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Project Lucky Tiger, 1966 to 1967 Part II

By Member Ron Kosh, Sgt, USAF

NOTE: TLCB member Ron Kosh contributed an article about his experiences in Project “Lucky Tiger,” which was initiated in 1966 to stand up (create) the 606th Air Commando Sq. at Hurlburt AFB, Florida. After several weeks of training there the unit moved to Nakhon Phanom Royal Thai Air Force Base (RTAFB), known as “NKP.” Ron’s Combat Control Team was formed up at Hurlburt, having been assembled from other Continental United States-based units (CONUS). The training at Hurlburt was 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.

The first part of this article was in the December 2024

issue of The Mekong Express Mail. That part covered his adventures in Thailand, primarily. Ron concludes his story here, in Part II.

His leg on the way to Laos was to Udorn RTAFB. From there he got an Air America ride to Vientiane’s commercial airport. At a satellite office of the Air Attaché of the U.S. Embassy—

Vientiane, he received an overview of the assignment and a Lao driver’s license, only for use as ID. Before leaving NKP, they were instructed to wear only civilian clothes, Levis, unmarked work-type clothing, or unmarked fatigues. They had to leave behind dog tags, Geneva Convention card, or anything else identifying them as a member of the military.



Ron, at right, with a pal, at 606 Air Commando Squadron headquarters.

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L-36 Attack

Undoubtedly the most memorable event of my period in Laos was the attack of L-36 (Na Khang) by the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) in early January 1967. It involved my being both on the ground there and in the air for many hours on successive days marking targets in

Lucky Tiger continues on page 3

Editor's Notebook

The Wonderful Assistance Program

The Thailand Laos Cambodia Brotherhood offers so much to its members, from its annual reunions to its personal accounts of its members' adventures, both from back in the day to their current activities; and I am sure each of us has their own favorite feature.

For me, it's the Assistance Program. Some time back in the 1990s when I first got comfortable with the internet, emails, and e-surfing, I began dialing into various sites supported by veterans who had served in special units during the Vietnam War. I found them interesting, especially if they had some connection to my time as the admin officer at a radar site in Phitsanulok, Thailand—Det 8 of the 621st Tactical Control Squadron, from September 1967 to August 1968; however, never so much that I became a regular member. That is until I came across TLCB's web page. What moved me to join was the group's Assistance Program, which supports educational aid to students and schools, particularly



Before and After

At *Lat Huong High School*, December 10, 2024. Paek, Laos.. TLCB Assistance put on a new roof and plastered the classrooms inside and out. See the full story in the June issue of the *MEM*.



in northeast Thailand and rural Laos.

During my year in Phitsanulok, I regularly worked with local schools, mainly assisting in their English language programs. Actually, for a while prior to joining the Air Force, I had taught junior high school English, although that was vastly different from what I did in Phitsanulok. I always felt that there was more I could have done, and that personal frustration has increased in the years since then. So, the discovery of TLCB's program was inspiring and the most important factor in my joining the Brotherhood.

Adding to the uniqueness of the Assistance Program is the wide and generous support that so many members provide. Take a look at pages 10 and 11 of this issue—one of the longest lists of contributors that has ever been published, at least during my tenure as editor, which goes back to 2012. Congratulations and thank you to all of you.

John Harrington

MEM Editor

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"It's for the kids...."

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Reunion 2025: Nashville, Tennessee

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its defense, and afterwards as the NVA regulars retreated after being repelled by the Royal Lao Army (RLA) on the ground. LS-36 was northwest of the Plain of Jars (PDJ), on the other side where we were the most in-and-out, sometimes as much as a couple of times a week. Its location was near a major Ho Chi Minh (HCM) Trail leg, and a real thorn in the side of the NVA because it had ground intel recon teams that would monitor “trail traffic.” Accordingly, it was heavily attacked by them several times, once while I was in country (January or February ’67). On the initial day of the attack, it was my turn to fly.

Weather at that time of year was typically thickly overcast and often foggy at ground level until mid-morning. Because of insufficient visibility, we seldom could get off very early at 20A. I awoke about 0600 or so that day and turned up the Collins HF radio in our hootch. Mike Lynch was on the air with an unusually urgent “London, London, London (L-36) to Paris (L-20A), over...” as the attack had just started. They needed help!

It was an intense bit to get down to the 20A strip, get an aircraft and pilot from the dispatcher, and put in our radios. We “pushed the envelope” considerably to get off as soon as possible. Once in the air, though, it was solid overcast above and almost no ground visibility all the way to 36. The NVA had good weather people! Once arriving at L-36, we orbited overhead with little hope of being able to thread our way in under the overcast. The likelihood was nil of being able to get any F-105 fighters down through it. I don’t recall who the Porter pilot was that day, but we were eventually able to thread our way in to actually land.

At that point, the ground attack had been mostly repelled, but not until after the NVA had actually come across the entire open area across from the strip. At one point earlier they had been halfway up the hill and well into the camp, almost to the 4.2 inch mortar that was in its center and was the heaviest on-site defensive piece! We landed while still catching some sporadic small arms fire from the tree line on the opposite side of the strip from the camp.

Lynch, career SOD case officer, and the other “Jerry Daniels,” then contract CIA, were ok, but one American civilian, Don Sostrum, a USAID civilian as I recall, who was from Washington state and a big guy, had caught a single AK round in the forehead. That was not his normal location, and he just had happened to spend the previous night there instead of returning to Sam Thong/L-20 across the mountain that we referred to as “Skyline Ridge,” from Long Tieng. I believe he had RON’d at 36 because of the weather. [Note: to RON is to “remain over night”]

A brief from Lynch, on what was understood to be the NVA retreat routes, began to open and Carlyle was also able to get in with another Porter. We separately went looking for targets that day and spent the next couple of days intensely at it. Although there was a low, thick overcast, some holes began to open, and a couple of flights of A-1s were able to get under, which gave the retreating NVA a lot to think about during their withdrawal.

It was eventually overrun a year or two after I left Laos.

Where Did It Go?

