Jollys who was to do what. He and Captain Sheffield were working things out like mad and told us that Sheffield would come out to the flight line to give us the final go order for the mission.

We waited for a while in the cockpits, ready to crank engines. Vern came out only a little later than we had expected, but he gave us the cut sign across the throat meaning to shut down, instead of the windup hand circle which would have meant to spin the rotors. The mission was on hold, and we would have to wait, standing by at our aircraft for further word. We waited like that for the next 7 hours.

By 8AM the aircraft ramp at U-tapao was scorching hot

from the Thai sun. After sitting in the cockpits for a while, we got out to avoid the greenhouse effect of the bright sun coming in through the plexi-glass cockpit windows. I remember lying down on the concrete ramp using the aircraft for shade. The auxiliary fuel tank on the right side of our helicopter became my shade. Lying right under the tank, which was full of fuel, was cooler, as the fuel seemed to be good insulation and stayed cooler than the air. I did some sleeping in short naps using my helmet bag as a pillow.

I think it was about noon when I noticed that C-141s had come in and parked near the helicopters. There were troops getting out of them. A group of them was led to our aircraft and told that this was their ride. The SPs who had been there all morning were then told that they were relieved of the mission, and that it would now be done by these Marines. I talked with a Marine lieutenant and told him what we had been told to do in taking them to the SS Mayaguez. He didn't say what he had heard about their mission but said that he needed to go over to one of the other helicopters to talk with his captain.

I went back to sleep.

Go to Sleep!

During the early afternoon more and more H-53s from both squadrons were arriving. Slough's flight arrived, refueled, and flew out toward the Mayaguez on a rescue mission of some sort. I didn't know much except that we were still to hold in place with our Marines waiting for a "go" order. It was about 3PM when Don Backlund and his crew came up to our aircraft with their flight gear. They informed us that due to a need for a fresh crew on the aircraft, we were displaced, and this mission was now theirs to fly. Colonel Hall was with them and confirmed the order that we should leave the aircraft, go to the BOQ, and get some rest. About 30 minutes later, all the crews showed up at billeting with orders to rest and be ready to brief for the mission at 4 in the morning. I remember telling Barry that if everybody is now getting rest, that we should get our aircraft back and be returned to the mission. He said, "Go to sleep."

The phone in our room rang to wake us up. I answered it and Vern Sheffield told me to bring in the crew. We got to the place on the flight line being used to run the operation in less than 20 minutes or so. Vern told us that the Mayaguez recovery had become a small war. He said that several of the helicopters that went to the island had been shot down, and that there were people in the water and on shore needing rescue and medevac. The helicopters which had dropped their Marines on the destroyer were trying to help. He said that we should stand by close, but we no longer had PJs for our crew since they were now on a 21st SOS helicopter which was here and on alert when everything started happening. Vern had placed our PJs with that aircraft, and they had launched out to help.

Vern told Barry that our crew should stay close and stay informed, and when he could put us together with PJs and an

H-53 continues on page 6

H-53 *continued from page 5*

aircraft, we would go out as well. He might get us an aircraft from a crew when they returned from the battle, or we might get one which came in from NKP, as the rest of the aircraft in both squadrons were being fixed and flown to U-Tapao as quickly as maintenance could get them ready. He said that he would find us some PJs pretty quickly from some of the crews that were just waiting around.

I went from one position to another in the operations building, listening to what was being said and began to learn more of what was going on. The mission had remained in essentially the same two parts as we had been briefed on the day before. Helicopters had been assigned, Marines to carry, and took them to two places; one larger group went to Tang Island while the smaller group went to a Navy destroyer, which then went to the SS Mayaguez and took back the ship from the Cambodians. The destroyer had not been part of our plan the day before as it was too far away. The extra day had given it time enough to become part of the plan. An aircraft carrier was also on the way and would be close enough to provide support soon.

Ship Recovered

The 21st SOS Squadron Commander had flown the first helicopter to the island and had been shot down, as was his second in command, the squadron operations officer in another of their helicopters. The last 21st SOS aircraft, which had been sitting on the parking ramp at U-Tapao, was still there because it was grounded for excessive vibrations. The pilot, Dick Brims, had cleared it for a flight and had asked the Jolly squadron for a couple of PJs. That was how the PJs on my original crew had gone out to the action; they were on Knife 51 with Brims flying. The first Jollys out were the ones who took the Marines to the destroyer and those Marines now had control of the SS Mayaguez. The Marines on the beaches were under fire and calling for more Marines.

There was a Marine colonel there, named Andersen, who was getting reports about the situation on the island and on the Mayaguez. He seemed excited and controlled, giving orders and listening to the reports. It wouldn't get me on one of the helicopters, so it didn't matter much to me. I probably should have listened more carefully, but I didn't. Colonel Hall, our squadron ops officer, was there tracking where each of the Jolly Green helicopters was. I wanted to ask when he thought my crew would get into the action, but I couldn't because we didn't yet have a full crew. I just wanted to find a way to the action, and couldn't, not anytime soon.

The Commander of the 21st SOS, LtCol John Denham, was a truly nice guy—polite in every way, and a strong “born-again” Christian. His predecessor at the 21st had been a part owner in one of the Thai massage parlors and had held squadron parties in the local bar and massage parlor. Denham had brought a big change over to the 21st. He and I had been together as students in the H-53 transition course. I had driven him home to Cheyenne, Wyoming one weekend when we had some time off. I was driving to Colorado to visit my wife's family, and he wanted to see his wife and kids. My wife had come in to pick us up after a simulator flight and we had driven from Ogden, Utah to Cheyenne. It was a big thing to do a favor for the colonel.

LtCol Denham came walking into the building a couple of hours after I got to operations. He had been shot down just off Tang Island just three hours earlier. I learned later that day that his flight mechanic, Woody Rumbaugh, had gone down at sea with the helicopter. LtCol Denham and the other two crew members had been hoisted out of the water by another 21st SOS aircraft and had just arrived back at the base. In our brief conversation I said that I was glad to see him alive. I had heard that he had been shot down, and until that moment, I had not heard if he had been picked up. He put his hand on my shoulder and squeezed. He then went over to the desk which was assigned to his squadron and started tracking where all his people were. He had several dead, including all on the crew that had crashed on the first night.

