

MEKONG EXPRESS MAIL



The newsletter of the Thailand-Laos-Cambodia Brotherhood, Inc. Volume 18, issue 4

WWW.TLC-Brotherhood.com

Strong Attendance at the 2017 TLCB Reunion

2nd-highest attendance ever, reaching just under 100 at the Saturday banquet.

* * *

The following presented by Robert Wheatley, at the memorial service on September 23, 2017

A few months ago I was asked if I'd be willing to share some of my thoughts at the reunion on what the TLCB means to me, and I was honored to do so. I guess I might best begin by going back forty-nine years to my return from Thailand in late 1968. Returning via Travis Air Base for separation after having completed four years of active duty, it was to be a bittersweet homecoming. Fifteen years ago, I wrote a poem about it, and I'd like to share it with you here. I call it...

No Hero's Welcome

Silver wings of Freedom Bird;
Dip gently t'ward the land.
The moment we've been yearning for;
At long last now at hand!

Can it be... I'm really here?
It just seems so unreal!
I guess the years I've been away at war;
Have made it hard to feel.

Barely breathing, cabin hushed;
Through porthole glass we peer;
For our first glimpse of home again;
The land we love so dear.

Now, through shroud of milky fog;
The Golden Gate appears.
Dare I believe I'm really back?
Can I release my fear?

Touchdown brings a chorus of;
Enthusiastic shouts.
In rev'rent silence, we grab our gear;
Now one by one, file out.

The stews were great, God love their hearts!
"Welcome home!" she says to me.
I move past her, down the steps;
As if I'm in a dream!

I feel the tarmac 'neath my feet;
The sun and wind upon my face.
Yes, I guess I'm in The World again;
By fate or Heaven's grace!

No Welcome continues on page 4

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Newest Members in the TLC Brotherhood

The 15 members listed below joined between the last issue of the MEM and the 1st of December. You can find more information on our website database. The Mekong Express Mail wishes you all a hearty "Welcome Home."

No	Branch	Last Name	First Name	City	State
1808	USAF	Szczepura	Lynnette	Orange Park	FL
1809	USAF	Gardner	Chrisopher	Wilton	CT
1810	USA	Parr	Jack	Tampa	FL
1811	USAF	Helwig	Dene'	East Amherst	NY
1812	USA	Taranto	Monroe	Ponte Vedra Beach	FL
1813	USAF	Skinner	Paul	Xenia	OH
1814	USAF	Jones	John	Niceville	FL
1815	USAF	Green	Thomas	Tallahassee	FL
1816	USAF	McKinley	James	Cameron	MO
1817	Other	Patton	Patricia	Stow	OH
1818	USAF	Rose	George	Carolina Beach	NC
1819	USAF	Harmor	Gary	Vacaville	CA
1820	USAF	Howey	Linda	Medford	MA
1821	USAF	Rowland	Barry	Sherrills Ford	NC
1822	USAF	Myers	Robert	Pocatello	ID

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Brotherhood**

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TLC Brotherhood, Inc.

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2016-2017, showing year of term end*

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Vice President: Les Thompson (Reunion Committee) (2019)

Secretary: Paul Lee (2019)

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Chaplain: Debbie Stein (Memorial Committee) (2019)

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Ed Miller (2018)

"Willi Pete" Peterson (2018)

George Shenberger (2019)

John Sweet (2019)

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Communications Committee: Jerry Karnes

Exchange Shopkeeper: Thelma Tilton

History Committee: John Lorenzen

Membership Committee: Gerry Frazier

Public Relations Committee: "Willi Pete" Peterson

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Payments to the TLCB

Via website—uses PayPal, which accepts credit cards.

By check—make checks payable to "TLC Brotherhood, Inc."

Write payment purpose and member number on check.

Mail to:

TLC Brotherhood

P.O. Box 343

Locust Grove, GA 30248

Reunion 2018: Biloxi, Mississippi

Editor's Notebook:

Coming Home and Telling Our Stories

Coming Home

When those who attended the TLCB September Reunion began their visit to the Air Force Museum at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, long-time member Robert "Bob" Wheatley was asked to speak about what TLCB meant to him. His remarks, which are the opening (on page 1) of our report on this year's Reunion, struck strong emotions for those present and stirred their memories deeply, mine included

I could recall some of the same excitement that Bob described as his charter 707 approached the west coast, passed over San Francisco, and prepared to land at Travis AFB, about to be back in the States after a year away, a year with little more than handwritten letters from our families, looking forward to being back with them for a while. However, although I returned from Thailand at about the same time of the year in 1968, the next part of my arrival was a decided contrast. Those of us on that day in late August received no warning or cautions about wearing our uniforms in public or being scorned by anti-war protestors. In fact, I hopped a bus into San Francisco as quick as I could, found a modest hotel, walked around the streets, ate a



Author Bob Wheatley delivering his "Welcome Home" poem at the Air Force Museum memorial garden, by the plaque dedicated by the TLCB in 2007. Looking on are Chaplain Debbie Stein and Board Member George Shenberger.

without incident.