Another incident that comes to mind was far less dramatic, albeit more frustrating and accomplishing little. When we didn’t have sites to assist and when available fighters were assigned, we went looking for “trail-related” targets. At one point, either Carlyle or I, don’t recall who, spotted a very large



Royal Lao Air Force AT-28s. This was the fighter conversion of USAF T-28 trainers.

earth mover/bulldozer that was clearly visible in the opening along a major part of the Trail. This was fairly far north, in Sam Neua province and along one of the most heavily trafficked routes. Obviously, it was being used to regrade the road damage we were causing. It must have had engine issues because once spotted, it stayed visible for a few days even though they tried to cover it with tree branches, etc. On our alternating days FACING, Don and I took turns pounding it with multiple flights of F-105s as they were available, but none ever succeeded in getting a direct hit. Then, apparently, at night and on its own power, it was gone. It had a lot of large craters in the area to fill from the number of 500 pounders, and I recall one flight even had 1,000 pounders unloaded at it!

U-6 Beaver and its Mysterious Tubes

As mentioned previously, CASI Porters were used for the large majority of my missions. The exception was in an unmarked USAF deHavilland U-6 Beaver with Maj Peerson, air attaché from the embassy in Vientiane. His role was to know what the situation was “up-north” and presumably report that to the ambassador, et al. He was perhaps the only USAF person who actually had a legitimate presence in Laos, although his official “diplomatic” status certainly didn’t allow flying in support of the RLAF and RLA!

Occasionally, the Beaver had twin 2.75” FFAR rocket tubes hung on each wing, much as on an O-1. Installation in a closed hangar at Vientiane airport was done by ostensibly “civilian” (non-uniformed USAF) mechanics and armorers from Udorn who maintained the Royal Lao AF AT-28s. The International Control Commission also used the airport for its white H-34. When the tubes were installed, he rolled out of the hangar and took off just before daybreak and didn’t return until after dark.

In the right seat, I located targets and manned the radio with the fighters, which on those missions were usually RLAF AT-

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28s, with at least a flight leader who spoke English. On a couple of occasions, we might also get a few A-1Es out of Nakhon Phanom (NKP). Our U-6 rocket sighting “mechanism” was a vertical grease pencil line with crosshatches on his windscreen.

Since small arms and automatic weapons ground fire was not out of the question, and the U-6 had both a “wet” belly and all hydraulic controls, it was dicey, so the major was reluctant for a “target run” to “pop smoke.” Since he wanted to keep well off and often too high, it was unrealistic for me to be very accurate with the smoke. With the rockets and our “sophisticated sighting technology” our target marking effectiveness was somewhat better!

Peanut Butter for Lynch, Daniels, and “Eyhen”

I only recall the names of a couple of the CIA guys. Tony Poe was way up north and I only crossed paths with him once. I was in and out of L-36 frequently and got to see more of Lynch and Daniels. Those two also kept a pet — a marsupial something like a lemur, that was called an “eyhen” in either Hmong or Lao. It was docile, and very fat, probably because it always found a way of getting into the large peanut butter jar that was Mike and Jerry’s primary sustenance.

Missions and Strikes

The estimated number of actual strikes that I controlled during the period I operated as a FAC in Northern Laos, was approximately 75-80; perhaps more. A separate log of individual strikes was never kept. Fighter flights that I directed on strikes were sometimes two or occasionally four aircraft per strike. According to my AF Form 5 that I kept a copy of, I recorded a total of 179 missions in a variety of aircraft from that period in Laos. Of that total, based on the type of aircraft, there are 163 missions as a FAC. The forms show FAC sorties recorded under various mission symbols, although I don’t recall what the types represent for those 163 total FAC-related missions.

Monkeys and Free Time

Free time in the evenings at L-20A was mostly spent reading or talking with the five or six USAID or CIA guys who had the hootch adjacent to ours, and they kept a fairly large, caged collection of various kinds of monkeys for entertainment. Didn’t record nor recall names. One, though, may have been a guy named Scofield, but at this point I’m not certain. Another was the senior most agency SOD operations officer in charge, John Randall, although he had quarters elsewhere at L-20A. There was also a U.S. Army physical therapist, “Skip,” no recollection of his surname, from Tripler Army hospital, who was there for several weeks at the outset of my time. He had accompanied Gen Vang Pao back to Laos from Hawaii after the

general had been treated for his sustained wounds. I also recall a very senior agency guy who visited from Langley, Charley Gabler. Not sure of his role, but we spent some time chatting at length one night.

Carlyle and I had a two-room, wooden hootch that had a decent-sized common room for our radio, a table, and chairs. We shared a very small bedroom with a bunkbed. Meals were in a common “dining hall” across from our quarters. While the two of us had our own a hootch at 20A, occasionally one of us might go back to Vientiane for a day or two. I did manage to get back to NKP for a couple of days in late December, primarily because the weather was such that we weren’t able to get in very many missions; AND the Bob Hope Christmas show was going to be there!

Butterflies Grounded


In March or April of ’67 we were advised that the “Butterfly” FAC program was being suspended. No information was shared with us as to what had precipitated that. We had a few days to get our gear, radios, and weapons together and were told to skip Vientiane and go directly to Udorn and on to NKP. That was it—nothing more! And once we got to NKP—again nothing was communicated—zilch! Absolutely nothing was shared with us about anything; not about our performance as to whether it was a good, bad, or lousy job. Our NCOIC didn’t know anything either. He had been a bit surprised when we showed up and got “No” answers when he asked if



A “Lima site” base in Laos in 1967.

he should send some replacements. Eventually a few bits came out that a new FAC program was going to be set up. That was ultimately the Ravens’ program. We also eventually learned, via the grapevine, that an AAR had been submitted by the ABCCC controller on duty that day about our “very positive” contributions to the successful defense of L-36.

