



Mekong Express Mail

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THE THAILAND LAOS CAMBODIA BROTHERHOOD, INC.

www.TLC-Brotherhood.org

Eventful Pilatus Porter flight from Switzerland to Saigon

By Les Strouse

In July 1965 I was tasked to go from Saigon to Stans, Switzerland to pick up a new Pilatus Porter. I was to arrive a few days before the airplane would be ready because in my “luggage” were some radios to be installed prior to the certification by the US FAA.

I departed Saigon for Bangkok where I would pick up my “luggage” before catching a Swissair flight to Zurich on the 27th of July. Everything went as scheduled. I did not even have a problem clearing customs in Zurich with my 65 pounds of excess baggage. The train ride to Stans was a real tourist thrill since I had never been to Switzerland before. The scenery was spectacular.

A representative from Pilatus, the manufacturer of the Porters, met me at the train station and took me to the hotel where I checked in and unloaded my personal luggage. The rest went with me to the factory. After a tour of the factory I “met” my new airplane. It was ready except for the radios that I had hand carried and for the US FAA certification. That was to take place in two days time.

The FAA representative came from Frankfurt as scheduled but the certification did not happen. What was supposedly a new airplane was really a remanufactured airplane (It had been in the Swiss Army and had been wrecked) and would require different paperwork. The FAA rep headed back to Frankfurt to get the required forms. (Never did find out why he did not just call and have them sent.)

On 2 August I test flew the airplane and the certification was ready on the 3rd. The airplane was certified and I had a ferry permit allowing me to fly daylight VFR only and at 10% over normal gross weight. I was ready to go! On the 4th I departed Stans for Zurich. I could not leave from Stans on an international flight and I had to fill the ferry system with fuel at Zurich. The stop at Zurich was purely technical and I was soon off for Naples. It was a very nice flight. I got to check out my ferry system, which was made up of three 55-gallon drums lying down in a cradle in the cabin of the airplane. There was a pilot-controlled pump connected by clear plastic tubing to the inter-connect between

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Return to Ban Nahom

by Jeff Hudgens

“Where is the rest of the bone jarring road?” I wondered. It had only been 14 months since my last visit and now the road to Ban Nahom was paved halfway to the village. Progress—and so quickly!

My “Impact Laos” team members and I were returning to Ban Nahom village to fulfill our vision. The vision was spawned 14 months before when I searched for my fathers crash site.

You may recall, my dad, Maj. Edward M. Hudgens was an A-1 pilot on a search and rescue mission for two downed F4 pilots in the Mu Gia region. As he was returning to Nakhom Phanom, his tail section blew off. His plane crashed into the side of a karst a 45-minute hike from Ban Nahom village.

When I returned home from Ban Nahom in Oct 2002, I formed a team of friends from my church. Team members included fellow

TLCB member Bill Brown (stationed, ironically, at NKP the same time as my Dad), his brother Bob, dentist Greg Armi, Jeff Meyer, Ken Macon, Jeff von

see **Ban Nahom**, continued on page 6

Reunion 2004

See page 11 for preliminary details





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the wing tanks.

The flight from Zurich to Naples took 3 hours and 58 minutes. I was met by a follow-me vehicle and escorted to the transient area. I was met there by a “gopher” who, for US\$10 would handle all of my “formalities”. Without his services I would have incurred a considerable delay so I paid. I decided to continue on to Beirut even though it would be a violation of my ferry permit to fly at night. Off I went into the setting sun. Shortly after dark, I was passing over Cyprus when I got a red warning light. There were two on the panel, one above the other and the first time it flashed I was not sure whether it was my oil low pressure light or fuel filter clogged light. I soon found out as the oil low pressure light came on steady.

At that time, Cyprus had a notam (notice to airmen) that prohibited civilian aircraft from landing there. Well, I had an emergency and so stated and was cleared to land. By this time my engine was feathered. I did NOT want to run my new engine without oil! I glided to a nice landing at Nicosia International Airport. I was greeted by a weapons carrier load of British Military Police. They were polite and when they determined that I was not there to restart the war they agreed to tow my airplane off the runway. “Why don’t you use your engine?” they asked. I just told them that it quit running and that was why I was there in the first place.

Once I had the airplane secured I went to the Air Traffic Control center and had a message sent to Air America in Taipei explaining my circumstances. Then I went to the Ledra Palace Hotel, right on the green line. Hey, I just came from Saigon; I did not want to be in another war zone!