Now, let me rush to emphatically say that I am not challenging Bob Wheatley's homecoming story. Bob is one of the first TLCB members I met at the first Reunion I attended, in Washington, DC, in 2011. He has written for the *MEM* on several occasions and he is recognized by the membership for his deep integrity. There is no questioning his words.

Still, his story told at Wright-Patterson surprised me enough that I spoke to several other members over the next few days about their coming home experiences. The responses were varied. A number enthusiastically told me that their arrival at Travis was similar to Bob's and they were cautioned about making their military status clear, and as a result hurried to their homes or their next assignments. At the same time, almost as many of the small sample I spoke with said their arrival was more like mine, uneventful, certainly not a rousing or joyous welcome, but neither was it hostile.

I spent about two weeks of leave in my hometown before heading off to missile school and slightly more than two years at Davis-Monthan AFB outside Tucson. I guarantee there were no "hail the conquering hero" celebrations held in my honor. However,



Not like the 1970s. The Greeting Crew was all smiles and very efficient. At left, Marie Boas and at right, Virginia Vettel. Photo from Ray Boas, who received much well-deserved praise for an exceptionally good job as reunion chairman.

meal, and sat in the hotel bar for several hours, had some drinks and went to bed, all the while in my 1505s. In the morning, still in uniform (which allowed me to fly at half fare), I got a flight to Kennedy in New York, where my parents met me, grabbed my duffel bag, and headed home to Connecticut. All

Editor continues on page 5

No Welcome *continued from page 1*

“Your government thanks you for your service!”
(The debriefer drones his lines.)
Just one more thing before you go;
We’ll take no more of your time.

Your fathers and your uncles, brave;
were greeted with parades.
But we’re living in a different time;
For you, no accolades.

What’s more....
That uniform you’ve proudly worn;
For all these many years;
May be a liability;
When back amongst your peers.

For things have changed while you’ve been gone.
It’s not what you recall.
It seems the world is up-side-down;
Not like it was at all.

For all the times you ached for home;
A loved one’s gentle touch;
For all the times you thought of them;
And missed them, oh, so much!

For ev’ry day you slaved away;
And dodged incoming fire;
For ev’ry night you walked the line;
And stared out through the wire;

Someone else has burned our flag;
The flag you’ve well defended.
And here at home, the world you’d known;
Has completely been upended!



Above, the TLCB memorial plaque that was dedicated in the Memorial Garden at the AF Museum in 2007.

So, before you board that freedom bus;
Set foot outside the gate;
Best change into your civvies lads;
Or face their scorn and hate!

You see...
They’re spitting on our soldiers now;
No Hero’s Welcome will you find.
And the honor that you thought you earned;
Well...that was all just in your mind.....

Coming Home and Why I Joined the TLCB

And so, rather than spending a few days in San Francisco as I’d planned, I went directly home. Once there, I found that when I tried to share my experiences with friends and former classmates I was mostly greeted with looks of disinterest—even some of disdain and disapproval. People in general, weary of the war, didn’t want to hear about it—didn’t even seem to care.

Worst of all, although my DD214 includes the Vietnam Service Medal and Vietnam Campaign Medal among my awards, “boots on ground” Vietnam vets I encountered seemed to look upon me as a counterfeit war veteran, a wannabe, having “only” served in Thailand. What right do you have to say you are even a Vietnam veteran?” they asked. I had one grunt tell me that he would die for any of his in-country REMFs, but he wouldn’t cross the street to help me. I had to chalk his attitude up to ignorance.

Still, words like that cut deep. Swallowing hard, I resolved to simply put it all away, shove it down into the deep recesses of consciousness and just get on with life.

Long buried, but certainly not dead, almost thirty years later it all came bubbling back up. I felt compelled to begin a search for others who might have had a common experience. Is there anyone else out there like me? I wondered. Thankfully, a new thing called the Internet had opened up new avenues to aid in my quest.

In short order I linked up with a handful of guys of common background who were getting together an informal organization they were calling the Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia Brotherhood, and to my delight, they wanted ME to join them.

After wandering for so long in the wilderness in complete isolation, in 1998 I suddenly found myself among brothers who understood, and most importantly, valued my service and accepted me as one of their own! At long last, thirty years after my return, I was finally home!

And so in closing, I want to say to all of you—

***Welcome Home, Brothers!
Welcome Home!***

Editor *continued from page 3*

did any of us in those days really expect that? Most of us had left a year before to be part of a War that was well under way, and returned from that War without its end really in sight. I got together with friends, some who had seen duty in Vietnam and who frankly envied my “safe” time in Thailand, and others who were expecting to go “over there” themselves. My civilian friends were, to a person, interested in my experience. In my remaining Air Force days, in Tucson and while taking courses at the University of Arizona, a few times I was challenged about my service, but never violently. However, a few of the TLCB members I talked with last September said they were treated with hostility, and two said they were spit upon. And some whose experience was more like mine, admitted they knew other veterans similarly abused.