The AAR, which supposedly also included some recommendations of recognition, then wound up in Saigon on Gen Momyers’s desk. The general then found out that the two FACs who had been operating for several months in northern “Barrel Roll” were not only “non-rated,” they were also a couple of E-4s who had been directing “his jets.” At that point, the general made an immediate trip to Udorn and NKP to express his views personally as to how the FAC program was to be going forward. That visit was what led to our immediate recall and the “complete silence” we experienced!

It wasn’t long afterwards that our CONUS rotation dates were on the calendar. Our NKP tours were coming to a close and some of our replacements had begun to show up, including Bob Bartlett, Frank Anthony, Tom Royer, and John Huffman. Huffman, after his solo E & E, was one of the very last of the very few to be able to make it out of L-85, Phou Pha Thi, when it was overrun by NVA the following year. 

Ending the Vietnam War in an H-53

Part II

As told by Maj Gen Richard Comer, USAF Retired

Finally—Action!

After the fall of Saigon, in April of 1975, the 40th ARRS and 21st SOS helicopter squadrons, stationed at Nakhon Phanom RTAFB, Thailand, were preparing to depart Southeast Asia. Meanwhile, in the islands off the coast of Cambodia, Khmer Rouge forces had boarded the SS Mayaguez container ship as she passed through waters claimed by Cambodia. After the initial boarding, Mayaguez was anchored about 1½ miles off Koh Tang island where the Khmer Rouge boarding party had ordered the crew to anchor. The Ford administration decided that a rapid and decisive military response was called for.

Ordered to participate in the recapture of the SS Mayaguez on May 13th of 1975, H-53 co-pilot 2nd Lt Rich Comer arrived at U-Tapao airbase and he and the crew of Knife 12, commanded by Captain Barry Walls, were eager to get into the ongoing action, as described in the last issue of Mekong Express Mail, page 1. Up to this point they had either lacked a complete crew, were short of pararescue jumpers (PJs), or had no flyable helicopter due to maintenance problems and battle losses in the action that was already taking place. Finally their complete crew was provided with an operational aircraft.

General Comer continues his narrative:

The assistant squadron ops officer, Captain Vern Sheffield, finally said that 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 aircraft carrier USS Coral Sea, 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 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.

Paul Jacobs and his crew landed and parked a perfectly flyable H-53 at about 1300. It got refueled by the maintenance guys, who were going with us. Jesse, our flight mechanic, did a quick preflight inspection, and we took off with a pretty large load of people. This must have been after 1400 (2 PM). We tracked outbound from the U-tapao Tactical Air Navigation (TACAN) transmitter on the radial which pointed us toward Tang Island. Barry briefed the crew through the combat ingress checklist. Barry wasn't long on briefings of this type. He said that he

CH-53Ds landing



assumed everybody was competent in their jobs and knew their procedures. "Stick to them," he said, "and concentrate on getting the right things done and that's how we'll best be able to help out."

First time on a carrier deck.

I got all the radio frequencies set up and about 50 miles out of U-tapao I switched to the TACAN (navigation) frequency of the aircraft carrier. We heard a good bit of chatter on the radios and were listening hard to get up to speed on the situation. At about 100 miles out to sea from U-tapao, we had good radio reception and locked on to the ship's TACAN, showing it was about 35 miles further out. TACAN gives both the radial and the distance from the transmitter, providing a very accurate position fix. We made contact with the carrier and told them that we had some helicopter maintenance and extra crew members to drop off on their deck. They told us that they would "hot pump" us when we landed. Barry made the landing. It was the first time on a Navy deck for any of us and we made the best we could of what the hand signals meant. We had gotten a brief on the deck procedures and found our way through it. No doubt the Navy guys would have had a number of things to say about the AF crew they saw that day!

Then we took off and headed toward the island, 15 to 20 miles away. We got up on all the right radio frequencies and heard Lt Don Backlund, aircraft commander of Jolly Green 11, talking to the airborne forward air controller (FAC). The FACs had not been part of the original plan but had been called up from Korat when the first wave of helicopters encountered strong resistance, and three of the first four to land on the island, all in the 21st SOS, had been shot down. Backlund was telling the FAC that the marines and surviving crew members on the beaches were under fire and needed to get off the island. Several attempts to pick up wounded during the day had resulted in battle damage, which had put other helicopters out

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of commission. Backlund said, “The two or three helicopters still out here flying won’t last long if previous mistakes are repeated.” Backlund was really laying things out and said that it would soon be dark and the chances of successfully getting everybody off the island would be greatly reduced. Barry knew the FAC by name and mentioned that he was a major named Bob Undorf. Don Backlund challenged him to make things happen, and quickly, or he would only be the newly arrived on-scene commander of a miserable failure.

During that conversation, we had arrived on Jolly Green II’s wing and were joined now in a formation of two Jollys. There was also Knife 51, Dick Brims and his crew, with my crew’s original PJs, who were orbiting nearby and ready to work together, but not in the same formation. This was because different squadrons from different AF major commands didn’t fly formation with exactly the same procedures.

Jollies, a Knife, and Daisy Cutters

The FAC went to work, talking with the people on the beach, identifying their exact positions, and lining up the strike assets he had available. He called in an F-4 to drop a couple of bombs. The bombs went badly with one falling short of the island and the second landing long of the island. Both were closer to the Marines on the beaches than to any of the enemy. Undorf sent the F-4s home and asked who could hit a target. He then called in the AC-130 “gunship” to hit some of the spots near the marines on the east beach. After that, he cleared-in a flight of C-130s which were carrying 15,000 pound “daisy cutters.” Daisy cutter bombs had a long pole on the nose to make them detonate while above the ground. It was designed as an anti-personnel weapon, but could be used to blow holes in the jungle to create helicopter landing areas. The concussion of the bomb was designed to cut the trees off at ground level and to open a spot. The guys back at U tapao had sent for them and had sent them out to create the alternate landing zone if the beaches became unusable. One of the C-130s dropped at the far end of the island. I couldn’t think of a good reason for that as the Marines seemed to be trapped on the beaches and would be unable to move to the far end of the jungle island. But then, I was a helicopter co-pilot and what did I know about whether the Marines could push through or not? I woke myself up from these thoughts—I needed to concentrate on my own job, and finally, suddenly, it was time to do it.