Aircraft from the 21st were also cycling in and were loading more troops, refueling, and leaving again. I needed a flyable Jolly Green helicopter! Vern said that the Marine colonel was moving more troops toward the island and thought that was the best way to protect those on the beaches. He was acting on his orders and did not regard the recapture of the SS Mayaguez as the end of the mission. We heard sometime around 10AM that the Mayaguez crew was also now back in American hands. I didn't know the circumstances of that, but I remember thinking that no matter what, the mission had succeeded.

Hope and disappointment

Vern Sheffield assigned 3 PJs to our crew at about 11AM and told us to get ready to go. He said that one of the Jollys was returning and, if it was flyable, he would have us relieve the crew who had been on the bird since 3AM.

The aircraft coming in was Phil Pacini's crew. I had my flight gear and went out to the parking ramp to meet them as it taxied in. It looked good to me as it parked. The maintenance guys who were talking to the crew after plugging into the intercom began to point at the sides of the aircraft and at the auxiliary fuel tank on the left side. I saw one of them put his finger into a couple of bullet holes. Bob Dube, the co-pilot, talked with me after they shut down the engines and rotors. They had taken a good bit of fire from the island, puncturing both external aux tanks. They also had some flight control problems that they thought needed fixing. Their judgment was that the aircraft was not flyable. The maintenance guys didn't have any spare aux tanks to hang on the aircraft either. It hurt.

An hour later the assistant squadron ops officer, Captain Vern Sheffield, said another Jolly was coming in and that the pilot said his bird was in good shape. Our orders were to take with us some maintenance guys and Joe Gilbert's crew. We were to fly first to the USS Coral Sea, an aircraft carrier, and place the maintainers and Gilbert's crew there. Then we were to join in on the extraction of people from the island. Orders had come from somewhere that the troops on the way out had to return. No more Marines were to be placed on the island and those on shore had to be extracted. Aircraft carrying troops toward the island were turning around to come back. Action at last!

Part II of General Comer's story about closing out the Vietnam War will be published in a future issue of Mekong Express Mail. Ed.



Project Lucky Tiger, 1966 to 1967

Part I

By Member Ron Kosh, Sgt, USAF

Project “Lucky Tiger” was initiated in 1966 to stand up (create) the 606th Air Commando Sq. at Hurlburt Field, FL. We first trained for several weeks there and then moved as a unit to Nakhon Phanom (NKP). Like the rest of the squadron’s diverse elements, our Combat Control Team was formed up at Hurlburt, having been assembled from other Continental United States-based units (CONUS). While our orders assigned us to NKP and the 606th, we were to report initially to Hurlburt AFB for an unspecified number of weeks of “TDY–enroute.” Once at Hurlburt, those weeks were for familiarization training to prepare to go to Southeast Asia, learn about localized information, related Escape & Evasion (E&E), Survival, Evasion, Resistance, and Escape (SERE), with some focus on counterinsurgency and forward air operations.

Concluding the TDY, the unit moved from Florida to NKP, and was in two or three separate elements, each about a week apart; I deployed with the last element. The serials were deployed via C-130s, I think it was four each; each was loaded with some of our gear, vehicles, and personnel. There were multiple stops for fuel and a new crew or two, which included Travis, Hickam, Wake, Anderson, Mactan, Tan Son Nhut (TSN), and eventually NKP. I don’t think I left any out but may have.

Ripe and Ready

By the time we arrived in Thailand, we were definitely “ripe.” Most of the unit’s aircraft were ferried over in formations, while some of the smaller ones and the helicopters had been partially disassembled and arrived separately in C-124s and were reassembled at NKP. The remainder of our gear arrived in fits and starts over the following several weeks.

Originally, other than the resident 23rd Tactical Air Support Squadron (TASS), who were forward air controllers (FACs), much of the NKP operations, related to what was to be our specific mission, was designated Detachment 1, 1st Air Commando Wing (ACW). Then with the activation of the 606th ACS, we became a 7th/13th Air Force standalone unit under the Pacific Air Forces (PACAF) major command. At that point I don’t believe there was yet an active 56th ACW.

While we were a Combat Control Team (CCT) element in the 606th, there were still some 1st ACW CCT folks who came over briefly or remained there in TDY status from England AFB:



Author Ron Kosh as shown in his Lao driver's license photo.

2Lt Bob McCollough and MSgt Jim Howell.

A few weeks prior to our arrival at NKP, one of the TDY CCTs from the 1st ACW, A1C Andre’ Guillet, was killed in action. I had known Andy from jump school. He had been flying in the back seat of a 23rd TASS O-1 assisting the pilot [Captain Lee Harley, lost on May 18th. ed.] as an “extra pair of eyes” spotting for truck traffic and similar targets of opportunity along the Ho Chi Minh (HCM) Trail.

Our 606th unit, as part of Operation “Lucky Tiger,” was the first permanent party CCT at NKP, arriving in late May and June of 1966. The NCOIC was E7 Danny L. Pike. We did not have a full-time officer, but Capt. Richard

C. Boys, an intel officer, oversaw our operations on a part-time basis. The team was comprised of Controller SSgts John Johnston and Jack Webb, who were A1Cs, and later, Sgts, Don Carlyle, Les Hall, Clyde Howard, and me. We also had a radio maintenance man, TSgt Howard Harris.



The Fairchild C-123, developed from a Chase glider design and boosted by auxiliary jet engines. Main power was two reversed Pratt & Whitney R-2800 recip engines.

NKP, Starlight Scopes, Candlesticks, Flares, and Leaflets

In those early days at NKP, there were a variety of odd missions/jobs for the CCTs. Among some of the assignments beyond our usual scope, was non-status flying on “Candlestick” C-123s, at night, using “Starlight Scopes,” an early night vision technology. The objective was to spot NVA truck convoy traffic on the HCM Trail. The assignment involved being in a tethered harness, lying on an old mattress or mat while the upper half of our torso was hanging out the floor hatch with a “Starlight Scope” in hand, also tethered. The crew would fly over known

Lucky Tiger continues on page 8

Lucky Tiger *continued from page 7*

target areas, hopefully without significant anti-aircraft (AA) fire. We would scan the ground with the scope looking for truck traffic or other enemy activity. When we spotted some, we would notify the crew using the headset/intercom so the loadmasters could then kick parachute flares off the ramp, which would illuminate the area for the A-26s orbiting above us, so they could begin their attack runs.