It is nearly universally recognized that veterans of the long slog of the Vietnam War, whether in Nam itself, or other parts of Southeast Asia, came home to, at best, an indifferent country. For the most part, we have published our members’ stories about their experiences in SEA, or quite often about their emotions if they returned to the places they once served. However, we have not carried much at all about “Coming Home.” *I would like to hear from as many of our membership as possible about their “Coming Home” experience and see a regular series of such stories appearing in the MEM.* I guarantee if you write it, we will publish it.

More About Our Stories

Each time we start to put together an issue of the *MEM*, the staff (me and Thelma Tilton, the assistant editor, and Bill Tilton, the composition and production chief) experience an initial feeling that we won’t have enough material. Usually, not long after, we’re trying to figure out what we can put off till the next issue. Yet, every once in a while, we realize that we are actually short a few pages. That happened just recently, and as I was bemoaning our fate, Bill offered that he had kept, or perhaps, recreated a diary for a good deal of his time at Nakhon Phanom back in the day, and asked if I’d be interested in what he called “His First Trip to Bangkok.” I jumped right on it, and you’ll find it on page 12.

The surprise is it was not at all what I expected and I found it warm and moving. (I’m not sure I’d want to offer an honest account of my first visit to Bangkok). But, the lesson of Bill Tilton’s memoir is that I’ll bet that many of you have some notes or mementos of visits to Bangkok, or Chiang Mai, or of many other places that would make good copy for the *MEM*. As I’ve said many times, there are no uninteresting stories and, to a member, you can write better than you think. If you can’t, we’ll be willing to help, but that probably won’t be needed. Send them in!

John Harrington
MEM Editor
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It Happened at Dayton



I Won Rosie’s Quilt!

Note—we love Rosie’s quilt!

Just a few minutes earlier (after a trip down the hall), I asked Rosie if they had had the drawing for “my” quilt yet. If you remember me laughing like a clown when my name was drawn, that is why.

Here is a photo of this lovely quilt, proudly placed and in use.

Duane Mullen

At the Reunion—

First time attending

James Enockson, St. Charles, Illinois
David and Sharon Hager, Fenton, Michigan
Chris Hellgren, Louisville, Kentucky
Gilles Hughes, Ridley Park, Pennsylvania
Duane and Pat Mullen, Sidney, Ohio

New members attending

T.B. “Junior” Davis, Bluffton, Ohio
Bob Dias, Warsaw, Tennessee
Mike and Jeannie Oubre, Dallas, Georgia
Pat Harley Patton, Stow, Ohio
Chris and Kaye Tilton, Westlake, Ohio
John Weber, New Castle, Delaware



At Dayton continues on page 6

It Happened at Dayton! ~~ continued

A Special Flag

With rubber gloves to protect it, two AF Museum workers display the last U.S. flag to fly over Nakhon Phanom Royal Thai AFB, which was presented to the museum in 2011 in the name of the TLC Brotherhood. Donated by MSGT Chuck Gunter, who turned over the final equipment to the Thai Air Force in the summer of 1975, the flag was presented by Ray Boas to Director, LGen John Hudson, with a letter from President Frank Marsh requesting that the flag be placed on display. So far that request has not been granted, but the flag is well protected and identified.



Ed Miller and Ray Boas arrived for the photoshoot on time, but the main group had already had the photo taken and had departed. That photo included all reunion attendants who had served at NKP during the Vietnam War. We hope to include it in a future issue.

At Dayton continues on page 8

"We are not alone," is the photographer's title for this shot of military reunions being held at the same time in our hotel. Photo by Ken Schmidt.



Above, auction goods pile up in the Nipa Hut like presents beneath a Christmas tree. The auction this year raised \$5550, and the quilt raffle raised an impressive \$2689. In addition, Randy Jenness ran an ad hoc 50/50 raffle. Winner Les Thompson donated back his half and we raised another \$700 for the kids! We all got a charge out of Randy's enthusiasm and helpfulness.



Above, reunions are a great opportunity to renew old friendships. Thelma Tilton greets Cheryl, at left, and Ron Bogota, at right. Reunion photos by Ed Miller.



At left, TLCB Public Relations Committee's special display commemorating the now-recognized service of MSGT James Calfee at the Battle of LS-85 in Northern Laos

New Member Profile

Monroe J. “Doc” Taranto



Doc today..

Vung Tau, providing communications to U.S. positions in the Mekong Delta provinces, as far south as Ca Mau.

My second tour was in 1968 and 1969, assigned to the 2nd Signal Group, (during Tet), once again providing wideband and telephone communications systems in III and IV Corps. Late in that tour I was transferred to Bangkok and the Joint (Army, Navy, AF) Cutover Working Group that provided engineering services for the new SE Asia Automatic Telephone System

I am a retired Army Signal Officer, and served 30 years in assignments all over the world, especially Vietnam and Thailand. (Picked up my nickname while in Pre-Veterinary School).