Rock, Roll, Blaze—Ooops!

The shock wave from the bomb explosion made our helicopter rock and roll like a ship on a rough sea. Our SERVO caution lights came on, indicating our hydraulic flight controls had experienced low pressure and might be failing. Since the lights were caused by the turbulence and nothing else was wrong on the instruments, I reset the lights and completed the checklist items.

Lindorf called in Backlund’s helicopter to land on the East

beach and pick up all the Marines remaining there. We went in with them and Brims followed. As Backlund slowed and turned his helicopter to put its tail toward the trees just off the beach, we set up a slow circle over and around his helicopter. Backlund’s two side guns were both blazing away as they set down on the sand. I saw Brims’ helicopter on the other side



Wayne Fisk guides Marines

of the circle we were making over Jolly 11 and his guns were also blazing. Our guns shot out a couple of bursts but just short ones. TSgt Patterson was the lead PJ on board, and he had the gun on the left side. Sgt Rinehart was on the tail, and Sgt Styer on the right. Jesse had stayed in the seat. We were taking hits, a good number up the belly of the cabin, but I saw no damage indications on the flight instruments. Jesse was watching them closely, if my memory is correct.

I noted that it was starting to get dark and I reached down into my helmet bag on the left of my seat and got out my flashlight. When I did that, I saw my ceramic “chicken plate,” as we called our body armor. I had forgotten to put it on under my shoulder straps. I felt suddenly very vulnerable and wondered if this was the mistake which would get me killed. Stupid me! Getting these things right was my only job and I had left out something important.

Broken Copters and a Survivor

Backlund’s helicopter came out of the LZ and he called that he had wounded on board, the East beach was clear of friendlies, and he was enroute to the Coral Sea. We returned to our holding pattern about 4 to 5 miles off the island. Then Undorf, the FAC, told us to prepare for a hoist pick-up. There was one person left on the East beach in one of the shot-down helicopters.

We had seen the H-53 hulks on the first run and got a good look at them. One was sitting upright with the tail broken off and the other was farther out in the water lying on its side. Undorf said the survivor was in the one lying on its side. He called the AC-130 back in and cleared them to shoot everything on the beach. The gunship seemed to cover it well with

H-53 continues next page

sparkling rounds hitting all along the East beach. Barry had given me the flight controls in the holding pattern, and I had the primary radio. I told the FAC, "Request you expedite!"

It was now getting to be really dark. I imagined it was going to be a tough hover in the dark, out over the featureless water. I figured we needed to get all the fuel we could into the main tanks from the auxiliaries. If the aux tanks got punctured we wouldn't be able to pressurize them in order to get any of that fuel. So I began a fuel transfer to the main tanks and called it out on the intercom. Jesse had gotten out of the seat to run the



With modesty and dry humor, General Rich Comer told his fascinating life story at our 2024 Reunion in Pensacola, Florida.

hoist on the right side, which would also mean the right side gun would have to be swung out of the way and not used during a hoist pick up. Styer put on swim gear in case he needed to get into the water to help the survivor.

Shot gun

The AC finished his work and Undorf called us to go in for our hoist. I reached down beside me to get my chicken plate and tried to get it under my shoulder straps while still flying. Barry was briefing the crew on all that he could foresee. The chicken plate slipped and fell on my hand which was steering with the cyclic stick. Barry looked over and gave me a look which made me put the chicken plate back down on the floor beside my seat. We were now getting close and I began the approach with a nose up slowdown. Barry took the controls at just that moment and did a steep turn while slowing to put the tail toward the places where we thought the enemy positions were. Rinehart began firing the tail gun, which then jammed. He said, "The gun is shot!" This was a literal statement, as we learned later that a round had hit the gun in the ammunition feeder, which made our tail mini-gun useless.

We took a couple of rounds through the cockpit and I could hear bullet impacts in the fuselage. On the radio I heard Undorf calling out, "Fire." I looked at the engine instruments and they looked OK. I saw the fuel transfer lights were still on, so I quickly reached over and turned off the transfer switches,

cursing myself for leaving them on. I felt some more rounds hit us and looked toward Barry. He was hovering and moving the helicopter to the left as called for by Patterson. The shot-down helicopter was off to our left as we came to a hover. We needed to move about a hundred feet.

As co-pilot, my job was to stay alive

My seat armor had a wing on the left of the seat, putting it toward the shore where Backlund's LZ had been. All those former Marine foxholes were now full of angry Cambodians shooting at us. I felt myself sitting up straighter and even tucked in my chin a bit to put myself more behind the armor wing of the seat. I checked Barry and he was OK, but I kept thinking that if he got shot I had to be ready to take the controls. As co-pilot, my job was to stay alive in case Barry didn't. I saw Knife 51 come into the lagoon and hover just about 200 yards away and level with us. Their crew had knocked out all the helicopter's cabin windows on one side and crew members, to include our former PJs, were shooting at the shore with their personal weapons. They were putting out a lot of bullets all over that beach.

I been shot, I been shot!

Jesse, the PJ at the hoist, went "hot mike" when he saw the hulk below us, and took over the intercom, calling directions to Barry in order to move us over it. Barry said that the hoist was out the door and on the way down. After a bit he said the hoist was in the water and it was by the hulk. Jesse grunted loudly in the middle of his calls for "right two, down five" etc. Barry asked Jesse if he was OK, but Jesse just kept giving directions for about 20 more seconds. Then, Jesse seemed surprised, saying, "I been shot, I been shot; my leg, my leg!"

Styer was on the floor by Jesse and looking for a survivor—but there wasn't one that anyone could see. Styer pulled Jesse from the door and unplugged his intercom cord. Barry began the takeoff from a hover and somebody got the hoist coming back up and brought it back inside. I made the radio call that we had one crew member wounded and were coming out from the beach. Barry asked what heading to fly and I said that we could go to the USS Holt which had been near our former holding pattern. The Holt lit up and said they were ready to receive us. Rinehart and Patterson said that we were badly damaged, and they thought we were losing fuel. I looked at the gauges and it looked to me like the aux tanks were losing fuel. Barry said that the Holt's helipad was too small for us to park on and we would need to go to the USS Coral Sea where we could park and shut down. I made the radio call to the Holt that we were aborting the approach due to battle damage and would go to the carrier.