Next morning I called the Pilatus factory in Stans. Air America had already contacted them and a mechanic was on the way, in a roundabout way. He had to go to Tel Aviv to get to Nicosia. Cooled my heels until the next day, 7 August. The mechanic arrived and determined that the rear bearing seal was

leaking and that we would need support from the Astzou engine factory in France. Another delay until the French engine specialist arrived—with one of the tools that were needed to pull the rear bearing broken. He was going to call France and have another one sent but I took the broken tool to the Cyprus Airways shop and had it repaired. The French mechanic threw it on the ground and said he would not use it. At this point, I got up on the maintenance stand and started to pull the rear bearing. Hey, I worked on my Dad’s dozers and on my own Piper Tri Pacer so I did know a little bit about mechanic-ing! As soon as one of the bushings holding the bearing in squeaked, the mechanic took over. New bearing installed. By now it was 13 August and I was REALLY ready to go home. Test flight determined that we had accomplished nothing. Oil consumption was much too high to continue my ferry flight.

A new engine was ordered. Okay, no civilian cargo flights into Nicosia. I went to the U.S. Embassy (they had a weekly support flight from Athens) and BSed my way to the CIA office where I was told that they did NOT want to know that I was there and they

were not about to get involved. But I did get enough information to have the engine shipped to Tel Aviv and brought on an El Al flight to Cyprus.

Changed the engine and then we had a propeller problem. Electric prop! New prop called for, delivered and installed.

It was now the 21st of August and the test flight was okay. I forgot to mention that I was well over my 10-day visa upon arrival. The immigration guy told me that it would take 10 days to renew it. Well, it only took US\$20 to ignore it. I was cleared to leave.

On the 22nd I left Nicosia for Damascus with an overflight of Beirut. When I called Beirut with my ETA they insisted that I had to land. Legally I was supposed to be cleared for the overflight but so it goes. I landed at Beirut after only 1 hour and 9 minutes of flight time. I was grossly over weight for landing but managed to squeak it on. I went to the tower and had to pay a US\$2.50 landing fee and was then cleared to go to Damascus. I was off.

It took all of 33 minutes to reach Damascus. Hey look at all of the Russian airplanes on the lollipops off the side of the runway. Migs and Beagles! I did not expect this stop to be too friendly. “Park your airplane as close to the tower as you

see Porter, continued on page 4



The picture of N184L depicts the same model of airplane and engine as the one that I ferried on the flight in 1965. I flew N184L when the Air Commandos did an evaluation of the Porters in 1963/64. Photo by the author.

TAC KB-50's Last Mission in SEA

by Gary Parker

Gary Parker was an aircraft commander in KB-50J tankers in the 421st Aerial Refueling Squadron, Yokota, Japan, in 1963 through 1965. The article first appeared in the newsletter of the TAC Tanker Association and is reprinted with permission. Gary said: I hope this adds a little to the 421st SEA story. MEM has added some explanations in brackets.

I had almost forgotten backing up to park with the tail hanging over the mud and the main wheels within a foot of the edge of the tarmac.

For a period of time the 421st kept a detachment at Ton Son Nhut (Saigon). There was not space for us on the ramp, so we parked on the far side of the field by the trees on old taxiways. To park, you taxied the aircraft as far as you could down the taxiway away from the runway and then turned 90 degrees to the taxiway. You dispatched a spotter to stand at the edge of the tarmac. Then reversed the engines, backing up until the spotter signaled to stop. As most all of you know, if you are backing and step on the brakes, the aircraft will tilt nose up and not stop until it is resting on the tail. The correct method of stopping is to shift the engines from reverse to forward thrust and not use the brakes. This gets a little bit tricky when you are required to have the wheels within a foot of the mud. Most of us got pretty proficient, however, a few had some problems.

During early fall 1964, we had a detachment of three KBs at Saigon. The A/Cs [aircraft commanders] were Bob Thorn, Dave Dennis and myself (Gary Parker). We had just completed a somewhat hairy mission along the Ho Chi Minh trail. Bob and Dave were returning direct to Saigon, while I had to stop for fuel at Danang because of off-loading almost all my fuel, including some avgas [gasoline] to two fighters that had an emergency. Upon approach at DaNang, we picked up some ground fire, but only took two hits in the right outer wing tip. We took on some fuel and headed for Saigon. Upon arrival at Saigon, we landed and taxied to our deserted taxiway. We saw one KB-50 parked normally with its tail hanging over the mud and a second one with its tail stuck in the mud and the nose wheel well up in the air. It seems that Dave had gone a little too fast in reverse, panicked and slammed on the brakes. Needless to say, poor Dave never heard the last of that.

Another story is about the last mission the KB-50s flew in SEA.