My first tour was in Vietnam in 1965 and 1966 where I served with the 39th Signal Battalion working in III and IV Corps, based in Saigon then

(SEA-ATS). This involved activating nine large tandem switching centers, 3 in Thailand and 6 in Vietnam, connecting to 61 telephone exchanges in Thailand, Vietnam, Vientiane, Phnom Penh, plus some other comms links into Laos.

From 1969 until 1971, I stayed in Thailand with the U.S. Army Communications Engineering Agency supporting U.S. – Thai bases with microwave, tropo-scatter radio, telephone, and cable systems throughout the country.

Returning from Thailand in 1971, I served with various communications organizations in Maryland, the NATO Communications Agency and the Army CONUS Information Systems Engineering Command, retiring in 1986. I continued working in industry until final retirement to Ponte Vedra Beach, Florida in 2000.



Doc in jungle fatigues.

I am married with four grown children and 12 grandchildren. My wife was born in Thailand and we visit there each year.



New Member Profile

Tony Iglesias

A little about me personally.....I am 67 years old and live in Asbury, NJ. I was born in Spain and came to America, arriving the day before my 5th Birthday, and grew up in Newark until my enlistment into the USAF in 1970. I am retired from the telecommunications industry and live with my 2 children and my wife Heather. I love music, both playing and listening, golf and all sports, and I love to travel. I just returned from Spain a few weeks ago.

My story...

The lottery of 1969 gave me a high number. I was destined to be drafted within four months. After much thought, and after talking to my uncle who flew bombers in World War II, I decided to enlist in the Air Force. I wanted to work, or somehow be associated with airplanes—maybe be a jet engine mechanic. Off to Lackland Air Force Base in Texas for basic and on to Sheppard AFB for Reciprocal Engine Mechanics training. Three months later, I had orders to Takhli, Thailand, and would be shipping out in September 1970.

I Arrived in Thailand as part of the 56th FMS group and quickly fell in love with the country and its people. After 3 days in Bangkok (WOW), I flew to Takhli RTAB. The first thing that stood out was that there were very few reciprocal engine aircraft on the flight line. In fact, it was full of F-105s being sent to other bases and back to Kansas. I was assigned to work on Aerospace Ground Equipment (AGE) as there were no planes for me to work on. Obviously, the base was closing down to some extent and I waited to see where they would send me. Meantime, I got my first taste of “downtown” and enjoyed everything it had to offer. In November, I received my orders heading northeast to the Thailand/Laos border to Nakhon Phanom (NKP), a



At right, Tony after a QU-22 mission. Photos provided by the author.

Iglesias continues on page 10



It Happened at Dayton! ~~ continued

Above, all who attended in 2017, except for Ed Miller, who created this panorama by stitching together photos taken by Ken Schmidt. Group is at the monument where the “organized” TLCB began.

In September of 1998, a group of Internet pen-pals who called themselves “the TLC Brotherhood“ gathered at the Air Force Museum, on this very spot, and voted to create a formal organization.

Shown at right are the seven members present this year who were also in the photo taken at that spot, except that they stood on the other side of the monument. From the left, Jim Roth, Jerry Frazier, John Sweet, Paul Lee, Jim Kidd, Bill Tilton, and Bob Pruiksma.



At left, entrance to the United States Air Force Museum. Most of one day was devoted to the opportunity to take it all in, which obviously is impossible. Now comprising four vast hangar-shaped exhibit halls, the museum covers military aviation from its beginnings through all the major conflicts U.S. aircraft have been involved in, plus much more. You have to take it in measured doses, or museum fatigue, a temporary affliction, sets in!





Dues Increase for First Time Ever

Board of Directors Enacts Annual Meeting Proposal

At the November 6, 2017 meeting of the Board of Directors of the TLC Brotherhood, Inc., the annual dues rate was increased by \$5.00 from \$25 to \$30. The bylaws of the TLC Brotherhood prescribe that dues changes become effective on the 1st of January of the year following adoption. Therefore, dues paid after December 30th, 2017 shall be \$30 per year. As I explained in the TLCB Forum, if you paid dues prior to January 1st, the years you paid for are considered *paid*. There will be no additional charge (nor would there be a refund if dues had been reduced.)

Since dues are officially payable in January of each year, the dues notice you find in this issue was prepared on the assumption that you will pay during that month. If your dues are received before that date, and you pay \$25, you will add one year to the length of your paid membership, as usual. If you paid \$30, for dues received before midnight of December 31st, five dollars will be considered a donation to Assistance unless you specifically request a refund. In that case you will receive the refund by check no later than January 15th.

This change came about when, at informal gatherings in Dayton, a number of members began discussing the advisability

of raising our annual dues to keep up with inflation and enable the organization to do more toward meeting our objectives. As treasurer, I brought this up as part of my report to the membership during the annual meeting of the TLC Brotherhood, Inc., and in an unofficial vote, the increase was enthusiastically endorsed by those present. The vote was “unofficial” because the bylaws prescribe that the board of directors sets the dues amount. As promised, the issue was raised at the next meeting of the board of directors and an increase from \$25 to \$30 per year was adopted.