Barry was talking on the intercom to the PJs about how badly Jesse was hurt. I told Barry the heading to the carrier based on my memory of where it had been in relation to the island. I checked the TACAN and saw that the needle which should have pointed to the carrier was spinning around, instead indicating that we had no lock on the carrier's transmitter. I used my flashlight to look at the TACAN control panel, and it was set

H-53 continues on page 8

on the correct channel, but it wasn't working. I assumed it was damaged. Barry was still flying and talking with the guys in back. I changed the UHF radio to the carrier's traffic control channel. Barry asked me again what direction to fly toward the carrier. I told him we were going in the right direction. He said that we were going away from Thailand, not toward it, and the carrier better be out here or we were going completely wrong, and I replied that it *was* the right direction. He told me to tune up the TACAN and I told him it was set on the right channel but wasn't working. He told me to set the TACAN and he cursed some. He cursed a lot. Barry told me to fly the helicopter so he could check things. He used his flashlight to check the TACAN control panel, then confirmed it was on the right channel. I called the Coral Sea for landing direction and said we were damaged with one wounded aboard.

The ocean lit up, with the ship about 5 miles directly in front of us! Barry told me to make the landing. I made the approach to a hover beside the ship and followed directions to then slide sideways to park between two H-53s already shut down on the deck. It was challenging from the left seat, but I felt good to be the one landing. We tipped some to the right as we settled on the gear, learning later that the gear strut on the right was collapsed and the tires on that side were flat.

Battle Damage

As we shut down and hit the rotor brake, sailors were already carrying Jesse off the helicopter to take him to the ship hospital. After we got out of our seats, I looked at some of the bullet holes in the cabin. Rinehart said that he had laid behind the tail gun and used his personal weapon to fire back after his mini gun had failed. Both of the aux tanks had holes in them and there was some damage up around the rotor head. After about 10 minutes, our maintenance guys were all over the helicopter, saying they had to get it configured to go down the aircraft elevator or the Navy would push it over the side to clear the flight deck. They wanted to take off the rotor blades. Barry told them to go ahead and said the rest of us were going to the hospital to see Jesse.

We had a short visit with Jesse. The doctor said the leg had taken the punishment fairly well and the bone hadn't been damaged. Jesse was groggy but awake. As we went back to the flight deck we met Joe Gilbert. He said that we were to take Backlund's aircraft and fly back to U-tapao. Barry said that we had no flight mechanic and Joe told us to take Backlund's crew with us and put his flight mechanic, Harry Cash, in the seat.



We did that and took off in about 15 minutes, flying the helicopter we had originally taken to U-tapao two days before.

Right after takeoff, we heard Knife 51 saying he was going in to the West beach to get the last Marines. We were immediately confused, asking one another why we were going to U-tapao when it wasn't over yet. I told Barry that we should return to

**Maj Gen Richard Comer,
USAF Retired**



CH-53D "Knife 22" at Hurlburt AFB, in Florida.

the carrier and drop off all but a crew and go back to the island. Gary Weikel, Backlund's co pilot, asked over the intercom what we were going to do. If Knife 51 was getting the last Marines, what was left? I called them and asked what was left. Brims said that the copilot of the helicopter down on the East beach, Johnny Lucas, was still there and someone had to get him. Weikel said that Johnny Lucas, one of his best friends, was on the USS Coral Sea. Lucas had gotten on Jolly Green 11 when they picked up the Marines from the East beach.

We then heard Jolly Green 44 say that they were up from the Holt where they had put the Marines they had just picked up from the West beach. Jolly 44 was Bob Blough and crew who had gotten on a helicopter that had come in from NKP that afternoon. They had arrived to join Knife 51 just as we had headed for the Coral Sea after getting shot up on the island. Knife 51 said that they were airborne from the West beach with the last of the Marines and that Jolly 11 and Jolly 44 could head for U-tapao. *We did!*

Becoming a General

I chose to stay in helicopters for my career path. All the H-53s were absorbed into Special Operations (SpecOps) in 1986 as part of the aftermath of the "Desert One" failed Iran hostage rescue, in 1980. I went into the SpecOps business with them. Helicopter pilots weren't the outcasts in SpecOps that they were in the rest of the Air Force. I commanded a squadron in Desert Shield and Desert Storm. It went well and I got promoted to colonel, a big shock to most people who knew me! Later, I commanded a group and then a wing. Those went well, and I got promoted to brigadier. I did some staff jobs in SpecOps at the Pentagon and at Ft Bragg. I was still a one-star and was the vice commander of AF Special Ops Command when 9/11 happened. As a counter-terrorism guy, I was suddenly promotable again. I retired as a two-star. It went OK.

Right now, I'm a retiree who does some consulting, and I'm President of the Jolly Green Association. I recently had the opportunity to tell my stories to those members of the TLC Brotherhood who attended your annual meeting and reunion at Pensacola, Florida.



David John Geryak, 1944—2024

TLC Brotherhood Public Relations Chairman

David's obituary, provided by his widow, Carol:

David John Geryak was born July 5, 1944 in Buffalo, New York, to Mary Louise and John Joseph Geryak. He graduated from Kenmore East High School in 1962, where he played football, and then went on to attend Erie County Community College before joining the Air Force.

David was a New Yorker by birth and a Texan by choice, falling in love with the state after he arrived in San Antonio with the Air Force in 1963. More importantly, when he was transferred to Carswell Air Force Base Fort Worth, he met Janie Wiley. They fell in love and were married for 48 years until she passed away.

During the Vietnam War, he enlisted in the Air Force and persuaded his superiors to deploy him overseas. He spent much of his decorated military career in southeast Asia, receiving, among other medals, the Presidential Unit Citation, awarded for extraordinary heroism in action against an armed enemy.