Another small effort I got involved with briefly was some propaganda leaflet and counterfeit North Vietnamese money-dropping missions. I worked on devising a better system to scatter the bundles' contents when they were dropped in certain North Vietnamese Army (NVA) areas. Knowing a bit about explosives from my days growing up in the Pennsylvania anthracite coal region, where my dad had a small mining operation, I worked on a jury-rigged squib device to get the leaflet bundles to separate and scatter the bundles' contents.

Helo Searches and Chains

There was also a TDY to Ubon with Clyde Howard. There had been reports of some late-night occasions of an unidentified helo crossing the Mekong into northeastern Thailand. That helo's origin was presumably from North Vietnam. A plan was devised to intercept it. So, a couple of pilots, don't recall their names, a U-6, and Clyde and I got the job. Reports placed the crossing somewhere south of Mukdahan and north of Ubon. Our little group got to go on a trip to Ubon where there was an Australian air defense interceptor unit, flying F-86s. They maintained a "five-minute alert" shack next to the runway and were to be "scrambled" if and when needed. We got to sit nights with their crews, waiting for a call from Mukdahan radar that they had a very low level and relatively slow, unidentified bogie. Our U-6, now an interceptor, had the side door and back



Royal Australian Air Force F-86, a variant of the North American Sabre Jet of Korean War fame.

seats removed. Our role was to sit on the floor with our tracer-loaded M-16, but our primary weapon was several cargo "tie down" chains. If a helo was spotted and we were scrambled and located it, the pilot was to directly overfly the helo. We were to fire a warning burst of tracers and then dump the chains into its rotors, forcing it down. My inquiry as to "what if the helo crew started shooting at us" met with no response. That

lasted about two or three weeks and no helo, so we were told to kit up and head back to NKP.

Teaching CCT to Special Forces

One other larger term assignment was when TSgt Howard Harris and I were sent TDY to Lop Buri (a Thai version of Fayetteville, NC, home to Fort Bragg and Pope AFB) along with several others, that were non-CCT aircrews. My job there was to teach various CCT operations to the Royal Thai Army Special Forces (SF) and the Thai Border Patrol Police that had an airborne element called a Police Aerial Resupply Unit (PARU). In September or October of 1966, the U.S. Army's 46th SF Company was stood up out of Okinawa and its HQ was also billeted at a Thai Army base at Lop Buri.

Shortly after getting there, a joint U.S. and Thai Army SF team was to be deployed to Trang, south, near the Thai border with Malaysia. It was to be a joint training/active counter-insurgency operation. Transport was being provided by several C-123s from NKP, but that distance was at the farthest limit of the C-123's range even with a top-off of fuel at Don Muang (Bangkok airport). And, there was no usable airstrip at or near the prospective SF camp area.

Accordingly, all of us parachuted in with Harris and me and a small SF element to secure the drop zone (DZ) on the lead C-123. The remainder of SFs were on the three trailing C-123s. Our job was to run the DZ air operations thereafter, as all the SF's equipment and supplies were to be dropped over a couple of days. Because of its distance and no usable airfield at the site or nearby, there were no known friendlies on the ground, and intel was spotty as to what we might encounter. It turned out that the aerial photo reconnaissance (recce) used to ID our DZ wasn't too hot either — it was entirely about a foot or more deep marsh, no solid or even semi-solid ground!

A Map, Hike, Farm Animals, Bus and Train ride

When we were done with the drops, Harris and I were left to find our own way home! Although there were no such things as available vehicles, we did have a map that showed a road nearby. We were able to hike out to a village and find a local bus going north. We broke down our M-16s and stuffed them into our rucksacks, and the bus got us to a railroad station after a few hours, along with the chickens, goats, and pigs. There we were able to get a train — a local — going north. No such thing as an "express!" The combined walk, bus, and train trip took us almost two days, and we finally arrived in Bangkok, clad in jungle fatigues with dried mud from our "soft!" DZ.

Readers who had R&R in Bangkok may recall that wearing uniforms there was frowned upon, but we had no change of clothes of any sort. We finally got ourselves checked into a hotel. We took a shower wearing our fatigues—the only set we had! Although fatigues in the city were not permitted, we managed to sneak around some alleys to get some fried rice and a Singha or two! It didn't take long before we were tagged by U.S. military, or air police, who took one look at us and were more than a bit skeptical about our story. Nevertheless, they

Lucky Tiger *continues next page*

told us to stay away from any main streets and larger bars and just get back into the hotel after we finished. Next day we were able to get a hop from Don Muang north. At Lop Buri, I had a message to get back to NKP — for yet another adventure.

Civilian Clothes, No Dog Tags

In August of '66, teammates Don Carlyle and Jack Webb were the first two of our team to be deployed to northern Laos at Long Tieng (aka originally L-98 or later renumbered as L-20 Alternate). When I got back to NKP from Trang and Lop Buri, I was told that I was going to Laos to replace Webb a few weeks later. That was in early December, and I stayed there with Carlyle until March or April of the following year.

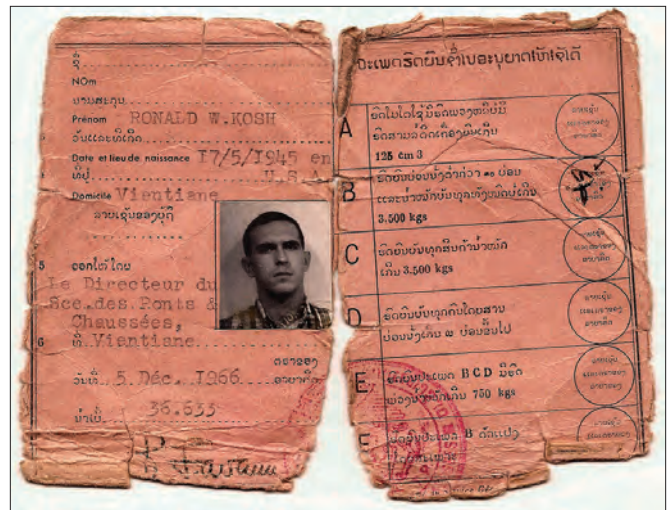
My leg on my way to Laos was to Udorn. From there I got



Left to right, Ron's Partner Don Carlyle, the Hmong lieutenant who provided them with targeting info, and author Ron Kosh.

an Air America ride to Vientiane's commercial airport. Once there, it started with a short visit to a satellite office of the Air Attaché of the U.S. Embassy—Vientiane. I was provided an overview of the assignment and received my Lao driver's license, only for use as my ID. Before leaving NKP, I was instructed to wear only civilian clothes, Levis, unmarked work type clothes, or unmarked fatigues. I was to leave behind my dog tags, Geneva Convention card, etc., or anything else identifying me as a member of the military.