No dues change should be made without a reason or purpose, and the board gave one to the members at Dayton. As a result, this December 2017 issue of Mekong Express Mail will be the last one printed in black and white and shades of gray. We are pleased to announce that starting with the March 2018 issue, our “MEM” will print in full color. We hope this will not only please our members and make the articles more vivid, but will encourage MORE members to continue to spread out copies to attract new members to our wonderful organization.

Bill Tilton, Treasurer



Iglesias continued from page 7

place nobody seemed to want to go to for what reasons I was not sure.

I arrived in NKP and was struck by its beauty seen from the C-47 and marveled at the Mekong river and the Laotian mountains across from it. Initially assigned to engine teardown (preparing large reciprocal engines for transport back to the U.S.). I was quickly TDY assigned to the 554 Recon Squadron, down the flight line to work on QU-22s. As part of the Igloo White action with Task Force Alpha (TFA), these small aircraft would relay signals from the various sensors dropped on the trail back to NKP for trail interdiction. There were many mechanical issues with these small aircraft and, in my opinion, they were not designed for the weather and conditions of Southeast Asia.

One day, a QU had crashed and I was assigned, as part of the recovery crew, to bring the engine back to base to get it analyzed. Tech Reps were dispatched from the states and sent to Thailand by Beechcraft to try and find out what was causing the failures. We finally had one they could dissect. A Jolly Green HH53 transported the team, along with a dozen Thai armed guards, to the crash site over the river in Laos. We were able to retrieve the equipment and tow the engine back to base, hanging it from the bottom of the chopper.

After my initial one-year tour, I extended for an additional year and spent that year working on the QU airplane until they were decommissioned in '73. On my free time I was also the goal keeper on the base soccer team. We'd play versus the Thai teachers of NKP and students from across the river in Thaket, Laos, along with other teams in the area. We were actually pretty good and had crowds in the hundreds to watch. It was a time I will always remember. I would spend any of my free time in town with the Thai people, and after two years, I could hold my own speaking the language.

The one sad memory I do have was having to watch a QU-

Tony playing soccer, with the Mekong River and the mountains of Laos in the background.



Above, recent photo of Tony with one of his two sons.

22 bird go down right after takeoff at NKP. I remember like it was yesterday—I gave Lt Lanny York from Muscatine, Iowa, the “thumbs up” as he taxied off the runway. He crashed shortly after takeoff, approximately nine kilometers from base in August 1972. He was flown to Japan where he gave the ultimate price for his country, falling to his burns and wounds. RIP Lanny.

I spent the last 2 years of my enlistment at Maxwell AFB in Alabama, where I had the honor to see some returning prisoners of war in late '73. One exciting adventure I had at Maxwell was flying in a small Lear jet to Charlotte airfield in North Carolina to change a carburetor on a C-123. The Lear jet was taking a few officers to Charlotte from Maxwell and they put me on that jet with four full birds and a two-star general. I realized when I got to Charlotte that after I replaced the carb I was to fly back in that plane back to Maxwell. I never had to fly on an aircraft that I personally just had worked on, so that was unique.

I enjoyed my time there, especially seeing former United States Attorney General John Mitchell on the golf course maintenance crew, as his “punishment” for his crimes. They had a real nice cushy jail there for high-profile criminals.

I have worked with AT&T and Lucent Tech for 25 years, working in the Asia Pacific area, and I am now a retired stay-at-home dad, and I play golf when I can. Thanks for hearing my story.



At The TLCB Exchange

<http://www.shop.tlc-brotherhood.com/>

TLCB WARMTH - They make great gifts!



The cold season is upon us. Keep yourself warm and treat yourself to our new, matte black "Secret War" travel mug, complete with a beautiful, colorful TLCB Logo. Sip your coffee or chocolate and enjoy!

We took 25 of these to the reunion at Dayton and sold out. But we still have a good supply. Get them while you can.



Also for sale are our warm hats in several styles, each having "Secret War" embroidered on the back. We have two types of military: plain or camo. Logos are "subdued" on the camos, and blend beautifully with the mottled look. **Check out the options at www.tlc-brotherhood.com.**

And of course, we have the traditional navy baseball types with the TLCB logo or your base name as well. Please visit our website to see which suits you best. If you can't make up your mind, buy one of each!



Notes from My Diary: April 1966

Arriving at NKP ~ First Visit to Bangkok ~ Bittersweet Return to NKP

By Bill Tilton

April 1, 1966:

I arrived at Nakhon Phanom TDY from South Vietnam to be a forward air controller (FAC) in a little detachment that was shortly to become the 23rd Tactical Air Support Squadron, known as “Project Cricket” at that time. We flew every day of the week and then got four days off, and most of us hopped on the C-130 “Klonghopper” to go to Bangkok. In 1972, I used already-fading memory, letters to my wife, Gay, and my parents, and notes from a little calendar I had kept in 1966 to write an account of my ten months at NKP. The following is adapted from the days of my own first “weekend” trip to Bangkok.