Following his honorable discharge from the Air Force, David embarked on a successful career as a civil engineer and construction manager, working on major projects across the country. You can see his work in places as varied as the Dallas Arts District, the Glen Rose Nuclear Power Plant, and the DFW International Airport.

In his retirement, David traveled widely throughout the U.S. with his wife, Carol, whom he married in 2014. They shared a love of family and travel and toured together around the world. He was particularly fond of the land of enchantment, New Mexico.

David also spent much of his time working with and advocating for his fellow veterans. He was the Public Relations Committee Chairman for the Thailand, Laos, Cambodia Brotherhood. He also worked to help others, who had been exposed to dangerous chemicals, to get the health benefits they needed.

David passed away December 23, 2024, in Fort Worth, Texas.



He was predeceased by his parents as well as his first wife Janie.

He is survived by his wife, Carol Elliott; his daughter, Nicolle Little; his sisters, Deborah Snook (Gordon) and Joanne Shields (Timothy); his nephew, Jason Krasny; his niece, Barbara Corbetta; his grandchildren, Ryan, Logan, Kelsie, and Alexis; his step-children Martha, Marie, and Cecily; and his step-grandchildren, Michael, Daniel, Maryanne, Sophie, James, Margaret, Gregory, and Edith.

David was a kind, calm, and steady presence in the lives of everyone who knew him and will be dearly missed. A funeral was held January 20, 2025, at St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Catholic Church in Keller. He will be buried at Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio on a date yet to be determined.

Memorial donations in David's name can be made to the TLCB (Thailand, Laos, Cambodia Brotherhood), which mainly assists impoverished schools in remote areas of Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia; or donate to the veterans' organization of your choice.



LIKE us on FACEBOOK

*The Official Thailand-Laos-Cambodia
Brotherhood page*

Changed your address? ...eMail?

If so, please let us know so that we can update the official database and ensure that *MEM* issues and official mail get addressed properly. You can send an email to:

Treasurer@TLC-Brotherhood.com, or write to:

TLC Brotherhood

PO Box 60

Aspers, PA 17304.

INCLUDE MEMBER #!

Donors to Assistance, 2024/5 Season

NEW APPROACH: We have adopted the policy of displaying all donors through the *current dues season*, which always runs through midnight of the 31st of January. For this first issue under the new policy, we include all who donated from **January 1st of 2024 through January 31st, 2025**. In future March issues the donation period will begin on February 1st of the previous year.

DONOR CATEGORIES: Platinum, \$1000 and up; Gold, \$500 to \$999; Silver, \$100 to \$499; Donor, \$20 to \$99.

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Barr, John
Boas, Ray
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Smialek, Peter
Smith, Larry
Spahr, Tommy
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Stein, Ed
Stephenson, Darl
Stewart, Robert
Stockamp, Mike
Stretch, Wayne
Taranto, Monroe
Thompson, Everett
Tilton, Thelma



This year's quilt!

Get ready for the 2025 Reunion Quilt Raffle in honor of Rosie Wheatley. Shown here is the quilt that will be donated by Mark and Becky Schlieder once again. The June issue of the *Mekong Express Mail* will contain more details and a sheet of tickets.

Trinchero, Paul
Trout, Charles
Ungleich, Tom
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Finn, John
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Mastro, John
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Mayo, James
Melton, John
Middleton, Richard
Millaway, Raymond
Mulder, Donald
Mullen, Duane
Munoz, John
Mussolino, Paul
Nagy, Randolph
Nordberg, Stephen
Oconnor, Brian
Oubre, Carroll
Pack, Thomas
Parker, Kenneth
Parr, Jack
Peterson, William
Peterson, Larry
Piskun, Harry
Pocchiari, Joseph
Porter, Jim
Repar, Robert
Resseguie, Robert

Rhiness, Martin
Riedell, William
Riffe, James
Rivera, Reynaldo
Ryman, Randolph
San Roman, Gilbert
Sauer, William
Saxton, Ronald
Schreader, George
Seals, Roy
Seitter, Randolph
Shane, Ronald
Silva, Raymond
Sleep, Gordon
Smith, Richard
Smith, Vaughan
Squires, Everett
Stephens, Gregory
Stewart, Philip
Streeter, Terry
Strickland, Ted
Stucky, Scott
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Sysko, David
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Waller, Reuben
Weathers, John
Webber, Ronald
Weber, John
Wells, Paul
Williams, Fred
Williams, Luther
Witkin, Ken
Witt, Edward
Wolf, Richard
Wood, Thornton
Zola, Anthony

Seen at the Pensacola Reunion in September 2024



Above, POW/MIA table ceremony was the most meaningful we had ever seen. New chaplain Dan Pierce read the description as Jim Mayo performed the placing of the symbolic items on the table.

At right, we enjoyed a Blue Angels practice session, outside the Naval Air Museum.



At left, our guest speaker, retired general Comer, was a good sport and agreed to do the drawing for the quilt raffle. The quilt, donated again by the Schlieders, was won by Mike Potaski, above, who has been a member since 2001.



Samphou Gets A Granddaughter!

Mac Thompson's long-time driver, Samphou, still carries our SEA team around Laos on Assistance visits, and has helped us in many ways, including an intervention when the team was being expelled from a hotel in the Long Tieng region by a zealous officer. This is Samphou's second granddaughter!



FIND THE "SPECIAL" PATCH!

Can you locate a familiar patch here? Next time you're at the Jersey Shore, stop by and check out "The Flight Deck" cafe at NAS Cape May—see if our patch is still there. Members Sean Cunningham and Kristie Samples got them to add it last summer. Most of the patches are military and police.



Chaplain's Corner

Dan Pierce – Chaplain
dan.nkp.pierce@gmail.com
717-492-6297

New Year Greetings to my TLCB Brothers and Sisters, January 2025

As your newly elected chaplain, I want to say thank you for entrusting me with this position. I am humbled and honored to serve you in this capacity!