After this initial process of a day or two, I went on to L-20A, again via Air America. There, I spent a few days separately accompanying Webb and Carlyle on alternating days on multiple missions. Lon Tieng was the



Ron still has what's left of his Lao driver's license, which he obtained as his only identification while in Laos.

major Hmong settlement in Laos, Gen Vang Pao's HQ, and base camp of a large unit of irregulars in the RLA. It was the largest Lao element being supported by our government. In addition to trying to maintain some degree of independence, they were engaged by the U.S. to interdict NVA truck convoys and infantry traffic coming out of North Vietnam through Sam Neua Province of very northeastern Laos. The route of those convoys was all the way down the whole length of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, eventually through Mu Ghia Pass and into South Viet Nam.

All Eyeballs

After a few days each with Carlyle and Webb, it was time for my "check ride" of sorts on a strike mission. Major Andy Peerson, an Assistant Air Attaché officer, came up to L-20A in his de Havilland U-6 Beaver. My "training" process was actually fairly short, as prior to volunteering to be a combat controller, I had been an air defense ground control intercept tech (AC&W 27350A). Compared to that, this job that I was about to get involved with was mostly "all eyeballs." From my perspective, it only involved identifying and then marking and/or describing a target on the ground. It didn't require compensating for relative airspeed differences using an E6B type intercept calculator or any sort of math to identify appropriate attack angles.

Lucky Tiger continues on page 10



The Canadian-built de Havilland "Beaver." This workhorse was designed for operations in extremely cold climates. Designated "U-6" by the U.S. Army, the Beaver was one of the most useful utility aircraft in the Air Force. It had excellent STOL performance and could carry six passengers or just over a ton of cargo.

Lucky Tiger *continued from page 9*

Once familiar with the routine, our geographic area of operations, and mission objectives, I started FACing on my own, calling strikes independently. The typical process was for Don and me to take turns flying on alternate days. Occasionally we would fly several days in row, while the others either went down to Vientiane, Udorn, or NKP for a break or other reason. With both of us at L-20A and only one Porter available, whoever remained at L-20A monitored our fixed station radios, which were UHF for air traffic, albeit with limited range reception given our location in a valley, and a commercial Collins HF transceiver that had a “creative” bamboo-framed rhombic antenna that provided contact with other ground stations at L-36, Vientiane, etc. and backup with the airborne command post. With the right weather, we were even able to get some MARS (“ham radio”) stations.

Pilatus Porters

Our missions were to provide forward air control support, in some cases to the RLA, but the primary mission was to interdict the supply route of the North Vietnamese Army from North Vietnam down through Laos, into South Vietnam. We were living with the Hmong regulars of the RLA, led by General Vang Pao, whose headquarters was Long Tieng. We



The Swiss-built turbine powered Porter can carry up to 10 passengers or over 2600 pounds of cargo and take off in less than 700 feet, making it very useful in the jagged karst mountains of Laos.

would do our forward air control, primarily in the air and very occasionally on the ground. FACing from the air was flying, typically, in Pilatus Porters, a single engine, variable pitch turbo prop that was not in the USAF inventory, but was being flown by American civilians in the left seat and we combat controllers in the right seat.

Almost always, we were in an unmarked, gray Continental Air Services International (CASI) Pilatus Porter. The civilian pilot sat in the left seat and FAC in the right. Initially we typically had one CASI aircraft per day available to us for FAC duty. On a few occasions, we might get, for our purposes, an Air America Porter, and once in a very great while, an AA Helio Courier (U-10). Although almost all our FAC missions were

on Porters flown on CASI aircraft, Porters were flown on 126 of the FAC missions I recorded, while a very few were on the Helio Courier or in the air attaché’s U-6, which I’ll cover later.

Targeting, Interpreting, and Topping Off

The nature of our targeting was mixed. Some days, or parts thereof, it was to: 1) Provide close air support to the RLA and/or the indigenous Hmong irregulars on the ground, or 2) Interdict traffic of the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) units and its supply convoys heading south along the Ho Chi Minh Trail network, or 3) Inflict physical damage to Trail elements such as narrow passes, bridges (if any), river fords, etc. in an effort to impede NVA convoys.

Our role in providing close air support to the RLA was a more complicated process because of language issues with both ground units and air assets if the pilots were Royal Lao Air Force (RLAF). For those missions, the RLA typically provided an English-speaking interpreter to fly with us. In most instances the interpreter would join us, the FAC and pilot, at 20A and we would then head out to begin our day’s work at the Lima Site to which we were assigned. When needed, the “terp” would communicate with ground units on a hand-held radio identifying specific locations where they wanted ordnance directed.

Typically, we would first land at an assigned Lima Site, or at another close by. A local RLA officer or NCO who knew

the target would then join us for the subsequent flight. Depending upon the intensity of the day, if we had clear weather and availability of fighters, it could be more than one target location. Some days, because of distances and/or flight times, we might have to “top off” the Porter with fuel, and some sites maintained a few 55-gallon fuel drums with a hand pump. The four of us: Pilot in the left seat, FAC in the right, the two Lao in back, would then take off to make contact with the fighters. The two Lao often just sat or kneeled on the floor. During the airstrike,

the soldier and/or the interpreter would point out to me what we were to target.

Once I had clearly ID’d the target, and since the Porter didn’t have any 2.5 inch Folding Fin Aerial Rockets (FFARs) for marking, if the pilot was willing, and some were, we would first make our own target run. On those I would “pop and drop” a smoke grenade in an attempt to hit the target. That took some practice to get reasonably accurate. Even if I missed, though, I could then provide the fighters with a visible common point of reference from the smoke. If my pilot was reluctant to make our own target run, I would be more descriptive of the target area

Lucky Tiger continues next page

using visible ground features and such.