NOTE: Beginning with the 16th, flying days headings include some numbers. These signify the hours and minutes flown that month, followed by the hours and minutes flown in SEA and the number of sorties flown in SEA. Other notes are in brackets.

April 15: I learned today that I could go to Bangkok tomorrow after my mission. Unfortunately, I had loaned my B-4 bag to Jim Kormanik so he could go yesterday. I made immediate plans to stay at the Menida Hotel, because it was free to military R&R or TDY personnel, and to spend all day the 17th (Tuesday), 18th, and 19th touring and shopping. And I planned to get Kobe beef, which Lee [Harley; my closest friend at the 23rd TASS] had had for just \$3.00. (I’m sure it was actually water buffalo, which could be quite good anyhow.)

16 FAC AM 4 fts; Bangkok PM !!!; 43+35 / 128+35 / 46.

April 16: I got up at 0330 and went to breakfast, then Lee and I flew a very intense FAC sortie (my 35th at NKP), getting four flights of fighters. As soon as we debriefed, I cleaned up and packed quickly for a short stay in Bangkok. Lee assured me that I’d find it very interesting and relaxing.

I rode the Klong Express, a daily round-Thailand supply, mail, and transportation flight made by C-130 turboprop airlifters. They went to the U.S./Royal Thai airbases at Takhli, Udorn, our NKP, Ubon, and Khorat, starting and terminating at Don Muong, on the international airport at Bangkok. On alternate days they reversed direction, but NKP was always in the middle, around noon.

A heavy rain started right after we started to unload at Don Muong, and a group of us took shelter under the high C-130 tail until it let up. Then I went in the MAC passenger terminal and put my name on the Thursday return (because I supposed I could not afford to stay until Friday). My next problem was money—I had no U.S. cash, and the free Manida Hotel was full, so I needed more than I had expected. I found someone in the terminal who was headed for Saigon and traded him 1180 of my Viet piasters for \$10. Then I negotiated a cheap taxi ride to the Reno Hotel (\$7 per night) and got them to cash a \$50 check for me.

I don’t know where I heard about the Reno, which was located on Rama Road just across from the National Stadium. I think Lee Harley must have mentioned it. It was a very pleasant and acceptable place. Bangkok was odd in that area, and many others, in that there were strips of modern buildings and very clean streets running through big areas of little squalid-looking houses, huts, and small buildings—weathered and poor. The

squalor was right behind the Reno, and bustling Rama Road was in front. Most higher-ranking officers [I was a captain] stayed at the Chao Prya (named after the river) which they always called the “chowpeeah.” Rich people stayed at the Rama, the Erawan, or, the most famous venerable Oriental. The jet-set stayed at the new Intercontinental.

By chance, another Cricket, [TLCB member] George Getchell, was also staying at the Reno. George found me just after I had finished a ham steak on a one-inch slice of ripe pineapple, and he wanted to go eat. Nevertheless, since I hadn’t eaten anything else since 0400, before my morning mission, I was happy to eat again, this time with company. We went to a Lufthansa-sponsored German festival at the Rama Hotel, where stewardesses (who all looked like models in those days) served us German beer, sauerbraten, knoedls, and pickled beets; all you wanted for \$5. After stopping off at a jazz joint for a while, I cheerfully retired in the air-conditioned Reno on a very hard (and amazingly comfortable) Thai mattress.

17 Bangkok, Emerald Bud., Wat Po, Zoo, Kobe beef, Rama last night—German food.

April 17: I got up and started a letter to my wife, but George called me early, and we went to breakfast in the hotel. We took



The Rama Hotel in 1966. In 2004 it looked about the same. Photos furnished by the author.

Bangkok continues next page

some pictures of the cute girls on the hotel staff, then we headed for the tourist spots, first the Temple of the Emerald Buddha, with its twenty-foot soldier statues in the courtyard, then to the older but less prestigious reclining Buddha (Wat Po)—40 feet high on its side. For a few baht donation you got some squares of gold leaf to stick on the exposed sections of black-lacquered concrete. The golden Buddha, which we didn't visit, had a pretty amazing history: 11,000 pounds of gold, lost and forgotten for several hundred years because it had been covered with concrete and buried in a paddy to protect it from discovery by invading Burmese. In the mid-1950s a farmer hit it with his plow. Somebody told me it was worth over six million dollars.



Early morning at the Floating Market—a relic of the past that should have been kept. Flower boat above and pineapple boat below, and even a breakfast boat selling hot food among the boats and docks.



As we wandered in Wat Po, a student approached us about guiding us, for whatever we wanted to pay. For \$4, lunch, and a cab ride home, he took us all around that temple, through the Marble Temple and the zoo, plus saving us quite a bit by negotiating cab fares and finding cheap but excellent food. Then he arranged to meet us at 6:30 the next day to tour the Floating Market.

That evening George and I had dinner at Nick's Number One, which had a very competent continental cuisine. At George's urging I had pepper steak (au poivre) for the first time. The "Kobe beef" was very tender, the sauce was perfect, the service

was as good as it gets, and I've long remembered how much I enjoyed that meal. I did feel that I was being extravagant, though, adding onion soup and wine, and ending up paying \$9.