As per our title, we are a “brotherhood” and to me that entails caring, supporting, and encouraging one another. And so, as your chaplain I hope to fulfill that goal. Having served in full-time ministry I believe in the benefit and power of prayer, and so I would like to avail myself to you in this capacity. I appreciate those who have reached out to me already! You see, this is what makes this chaplain’s role fulfilling and “a labor of love” for me.

I think we all know that we are at that season of life where many of us are facing challenges, whether it be health or the loss of a loved one. I would count it a blessing to pray for anyone facing an illness, a recent loss, or an upcoming surgery. I have had the privilege of expressing condolences to the families of John (Jack) Mullins, Jennifer Stelling, the Bob Wheatley family, and most recently the David Geryak family.

Please let me know if you are aware of the passing of one of our members, a spouse, or with any prayer need you may have, as this all falls under “caring, support, and encouragement” for one another as a Brotherhood. Also, I am more than willing to send get-well cards or notes of encouragement to someone needing a “lift,” but I must know who they are, and so, I am soliciting your help!

Again, it is my privilege to serve you, so please reach out to me by phone, text, or email.

We had a most wonderful reunion in Pensacola, and I hope to see you in Nashville. Until then, I remain in your service,
Dan Pierce—
Chaplain



Official Notice

Nominations—2025 Board of Directors Election
Nominations period — April 1 through May 15

POSITIONS UP FOR ELECTION ARE:

Vice President
Secretary
Chaplain
Two Members-at-Large

Be sure the person you are nominating is willing and able to do the job.

Submit nominations to a committee member:

Roger Durant (Chair)—rdclays@aol.com

Les Thompson—les21@ix.netcom.com

Monty Dubs—DoubleTrouble250@yahoo.com



Newest Members in the TLC Brotherhood

The nine members listed below joined between the December 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
2090	Other	Cynthia	Pierce	Mount Joy	PA
2091	USAF	Donald	McCullough	Florence	AL
2092	USA	Clyde	Light	Bristol	PA
2093	USAF	Mario	Ramirez	Palm Bay	FL
2094	Other	Carol	Elliott Geryak	Ft Worth	TX
2095	USAF	Angelica	Pilato	Spencerport	NY
2096	USAF	Robert	Nichols	Sebring	FL
2097	Other	Rita	Durant	Cameron	MO
2098	USAF	Richard	Ropski	Omaha	NE

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

by Member Glenn Black

Editor's note: In the December issue we indicated that Glenn Black's article would be included in two parts; however, Glenn sent us some information that he thought should be clarified. As a result, we are including his comments as Part Two, and Part Three will be in the June issue.

Additional information from Glenn Black

Shortly before the coup in 1970, General Lon Nol, Minister of Defense and Prime Minister of Cambodia, sent word to China that he was suspending use of the Sihanoukville port by China and North Vietnam, thus ending the source of war materials via the Sihanouk Trail. At the time, Lon Nol told his commanders, "This ends Cambodian neutrality." It also enraged Prince Sihanouk, Head of State, then in France, and thus began the unraveling of Sihanouk's authority and ultimately culminated in the coup that deposed him.

Somewhat Approved

Per William Shawcross's book, "Sideshow," the U.S. never acknowledged any involvement in the coup, let alone U.S. approval. Frank Snepp, a CIA Strategic Analyst at the CIA Station in Saigon, had access to the Cambodia Reports Section in Saigon, where main operations in Phnom Penh were run, and mentioned that misinformation about events was fed to Sihanouk in France via Sihanouk's Queen Mother, apparently to discourage Sihanouk from returning to Cambodia. Based on Snepp's statements, it appears apparent that the CIA "somewhat encouraged" the coup; however, per "Sideshow," proof of the rumor was never substantiated. As agency guys and American officials might say, the coup was "somewhat approved." Everyone in Cambodia and elsewhere in the world believed it was a U.S. officially sponsored coup.

I'm not sure what difference it makes. The U.S. never officially admitted to involvement in the coup. Though certainly, feeding misinformation through the Queen Mother about the rioting and unrest in Phnom Penh and the turbulence



King Norodom Sihanouk, who kept Cambodia "neutral" as long as he could, while providing a virtual highway for Communist forces to supply their war.

in the National Assembly, may have caused Sihanouk to delay longer than he should have in France. That "misinformation," may have persuaded Sihanouk that to return was a risk to himself and his wife, Queen Monique.

Anyway, as they say, the cat's out of the bag; but I've read a lot of respected publications, and none has ever outrightly officially blamed the CIA for the coup. Rather, their authors could find no evidence that the CIA was overtly or covertly responsible for the coup; however, in the more subtle role of disinformation, the U.S., via the CIA, probably had a role, and they were well aware that there was a possible coup in the making. Personally, I never intended to imply that it was a U.S. approved coup; however, it was a timely coup and appreciated in the ruthless minds of Nixon and Kissinger who milked the situation for every advantage they could—which was with indifference in their support to people living under the Khmer Republic. Even with that said, substantial training, equipment, and military assistance were provided. Nobody could have foreseen how badly the war would eventually end—or its sad aftermath.

Rampant Corruption

I had hoped to avoid mentioning that controversy and the rampant corruption on the part of Lon Nol's younger brother,

Khmer Air Force continues next page



Pol Pot, Marxist ideologue whose effort to convert Cambodia into an agrarian Communist society killed about one fourth of the population, estimated at just under two million Cambodians. Pot became the dictator in 1976 and was deposed by Vietnam in 1979. He died of a heart attack in 1998, though there was a claim that he caused his own death to avoid being turned over to the United States.

Lon Non, likely responsible for the considerable sales and transfers of U.S. arms to the Khmer Rouge, making him one of the worst profiteers and sources of corruption of the war. The ineffective Commander in Chief of the Army, General Sosthene Fernandez, also had a profiteering brother. Of course, these two were not alone in this category, due to shortages, inflation, and the simple task of FANK soldiers to feed their families and themselves. For several years, the governor of Battambang bribed Khmer Rouge commanders to allow the Battambang rice crops to travel down Highway 5 to Phnom Penh—a considerable accomplishment.