It was a 0400 take off from Takhli AB, Thailand, to refuel F-100s. The weather was about 300 ft overcast with light rain. The tower operators and GCA [ground controlled approach, for instrument landings] units did not go to work that early, so we would send some one down the runway in a truck to make sure there were no animals or equipment in the way. We would always take off the same direction on the runway because the runway lights only worked on the last 3000 ft. We took off that way so if we had to abort we would be stopping in the area where there were lights.

Wes Cain and crew were primary, while I was the number one ground spare and Floyd Krey was the number two ground

spare. Wes aborted on the runway with the report of fuel streaming out of the aircraft. I took off as soon as Wes had cleared the runway and climbed to 12,000 ft where we broke out of the clouds. We turned on course to the rendezvous, when I heard panic shouting on the intercom in Spanish. It was Jesus Cordova, the left refueling operator (RO). I could not understand him, so I ask Sgt Browning, the right RO, to see what was happening. He replied with: "Sir you have fire from number one engine going clear past the tail." We feathered number one, but the fire did not go out. We shot the fire extinguisher bottles to number 1, but they had little effect. We turned back toward Takhli and hoped either the tower operator or better yet the

GCA people had come to work. There was a mobile TACAN [tactical air navigation; bearing and distance measuring equipment

for instrument landings] at the base and we had an approach plate for the TACAN, however we had flown the approach during VFR [visual] conditions and it lined you up with the chow hall and not the runway. We decided to make the approach 5 degrees left of the published course thinking this should line us up with the runway. We still had not been able to contact the tower or the GCA unit. At about 800 ft on final in the rain, we heard a wonderful voice on "guard" channel. It said, "This is Takhli GCA, we have you on radar, would you like to continue on a radar approach." My copilot was Jack Francis and he pressed the transmit button and said in a most nervous and very relieved voice. "You betcha!" We proceeded on and landed. The ceiling was about 200ft. After landing the fire truck put out the fire.

In the meantime, Floyd Krey and his crew were airborne. Just as the fire truck finished and we taxied off the runway, we heard Floyd call in that his number 2 engine was on fire and they were feathering it. About five minutes later we heard that his #3 engine was on fire. About thirty seconds later we heard "We are baling out." Floyd, with cool thinking and fine airmanship was able to keep the aircraft under control until all of his crew bailed out. Floyd then somehow got out himself. Every crew member survived with only minor injuries. Floyd's copilot was Lloyd Powell and his navigator was Gary Craig.

See KB-50J, concluded on page 5

can.” I put the wing tip in the door! Went up to the tower as instructed and they had my paperwork all made out for my flight to Bahrain. All I had to do was sign it. They asked if I needed anything and I said that I would like to pick up some Coke and bread. Fingers snapped and a little Arab kid showed up. I gave him US\$2 and within 10 minutes he was back with my Cokes and bread. (When you are ferrying a small airplane solo it is best to *not* get the trots. I learned much earlier in my career that Coke and bread can keep me sustained without fear of the dreaded two step.)

So, I was off to Bahrain. Well, not so fast. The temperature was over 100 degrees and my airplane was still overweight. Would you believe a 3000-foot ground roll in a Porter and then a climb rate of about 100 feet per minute? I saw a lot of the 10,000-foot runway and also a lot of the desert off the end of it. The rest of the flight to Bahrain was uneventful.

23rd of August I left Bahrain for Karachi. The clerk at the hotel gave me some Pakistani money in my change! It was hot, hazy and rough. I arrived in Karachi planning on going on to New Delhi but was presented with a cable from New Delhi telling me to go from Karachi to Ahmedabad. No problem, I am flexible. I pay my landing fee with Paki money! Wrong move. It is illegal to bring Paki money into Pakistan. I said,

“But the pilot who brought the last airplane through gave it to me and I did not know that it was illegal.” They bought it and let me go. I later found out that an air freighter crew spent a couple of nights in jail for bringing Paki money in. Whew!

Off we went to Ahmedabad, a short flight of only 2 hours 45 minutes after 7 hours and 43 minutes from Bahrain to Karachi. The airplane was a bit heavy but no problem. Cleared to land and taxi to the transient area. I did so and as I exited the airplane I had a rifle pointed at my nose and was told that I was under arrest for illegal entry into the country. Me, “I have a cable in my flight kit authorizing me to land here.” Him, “I’m sorry but your airplane is impounded and you cannot get in it!” Off we go to the local jail.