On the days we had RLAf AT-28s as strike assets and an interpreter on board, he and I would collaborate on target identification. I then marked it with smoke while he transmitted details to the fighters in Lao or Thai. My preference was always for USAF A-1E Skyraiders. The A-1s were far and away the best for amount of ordnance carried, the ability to place it accurately, and the time in the target area. And they were exceptionally durable from ground fire.

The Thai or Hmong had a few forward air guides (FAGs), and they would fly with us periodically. There were also some Thais that mostly FACed out of their T-28s. There were also a couple of guys—Thai ground intel/FAGs—one of them was RED HAT, a Thai mercenary I believe. Occasionally we had communication with them to secure target info. A major weakness was that we did not use any codes; everything we did was on voice radio, which was in the clear.

Radio Types, Batteries, and Ingenuity

The CASI Porters were equipped only with VHF radios, but did have TACAN receivers. For our FAC purposes with USAF and USN fighters, we needed UHF capability, which is the radio frequency band that is used for military aviation communications. Military ground forces use the FM bands. For that we used our standard field radios, which were wet-cell battery powered PRC 41s and PRC 47s. The PRC 41 was UHF for air-to-air with the fighters. The PRC-47 was HF for much longer range, if needed, with the airborne command post, or back to 20A or even Udom. We recharged the batteries for both radios each night from a generator at 20A. We almost always flew on Pilatus Porters of Continental Air Services aircraft (CASI), and only very occasionally on Air America Porters.

Although those aircraft had only VHF, most of the available Porters had a permanently installed UHF blade antenna, with a coaxial cable connector that we could plug our PRC 41 into. I would strap that radio onto the right back seat. The HF PRC-47 radio sat on the floor between the pilot in the left seat and me in the right seat. For the HF I ran a long wire antenna out the door jamb and along the wing strut, then I taped it down at the strut end with “100 mph tape” (duct tape), and strung it taut back to the vertical stabilizer, which had a metal loop installed, so I could secure it there with a dog leash clip on the wire’s end.

Between the UHF and especially the HF set, regardless of how low or far north we were, we had good, long-range capability, even back to Udom, if need be, or to the airborne command posts (ABCCCs) for “Rolling Thunder,” “Barrel Roll,” “Hillsborough,” or “Cricket,” combat areas. I’m not sure which at this point—it was a long time ago! Those airborne command posts were the source of almost all of our fighter assets.



The U-10 “Super Courier,” by Helio Aircraft Company, in Kansas, can take off in less than 200 feet, carry 5 passengers or 1300 pounds, and is controllable down to 28 knots! Max range is over 1000 miles.

Mission Procedures

During FAC missions, the pilot flew the aircraft, and we’d control out of the right seat. It was primitive, as we would mark a target with a low-level run by throwing a smoke grenade out the window. Even if our smoke didn’t hit the exact target, it still provided a reference point to direct the fighters. That marked where we wanted our assets, mostly F-105s, some F-4s, and both Sandy and Firefly A-1s. On occasion, some Navy aircraft became available when they were weathered out of harder targets in Haiphong or in Hanoi. They would get diverted to us and we would take over control of the aircraft, to expend their ordnance, which they could not carry back to the ship.

Locally, we took our direction and most of our targeting info on ground targeting from CIA case officers. The overall boss at Long Tieng was John Randall. There was a USAF Major, Andy Peerson, who was in the Air Attaché’s office in Vientiane. I only saw him at the outset of my tour and then maybe once or twice thereafter. We never wrote up reports or AARs for the Air attaché but might give them an occasional oral report via radio when asked.

Our Porters got shot at by small arms and auto weapons fairly regularly, but my aircraft was never hit. We avoided areas with 37 mm AA but occasionally would see some start and make a hasty departure! Capt Bob Farmer, one of my Butterfly predecessors, had his Porter take a few AK hits, but he and the pilot were unscathed. I did see two T-28s get shot down while we were FACING. As far as Search and Rescue (SAR), we often stood by when there was an alert, but never got directly involved. Our role was directing the air cover in the event that it was needed for extraction.

Lucky Tiger continues on page 12

Lucky Tiger continued from page 11

Smoke Bombs and Fireflies

Sometimes we would get flights of four A-1s assigned to us directly if we had sites that had major enemy fire. On a few times it was a flight of two “Sandies” at the end of their day, while escorting the air rescue “Jolly Greens,” wanting to burn their ordnance. More often though, the A-1s we received for ground attacks were pairs of “Fireflies” on armed reconnaissance missions. Those were typically turned over to us by the airborne command post when they could not find targets on their own.

Most jet flights we received for our targeting in Laos, “Barrel Roll,” were often initially assigned targets as part of the “Rolling Thunder” campaign in North Viet Nam. Those we received for our purposes were mostly F-105s, although as time progressed, we got a few F-4s as they were just coming into the USAF inventory. Occasionally there were a few Navy carrier-based fighters in rare instances.

As primary and secondary targets in Haiphong or in Hanoi were “weathered out,” those fighters would be diverted to us by the airborne command post. We would take control of those, occasionally for ground support, but much more commonly for “trail” related targets of opportunity that we had identified from our aerial observation or obtained from CIA clandestine operators.

The Butterflies, Gladys and Grace, and — their Armor

As the North Vietnam bombing intensity increased, it provided us with a greater number of available fighters. At that point, often more than one Porter per day became available. When two were, Carlyle and I both flew concurrently, one of us as “Butterfly 44” and the other as “22.” Since we both also became generally familiar to the airborne command post staff, as well as some of the fighter pilots, to distinguish between the two of us sharing our flight call signs, but still to avoid personal names, we adopted female names for radio use. I seem to recall that Don used “Gladys” as his ID, while I was known as “Grace.”

The typical routine for us before we started our FAC missions each day was to install our UHF HF with its “long wire.” Then we’d toss a case or so of smoke grenades behind us to mark targets. We also each had our own two pieces of titanium armor — each of which was a couple of feet square, which had been scrounged out of a downed H-3. A rope handle was on each; one plate went under the seat cushion and the other on the floor beneath our feet.