18 Bangkok, Floating mkt, Thai dancing, Natl Museum, BX, TOT, walk near hotel.

April 17: The student, calling himself Joe, appeared at the hotel at 6:35 and he and I went to the river, where he hired a little diesel-powered boat for sixty baht (\$3) for two hours on the klongs. We first crossed the Chao Prya, which had many barges and quite a few cargo ships up from the Gulf of Siam. Then we went past the Temple of the Dawn, Wat Arun, and into a wide canal—into the original village of Ban Gkok.

I was fascinated by the common scenes of people living in



Abundant bougainvillea frames a funny scene as the "meat boat" brings fresh meat to a residence. Those dogs leaned so far that they nearly fell into the klong.

relative squalor with the river as street and source of washing water. Boats were arriving with pineapples, cut flowers, rice, even charcoal. Hot breakfast or ice cream was available from the little boats, and every imaginable fruit and vegetable was being transported to the main market area or sold at docks and buildings along the klongs. A butcher was selling some meat from his boat at the dock of a lovely villa, with two little dogs sticking their noses so far toward the portable scales that they almost fell off the steps into the water. There were boat sheds with graceful wooden boats in various stages of completion and men cutting planks from logs with great hand saws. Many of the boats were captained by young women wearing lampshade-shaped straw hats. There were also long strings of barges loaded to the extreme, being pulled by boats with whole families living on them. The full barges were loaded to, and sometimes over, their gunwales, and had more planks added around the hatches to keep water out. Because of this, water actually covered part of the curved deck.

We stopped and looked through a silk factory. It was interesting seeing them weave, and there was a small elephant out back, on which Joe took a ride. I merely fed him some bananas.

At 9:00 I met George Getchell at the National Museum for

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You can still see the prow of a rice barge under construction in this boat house. No longer visible are builders cutting hull planks with two-man crosscut saws.

the Eastman Kodak show of traditional Thai dancing. I was shocked to pay sixty baht to get in, but it was so lovely that I later conceded that it was worth it. Then we looked at old carriages and things in the museum for a while.

After that I had a variety of things to do. I bought a



Above, "Joe" the guide rides a young elephant. At right, author is dwarfed by cement soldier guarding a palace gate.



tape recorder for myself and a roll of film for Lee Harley at the BX, got a big poster of a Thai dancer at the Tourist Organization of Thailand, bought some paper flowers for our maid Phaisarn, whose mother had recently died (in Sakhon Nakhon), then took a long walk and looked at shops and city sights. Bangkok seemed pretty clean, in need of some new streets and sewers in many areas, virtually without beggars or public drunks, and overall, a fascinating and likable place.

That evening George wanted me to go with him to a night club

Below, this worker is setting up silk threads for a loom in the factory the author toured.





No, not begging for a prosthetic leg!

when I said, “Why are you sorry?” She said, “They not tell you? Hahlie die in *kluang binh*.” (*Kluang binh*, or just *binh*, is Thai for airplane.)

It had happened on the New Road, beyond the Ban Loboy water crossing in the high little valley just before the border. He and Tom Morris had finished putting in airstrikes under low clouds and were headed back. Lee had an airborne observer aboard, Airman Andre Guillet. As high man, Lee was reading off the BDA [bomb damage assessment] to the last fighters and his transmission stopped virtually in mid-word.

Tom Morris always seemed to think he owed me something. He even apologized to me. He was one of the really good guys we had, and it made me sorry for him, that he should feel responsible at all. The way Tom explained it to us, Lee’s transmission stopped so oddly that he called him just to see if he was all right. When Lee didn’t answer, he turned back to see if Lee’s plane was okay, assuming he’d had electrical failure or something. While he was looking around in the air, Tom suddenly found himself in an upward hail of “golfballs.” [this would have been tracer ammunition] He shoved prop, throttle, and mixture all the way forward and dove for the treetops. I don’t think he

The shopkeeper’s brother bragged about his sister’s Thai dancing style, and urged her to display how her knuckles had been trained to bend clear to the back of her hand. While still a young girl they put cooked rice on her knuckles and bent her fingers back.



where he really enjoyed the floorshow. He had no idea where the place was, so we went to the curb and asked a taxi driver how much it would cost to take us there. No meters were hooked up in this city—all rides were negotiated up front, and that was what you paid. It was usually no more than a dollar. George argued and bargained brilliantly, and finally got his satisfaction that no more could be squeezed out of this negotiation. We got in and rode no more than one block to the club, the wily driver laughing with glee. We laughed too.

I had had a great time, but was shocked that it had cost me \$100. Of course, \$20 of that was for a tape recorder, and \$21 for the hotel.