The cops took me directly to a cell that was occupied by about 10 Indians. I was not booked and did not know if anyone would ever know that I was here. Me, “I want to call the American Embassy”. Him, “American Embassy in New Delhi, cannot call.” Five and a half hours later a well dressed man came and got me out of the cell and said we had to go to the airport to take care of customs and immigration formalities. No explanation whatsoever. The formalities took a couple of hours and by now it was early morning. Him, “I take you to the hotel, okay?” Me, “NO, I want to file a flight plan and go to Calcutta.” Not really. I wanted to get back to Bangkok or Saigon but I had to go via Calcutta to get there.

I left as the sun was rising, looking at an 8 hour flight. About half the flight was clear of clouds but the weather in Calcutta was deteriorating. Still legal but would require an instrument approach. They had radar and GCA (Ground Controlled Ap-

proach) on request. Make request one hour in advance, says the airway manual. Two hours out I requested GCA. Request approved continue and call XXX checkpoint. One hour out I reconfirmed my GCA request and was again told to call XXX checkpoint. I did and was cleared for an ILS approach. I did NOT have ILS equipment on board so again asked for GCA. Voice says, “GCA not operational today.” Weather was 200 foot ceiling with ½ mile visibility. I checked my charts and saw no high terrain or obstacles between me and the airport so I made an ILS using only the course line indicator. I had no glide slope receiver so had to descend by guess and by God.

Everything worked out and I landed in very heavy rain. I could barely see the runway. I asked the tower for taxi instructions and was advised to taxi around until I saw a B-26 and park next to it. Luckily I did find it before I ended up in the mud off a taxiway somewhere. Now my problem was how to get to the terminal. Esso came to the rescue. The jet fuel truck pulled up and we refueled the airplane. I had to get up on the wings to fill the wing tanks so I was soaked to the skin. But the job was done and the Esso truck took me to the terminal. The Immigration Officer refused to clear me until I dried myself off! I wrung out my handkerchief and wiped my face. He took

my passport and gave me a “shore pass.” “Pick up your passport before you leave.” I did not like that but what choice did I have

and it had been a really long day. More than 18 hours of flying time since I checked out of the hotel in Bahrain. Combining that with the 5+ hours in jail and the other stuff, it was nearly 28 hours.

I got a taxi into Calcutta to the Grand Hotel. Calcutta at its best is pretty dirty but when it is flooded it is really bad. The people who normally inhabited the streets were on the steps to keep out of the 12+ inches of water in the streets. We arrived at the Grand and the doorman put a plank out from the steps to the taxi. Great welcome and the place really looked good. I checked in and was given a voucher for two free drinks with my meal. I opted for a shower and bed. When I rose the next morning, I found that the Grand was anything but grand. Threadbare carpets. Chipped tile. Dirty staff uniforms. Coming in from the filthy streets and being overly tired led me to believe that I was in paradise.

In the morning I had my Coke and bread breakfast and went to the airport. The city was still flooded. It was still raining. As I entered the terminal I heard an announcement that all flights were delayed due to weather. I decided that I would not delay my departure.

Off I went, into the murk. I was not allowed to overfly Burma so I set up for my offshore route. The weather was bad—very heavy rain—but until level off I encountered no turbulence. When I reached my 7000 foot cruising altitude I looked back at my ferry system just in time to see it rise off the floor and slam back down. What a jolt—the only turbulence that I encountered during the whole 7 hour and 18 minute flight to Bangkok.

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Bangkok, and I was almost home. The AAM meet and greet crew were really staring at my airplane and I wondered why. When I got out I saw the paint had peeled off the leading edges of all surfaces. What was a nice cream color airplane now had green, zinc chromate, leading edges - quite UGLY. (BTW, AAM did not have the corporate paint job on the airplanes at that time.) It was now the 25th of August and I had been gone from home for almost a month. I got two days off in Bangkok while the airplane was inspected and given a thorough check. I got to EAT a REAL meal. I got to drink BEER. I got to sleep with a warm body next to me!

28 August and I was going to go home. But AAM, in their infinite wisdom, would not let me fly over water. The shortest route between Bangkok and Saigon was off the coast of Cambodia. (Not permitted to fly over Cambodia.) My flight plan was Bangkok to Danang then on to Saigon—a long haul. Departure from Bangkok was uneventful except the AAM Ops people wanted to know why I had the ferry tanks filled. Do not need that much fuel to go to Danang and there is lots of fuel there. As soon as I was out of Thai airspace there was basically no Air Traffic Control. I canceled my flight plan to Danang, filed for VFR direct to Saigon and 6 hours and 35 minutes after departing Bangkok I landed at Saigon. HOME!

31 days 55 hours and 54 minutes flying time. It had been a long haul but the war continued and I was quickly put back to work flying N12450 which had had the paint touched up and really looked smart. It would be some time before it gets its AAM feathers.