*Editor’s note: this is the end of Part One.
Part Two of “Lucky Tiger” will be in the March issue.*

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Aspers, PA 17304 **INCLUDE MEMBER #**



Newest Members in the TLC Brotherhood

The eight members listed below joined between the September 2024 issue of the *Mekong Express Mail* and this printing. You can find more information on our website database.

The MEM wishes you all a sincere “Welcome Home.” We are delighted that you have joined us.

No.	Branch	First Name	Last Name	City	State
2082	USAF	Phillip	Mahler	Dowling Park	FL
2083	Other	Nancy	Sweet	Seabrook	NH
2084	USAF	Ned	LaViolette	Oklahoma City	OK
2085	USAF	Allen	Evans	Motley	MN
2086	USAF	James	Smith	Cocoa Beach	FL
2087	USAF	Michael	Insogna	Wayne	PA
2088	USAF	Robert	LaBerge	Buford	GA
2089	USMC	Thomas	Filipiak	Chicago	IL

The Khmer Republic and Khmer Air Force And the Other Secret War, Part I

by Member Glenn Black

Recently, through contacts I met in the early 1990s, I reconnected with two U.S. Embassy staff members based in Phnom Penh. At the time, they were the Charge d'affaires, Charles Twining and his translator/facilitator, Mr. Khem Sos. Later, Twining became the Ambassador when the embassy formally reopened in 1994. In early 1991, U.S. relations with Cambodia had taken a warmer turn with the signing of the United Nations Peace Accords, and Cambodia invited the USA to reestablish a diplomatic presence in Cambodia. This led to the reopening of the first Cambodian U.S. Embassy since the "Eagle Pull" evacuation of the U.S. Mission staff on 12 April 1975, five days prior to the fall of Phnom Penh to the Communist Khmer Rouge.

I had questions about events and locations in Phnom Penh during Lon Nol's Khmer Republic government during 1970 to 1975. My initial curiosity was to learn more about the evacuation. Ambassador Twining said that he was not in Cambodia in 1975 and advised me to contact Khem Sos, who also wrote back, saying that during that event he was in the USA attending university; however, he did put me in contact with some Khmer American pilots who were members of the Khmer Air Force (KAF), many of whom now lived in California or other parts of the USA. One, a former UH-1H helicopter pilot, Mr. Sar Sithan, told me about several websites about Cambodia Veterans, Khmer Air Force, and the Khmer Navy (see box at bottom left).

Focus

Part I of this article is a summary of the critical but widely overlooked involvement of Cambodia in the Southeast Asia wars. In Part II, I will focus on the KAF website, which chronologically details the development of Cambodia's Air Force from its beginning as the Royal Cambodian Air Force in the 1950s and how it became the Khmer Air Force from 1970 until the end of the Khmer Republic in 1975. I found the content and photos fascinating, noting the points of view of the Khmer pilots, as well as earlier iterations of Cambodia's air force from 1954, but especially from 1970 to 1975.

The Thailand Laos Cambodia Brotherhood thanks the Chairman of Cambodia Veterans, Mr. Kalmine Ly, who obtained permission from the KAF website managers, Norodom Baley and So Sethi for TLCB's *Mekong Express Mail* to use content from their site to write this article. I refer readers to the Khmer Air Force site and urge that they read its contents and the descriptions of their service and aircraft, as well as personal accounts of the time in which they served. (See box below for the Website for the Khmer Air Force 1970 to 1975.)

Cambodia Joins the War

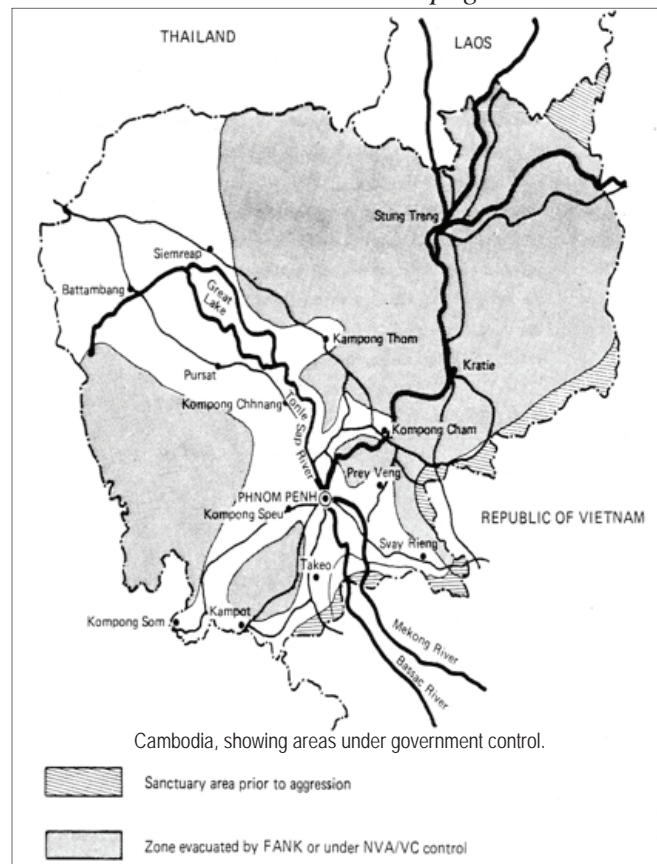
Some background about Cambodia is necessary to put the Khmer Air Force into context. The question begs, how did Cambodia, a neutral country that had avoided involvement in the war until 1970, tumble into the Vietnam War? Their entry into the war was at the worst possible time. War weariness in the USA was already significant. Most American citizens and the U.S. Congress were against widening the war in Vietnam to

another country. In fact, Cambodia had been used for supply and HQ shelter by North Vietnam for years.