A CIA paramilitary advisor, George Kenning, defended Governor General Sam Sek Iat of Battambang, but U.S. politicians and officials could not discern ostensibly “good” corruption from bad and hunting targets of corruption, finally got their way, and in late 1973 he was replaced. No rice went to Phnom Penh in 1974, and later in that year Sam Sek Iat was reinstated as Governor General. He also held that rank in the Khmer National Armed Forces. As the Khmer Rouge concentrated most of their offensive to take Phnom Penh, Highways 5 and 6 were closed by the KR units and it was too late to pull the bribery trick any more. It should be noted that Battambang Province never fell during the war, and for several days after April 17, 1975, those Cambodians who could, became refugees in Thailand

Honoring the Khmer Air Force Veterans

From my sources, this is the background situation of Cambodia’s progression from the onset of the Khmer Republic’s entry to the war on March 17, 1970 to April 17, 1975 in which FANK and the KAF operated, but my article wishes to honor the Khmer Air Force Veterans and their website—not to insult them with inconvenient truths. A lot of the early events took place simultaneously—the coup, the bombings, the deaths of the Vietnamese and Cambodians, and the increasing presence of North Vietnamese Army and Viet Cong units in Cambodia.

At the end of April 1970, a sizeable joint ARVN force began their preliminary forays into Cambodia that preceded Nixon’s incursion on the first of May with the effect that NVA units

were driven more deeply westward into Cambodia. There was no blocking effort. The US/ARVN’s offensive was purposely to drive the NVA/VC away from Vietnam’s border, with little concern for the consequences this would have on Cambodia. In the aftermath of the incursion, the two northeastern provinces that the Ho Chi Minh trail fed into were almost immediately taken over by the NVA/VC, after inflicting a military disaster to the untrained, under-experienced, and under-armed Lon Nol forces, trapping a sizable number of them along the Vietnamese border.

One Disaster After Another

The U.S. Army and ARVN helicopters mounted an air operation to extract the surviving soldiers, flying them to South Vietnam. From there, they were later sent back to Phnom Penh. So, one disaster followed another from the very start of FANK’s engagement with the NVA/VC forces. Like all wars, a lot of events happened and were superseded by other dire emergencies before the immensity of the preceding disaster could be accurately assessed. In 1972, taking a page from Nixon and Kissinger’s playbook, the NVA/VC began their own “Khmerization” of the war, turning Cambodian operations over to the now trained and supplied Khmer Rouge units, thus enabling the NVA/VC to concentrate efforts against South Vietnam. The war in Cambodia thus became a civil war fought by Khmer Rouge and an inadequately led or supported FANK.



NOTE: we asked Glenn about this photo of a desolate Phom Penh, which Pol Pot evacuated to force the Cambodians into the agrarian life style he envisioned. Glenn replied:

For several years after the Khmer Rouge period the city remained empty, during which the Vietnamese soldiers looted the residences of most of the city, causing a lot of animosity among the Khmer.

During the KR’s evacuation of the cities some people tried to remain in their homes; probably many old people and younger ones who hid and somehow survived. The KR killed them

where they found them. Many homes used a porous floor tile and one occasional experience when visiting the old buildings was to look down and see the imprints of where someone had melted into the floor tile. Once in 2000 at the customs office in Phnom Penh, to obtain a temporary export permit for a motorcycle ride to Thailand, I saw one of these. While I waited, gazing at the floor, I realized there was the faint imprint of part of a leg, buttock and side of a person’s back soaked into the floor. I guess the director of customs at that post thought folks wouldn’t notice, or the cleaner wasn’t given any bleach. I saw another such imprint in a friend’s house in Battambang. In the early 1990s I often wondered if I walked with spirits.



Reunion 2025: Nashville Tennessee!

**Thailand Laos Cambodia Brotherhood
Annual Meeting and Reunion**
September 15th, 16th, 17th, 18th, 2025
(Monday through Thursday)

Tentative Schedule:

Monday, September 15th: Registration at noon, meet and greet. Evening meal on your own.

Tuesday the 16th: Transportation to downtown Nashville and board the "Trolley" for an all-day tour of Nashville with tour guide. Evening meal on your own, with many super options!

Wednesday the 17th: Lunch cruise on the General Jackson Riverboat, including meal and entertainment, lasting approximately 2 1/2 to 3 hours. Return to hotel where our evening meal will be provided, prior to the annual Assistance Auction.

Thursday the 18th: Annual Meeting of the TLC Brotherhood, Inc., in the morning and president's banquet, with guest speaker and quilt raffle drawing in the evening. Afternoon activities are still in the planning stage and will be announced in the June issue and on www.TLC-Brotherhood.com.



The "General Jackson" riverboat on the Tennessee River (option).

Hotel amenities include:

- FREE shuttle to and from the Airport, 24Hrs
- FREE Parking and WI-FI
- Group Rate \$134 per night plus taxes
- Cancellation policy: 48hrs prior to your reservation date to avoid penalty
- Hot chef's Breakfast with eggs cooked to order
- RBG Bar and Grill Open 7 Days a week. 6am-11pm

RESERVATIONS: 615-889-9090

Radisson Hotel Nashville Airport
1112 Airport Center Drive
Nashville, TN 37214

A great way to see Nashville--the **Trolley**. This optional tour will take us to the best attractions for a guided tour of Music City USA! You can get off and on the Trolley as often as you like to visit things like the Country Music Hall of Fame and Ryman Auditorium, the famous home of Grand Ole Opry from 1943 to 1974.



TLCB BENEFIT NOTE: Early room registration guarantees the TLCB a complimentary hospitality room. This could be a significant expense so please get your hotel reservations in early.

- **Cancellation:** You have 48hrs prior to your reservation to cancel without penalty.
- **Excellent property description YouTube video:** <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o2mXOEPAP9w>
- **Reunion questions:** Contact Ray Boas: raymar711@gmail.com
- **Firm schedule and more details:** See the JUNE issue of the *Mekong Express Mail*.