19 To NKP 0615—Flt 918; [Learned Lee Harley shot down yesterday], tape from CBTs.

April 19: It was a sad shock to get back, especially with the double happiness of getting “home” to my unit, and of having had such a great visit to Bangkok. I leaped off Flight 941 full of excitement, ready to tell anyone who cared to listen all about my trip. But whenever I passed friends they seemed unwilling to talk—about anything. I was eager, but they wouldn’t even look me in the eye. Puzzled, I took my things to my hooch. There was the recently orphaned Phaisarn, looking very sad. She said “I sorry.” I asked her why and she pointed a stubby little finger toward the picture of Lee and his wife and children, on the desk. Then it started to dawn on me, what strange thing was going on. But I think I was still smiling and even laughing

took any hits, but it was too hot to find Lee. Rescue came, but couldn’t get into the valley at all because of the massive groundfire and triple-A (anti-aircraft artillery).

Somehow Tom thought he should have done more, and he knew how close I had been to Lee. He seemed to think he hadn’t been brave enough, and I have pretty much decided that if someone thinks he was not brave enough on some occasion, he probably wasn’t. But if Tom thought he wasn’t brave enough in my eyes, he was all wrong. I never got bathed in the massive tracer storm he and others who had been there described, though I always dreaded it. I never held Tom the least bit responsible for the loss of Lee Harley, but I don’t think I ever convinced him of that. And I don’t suppose I tried very hard, either. I did find Lee’s wreckage later—it didn’t look very good, though it was hard to see because of foliage. The place became known to us as Harley’s Valley.

I had lots of mail waiting when I got back. A care-package arrived, with antipasto, a folding razor, cards, ink, a book, and even some Kool-Aid (which was the only thing not welcome—they had it aplenty at the chow hall, and I always avoided it.) There was also a flashy pair of paisley print boxer shorts. I knew they were sent as a bit of a joke, and I played a joke back. In my letter to Gay (which had no mention of Lee Harley, of course), I said: “How about that bathing suit? I’ll try it out as soon as the pool is finished.” The joke worked; I got a very concerned letter back, and we laughed about the episode for years.



TLCB Assistance - Annual Report 2017

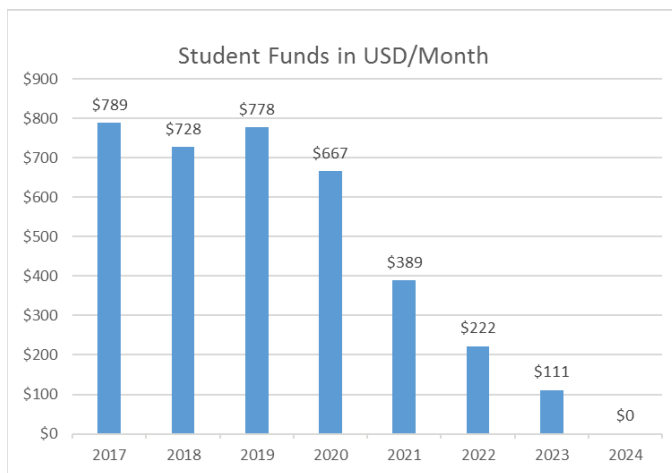
This past year, Assistance has continued its programs in Thailand and Laos. Since the last annual business meeting, your contributions funded nine projects in Laos, totaling \$29,600. In Thailand, we provided \$8,073.33* in student assistance. Details of the motions are in the quarterly reports available on the Forum at www.tlc-brotherhood.com/wp/tlcb-forum/

In Laos, we have continued the refurbishing of dilapidated/ needy schools. As we have done from the beginning, TLCB provides the supplies and the parents and school staff supply the labor.

We currently have 4 high school students and 12 college/ university students in the Student Assistance program. Student assistance funding has increased considerably the last year as high school students moved into university.

This last year SAF has averaged about \$295 a month income and an average monthly outgo of \$672. General assistance has averaged \$2731, with a monthly average outgo of \$2467. For 2018 and 2019, funding in Laos will be limited to \$10,000/year. This is necessary to ensure funds are available to continue the Student Assistance program.

Forecasted monthly average student funding amounts until



Mekong Express Mail Index

Do you ever recall a *MEM* article or photo from long ago and wish you could find it again? Did you know there is an on-line index to all *MEM* articles ever published, starting with our first issue in June of 2000? Yes, there is, and it is on our wonderful TLCB website: www.TLC-Brotherhood.com. All articles are listed by issue year and month, by title, with the authors' names and short descriptions of the subject matter. Go take a look sometime!

sunset, based on a 30:1 exchange rate.

I want to thank our guys on the ground in SEA who devote a lot of their time and energy to research these projects. They are the ones who make sure the projects are completed and ensure that our assistance funds are managed properly. Our trusted agents, in alphabetical order, are Art Crisfield, Jeff Hudgens, Auke Koopman, Phomphan, Satawat Sri-in and MacAlan Thompson. Gentlemen, you have my heartfelt thanks for all that you do.

*The September 2017 student assistance was estimated at \$900 as it had not been funded at the time of writing.

Respectfully submitted,

Les Thompson

Chairman TLCB Assistance Committee

23 September 2017

*Merry Christmas
and
Happy New Year
The Staff of the MEM*



2017 member William Wadsworth donated this 1966 menu for our use. Thanks!