The Coup and the Consequences

The North Vietnamese Army/Vietcong (NVA/VC) presence on Cambodian territory had long been a thorn in Prime Minister (and sometime King) Norodom Sihanouk's side. There were nationalist factions in Cambodia that disliked Sihanouk's heavy-handed tactics against opposition politicians. Notably,

Cambodia continues on page 14



WEBSITES:

(www.cambodiaveterans.com), and its two associated sites, about the Khmer Air Force and Navy

The Site for the Khmer Air Force 1970 to 1975 is <http://khmerairforce.com/AAK-KAF/AVNK-AAK-KAF/P-AAK-EN.html>

And for the Khmer Navy— (www.khmernavy.com).

some army officers criticized Sihanouk's deals and accommodations with North Vietnam and China to keep Cambodia neutral. Sihanouk's most glaring offense, in the view of many Americans and some Khmer, was his deal to allow Chinese ships to use Sihanoukville port, built with American aid, to unload Chinese war materials, drive them up USAID-built Highway 4 to Phnom Penh, then transport the materials via military trucks, up Highway 6, by the Royal Cambodian Army in the NE provinces for delivery to the NVA/VC. This was a condition Sihanouk had agreed to with Hanoi and Peking in exchange for recognizing Cambodia's neutrality.

By the second half of the 1960s, the North Vietnamese and Vietcong had increasingly trespassed along Cambodia's eastern border areas. Arms, ammunition, medicines, and rice arrived at Communist "sanctuaries" on the Cambodian border via the Ho Chi Minh trail for delivery to NVA/VC forces in South Vietnam. Around 1967, Prince Sihanouk had become uneasy with the growing presence of NVA and VC units inside Cambodia's borders. In 1967 Sihanouk told a visiting American official, Chester Bowles, that he would look the other way should U.S. forces enter Cambodia to attack Viet Cong troops retreating into Cambodia from South Vietnam. However, Sihanouk was not informed when U.S. super-secret "Menu Bombings" started on March 17, 1969, with the start of "Operation Breakfast." Sihanouk did not protest during this event, and he at least verbally approved of the bombings.

Corpses Float

Through 1964 to late 1969, Cambodia's Defense Minister Lon Nol's army enriched themselves by transporting war materials to the border via what became known as the Sihanouk Trail. Shortly before the coup in 1970, Lon Nol sent word to China that he was suspending use of the port, ending the source of war materials via the Sihanouk Trail. At the time, anti-Communist Lon Nol told his commanders that "this ends Cambodian neutrality." It also enraged Sihanouk, then in France, and began the unraveling of Sihanouk's authority and ultimately culminated in the U.S.-approved coup that deposed him. As this was happening, Khmer anxieties about the NVA/VC troops in Cambodia reached a flashpoint.

Lon Nol instigated demonstrations in the border provinces. During the demonstrations, Khmer attacked ethnic Vietnamese and Chinese civilian populations living in the area. Some 800 Vietnamese were bound and executed, then dumped into the Mekong. As their corpses floated into Vietnam, both the NVA/VC and the South Vietnamese Navy and Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) were enraged. Later in the 1970s, ARVN carried out cross border attacks with little regard for collateral damage to Khmer civilians. ARVN assault troops preceded the Nixon Incursion and later were to attack NVA/VC and Khmer Rouge units inside Cambodia on other occasions, mainly in the Delta border area.

Demonstrations and Demands

Sihanouk had traveled to the south of France for his lengthy annual health cure in late 1969. Lon Nol was acting Prime Minister and was left in charge. In March, Lon Nol instigated demonstrations in Phnom Penh with rioters, attacked and burned the embassies of North Vietnam and the Provisional Revolutionary Government of South Vietnam, the Viet Cong "embassy." The protestors demanded that NVA troops leave Cambodia, and it was at this time that Lon Nol imprudently ordered the Vietnamese Communists out of Cambodia within an unrealistic 72 hours. Throughout this crisis, Sihanouk did not return to Cambodia and pressure mounted in the National Assembly. Ultimately, the majority of the National Assembly voted to replace Sihanouk with Lon Nol as Prime Minister.

Upon departure from France, Sihanouk continued his earlier plan to visit Moscow and Beijing in a vain attempt to persuade China and the USSR to pressure North Vietnam to reduce their presence on Cambodian territory. Had he returned to Phnom Penh earlier, he still might have been able to defuse the situation, but by early March, 1970, things had unraveled too far in his absence. He departed France for Moscow and Peking intending to seek their help in applying pressure on Hanoi to reduce their presence in Cambodia. It was too late.

Sihanouk's Exile

In Moscow, Sihanouk's talks with Alexei Kosygin were unhelpful and as he was driven to the airport for his flight to Peking, Kosygin told him about the coup in Phnom Penh that had deposed him. In Peking, Sihanouk, always thin skinned, opted to seek revenge. He created the "Front Unie Nationale du Kampuchéa" (National United Front of Kampuchea) or FUNK. Sihanouk then allied himself with the Khmer Rouge, the North Vietnamese, the Viet Cong, and the Laotian Pathet Lao, throwing his personal prestige behind the Communists. On 5 May, the establishment of FUNK and of the "Gouvernement Royal d'Union Nationale du Kampuchéa," or GRUNK (Royal Government of National Union of Kampuchea), were proclaimed. Sihanouk assumed the post of head of state, in absentia. He was to remain in Peking during the war, except for a publicity trip to Cambodia in August 1973, via the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The Trail journey from Hanoi to northern Cambodia took a month.

Birth of the Khmer Rouge

After the coup, Lon Nol's Khmer Republic and its "Forces de l'Armie Nationale Khmer," or "National Khmer Armed Forces," known as FANK, almost immediately found themselves at war with battle-hardened NVA and VC units who simultaneously trained the Khmer Communists who became the "Khmer Rouges," the name coined for them by Sihanouk. The Khmer Rouge benefited from Prince Sihanouk's popularity



King Norodom Sihanouk

with the Khmer peasantry, who began joining the Khmer Rouge and rapidly swelled their ranks.

U.S. Views the end of Cambodian Neutrality

On the other hand, President Richard Nixon and then-National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger, found the prospect of Cambodia's entry to the war desirable. Nixon and Kissinger envisioned that attacking the border sanctuaries used by the NVA/VC in Cambodia would distract the NVA/VC units on Cambodia's side of the border and divert them from concentrated attacks against South Vietnam (SVN). The Cambodian border sanctuaries had long threatened SVN, serving as a delivery point of war materials via the Ho Chi Minh trail as well as being staging areas for attacks across the border, such as the Tet Offensive.

A disruption of NVA/VC forces operating from Cambodia's border areas would allow the continuation of Nixon's policy of "Vietnamization," which included a massive transfer of war materials and equipment to the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) and the Republic of Vietnam Air Force (RVNAF) while simultaneously allowing withdrawals of U.S. troops from Vietnam. Meanwhile, U.S. armed forces would help Cambodia resist Communist forces within Cambodia. Nixon saw Cambodia's entry to the war as a western flank that could protect South Vietnam's borders from NVA/VC infiltration via Cambodia. Vietnamization and U.S. troop drawdowns would continue uninterrupted as the Communists were distracted by the war on their flank. Per Nixon's doctrine, FANK forces were to fight the Communists on their own.

Congressional Limits

There were not many American soldiers serving in Cambodia at the time of Sihanouk's fall. These were mostly trainers or technical advisors. A small number liaised with the FANK ground forces. During the Khmer Republic, the U.S. Congress limited the number of Americans officially in Cambodia (that is, embassy staff and members of the U.S. armed services) to only two hundred persons at any one time. To get around this limitation, many U.S. military advisors and technicians flew into Cambodia in the morning and back out to Thailand or Vietnam in the evening, so as not to be considered "in country" in Cambodia. Part of the Nixon Doctrine was his assertion that there were no U.S. forces in Cambodia, apart from his brief "Incursion" from 1 May to 30 June 1970; however, by day and night, USAF Forward Air Controller aircraft liaised with "friendly" Lon Nol forces under NVA/VC harassment on the ground and guided U.S. air attacks on the Communist forces attacking FANK positions.

Lon Nol's Disappointment

Cambodia's Premier Lon Nol expected that Nixon would put U.S. soldiers on the ground inside Cambodia; however, aside from Nixon's brief and limited "Cambodia Incursion" by U.S. troops and armor units into eastern Cambodia from May 1 to June 30 of 1970, that was not to be. Upon being informed by Col Alexander Haig that there would be no U.S. boots on the ground, Lon Nol is reported to have wept. His hopes for salvaging the situation were at a low ebb.

Other than bombing campaigns, Nixon did approve 1.6 billion in U.S. military assistance that paid for material, arms, equipment, fast boats, river monitors, and landing craft for the Khmer Navy; also equipment, weapons, and training for the FANK's army, and aircraft and training for the KAF. Much of the naval and army training was done by Third Country Nationals (TCNs); the training required for the U.S. planes and helicopters was done in the USA and at bases in Thailand.



General Lon Nol

Nixon's quest was to provide what was most practical for FANK air, sea/riverine, and air forces with as limited an official footprint as possible so as not to provoke the ire of the U.S. Congress, already appalled by the U.S. incursion into Cambodia. U.S. bombing, where needed, was conducted day and night without USAF staff or aircraft being based in Cambodia itself.

Cambodia and the "Menu" Bombings

Per U.S. intelligence, the NVA/VC headquarters, Central Office South Vietnam HQ, known to the Americans as COSVN were directing the NVA/VC war effort in South Vietnam from bunkers along the Cambodian border sanctuaries, notably Area 353, the so-called "Fish Hook," an area of Cambodia that extended into Vietnam northwest of Saigon.

When President Nixon took office, he expressed his desire for U.S. troop withdrawals in South Vietnam. Consequently, General Creighton Abrams, Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) initiated a bombing request to General Earle Wheeler, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Abrams was concerned about the NVA/VC taking advantage of a troop drawdown, and reminded General Earle Wheeler, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, that intel expected a large-scale NVA/VC offensive soon. Abrams said that a concentrated B-52 attack on COSVN would have "an immediate effect on the offensive and will also have its effect on future military offensives which COSVN may desire to undertake." Thus, these areas were the targets of the first border bombings that came to be known as the "Menu" bombings.

Secrets

Wheeler met with the Joint Chiefs to authorize the bombings and sent the request to Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird, who passed it to the White House. The request was to be considered "by the highest authority," meaning the President. This response also insisted that "this matter be held as closely as possible by all channels and in all agencies which have access to it." Further discussion culminated in approval by President Nixon, who told General Wheeler and the Joint Chiefs, on a half dozen occasions, that nothing whatsoever about the proposal must ever be disclosed. Nixon was correct in his assumption that Congress would not allow him to bomb a neutral country.

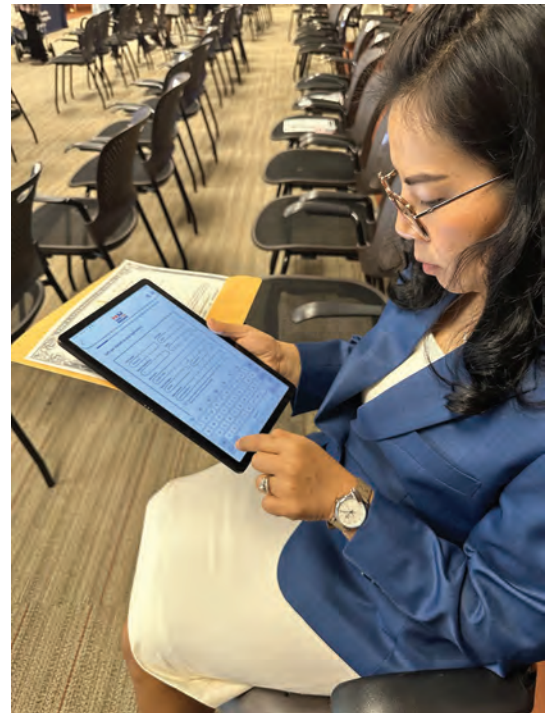
Part II of The "Other Secret War" will appear in the March issue of Mekong Express Mail. Ed.



TLCB's Newest Citizen!



Member Potjane Dubs (#02016), of Hanover, PA, earned her U.S. citizenship in November of this year. Potjane and her husband, Montaque (Monty) Dubs, have identified and facilitated several TLCB Assistance projects in a remote area of Northwest Thailand. The MEM staff salutes you!



Within minutes, Potjnee registered to vote, pictured above, and a few days later she had her *United States of America* passport, at left. A proud new citizen!

Reunion 2025: Nashville Tennessee!

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September 15th, 16th, 17th, 18th, 2025 (Monday through Thursday)*

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**REUNION DETAILS WILL START
IN THE MARCH ISSUE OF THE MEM**