Sorry to say in my senior moments, I do not remember the rest of his crew. Gary landed in the jungle, released his chute and walked to a house (hut) that was about a hundred yards from where he landed. Gary said that several people came out of the hut as he approached. A couple of them carried either sticks, hoes or guns. In the pre-dawn light Gary could not tell which. He was so nervous that he forgot what little Thai he knew and cried out “*El Friendo, El Friendo.*” He pulled out his blood chit, found the Thai language page and presented it to them. They could not read, so the chit was of little value. He made a flying gesture and said “Ban Takhli” They seemed to understand this and helped him back to the base.

The sad part of the accident was that the KB-50 hit a Thai village and killed several people. I went with the flight surgeon to the village. We did not know what to expect, whether they were ready to kill us or what. When we saw the village chief, his first question was how many of your people died in the airplane? The Doc and I did not know at this time whether Floyd’s crew survived or not. The chief said he prayed they were OK. We expressed our deep sorrow for his people and he said it is not your fault.

He said *My pen lai krop*, which basically means what ever will happen, will happen and we accept it. I had always liked the Thai people. They were gentle and kind. This confirmed my belief. Here this poor man, who had lost several of his people thought about our possible losses too.

The KBs were grounded after that, but we remained at Takhli for another month.

Oklahoma City Air Logistics Center inspectors spent several months at Yokota and Takhli and discovered many critical safety problems. After much



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Ban Nahom, continued from page 1

Richter and me. Supporting us from North by Northeast Tours was Montri, Sak and John Learned.

We finalized the vision and formulated a plan. We wanted to make an impact on poverty stricken Ban Nahom and surrounding villages. We decided to call it "Impact Laos." Our overall objectives were to focus on dental/medical needs and to help the kids and villagers in Ban Nahom and surrounding area.

The goals of this particular trip were to evaluate the dental needs of the kids, build a concrete school floor, procure and deliver helpful items like blankets, shoes, soap, shampoo, toothbrushes, toothpaste, school books, school and medical supplies.

I also felt it was important to involve those who fought in the war. I approached both the A-1 Skyriders Association and TLCB during the October reunions about participating in the project. Both enthusiastically agreed and donated funds towards the project.

Day 1

After a night in Bangkok and an early flight to NKP we visited the old base. Bill was looking for the old putting green he had built in 1969. We didn't find it (how do you lose a putting green?). I had learned the exact location of my Dad's



Left, upon completion of the visit, each patient received a toy (in left hand), a new toothbrush and a Polaroid picture with the dentist.

taking pictures of the kids then flipped the digital camera around to show them the photo. The joy it gave the kids and adults was addicting and this practice continued for our entire stay.

After a wonderful dinner cooked by Montri and a meeting with the local and District leaders, it was off to bed.

Day 3

The next morning we began our first day of activities in Ban Nahom. Brothers Bill and Bob Brown entertained the kids with a homemade box hockey game and by making bamboo hula-hoops. Seventy-one year old Bob even rode a bicycle backwards!

Then it was on to building a cement schoolroom floor funded by TLCB. To get water to the school for the cement, women and girls four years or older carried water from the riverbed to the school, up a 40-foot embankment and 200 yards to barrels outside of the school. Inside, Bill and Bob taught the locals and us "Farangs" (westerners) how to lay concrete. We were amazed at the tenacity of the Brown brothers.

John Learned was a welcome surprise member to our group. John is part of North by Northeast tours and set up a small medical center for minor medical issues.

During floor construction, we set up a dental clinic. Dentist Greg and his assistant Jeff Meyer performed dental assessments and cleanings on the village children. They showed the kids proper brushing techniques and introduced

Left, Dr Greg Armi performing a night time wisdom tooth extraction with nothing but a headlamp for illumination.

Below, John Learned administers medical aid to a girl with an infected lip. Many such infections prove fatal if untreated.



hooch at the A-1 reunion. We found it but there was not much left but the foundation.

We met TLCB member John Middlewood and his wife at dinner near the night market. After dinner, a few of the guys headed off to check out the night market where they dined on a few beetles, silkworms and grubs! Sadly, I was in heavy discussion with John and was unable to partake.

Day 2: Heading out

The next day we crossed the Mekong River, entered Laos and drove a not-so-bumpy four hours to Ban Nahom. Everywhere we went, we were the center of attention. We started





John Learned gave medical care to jaundiced man (in jacket).

All photos furnished by Jeff Hudgens.



Left, Gome and Jeff pour first bucket of TLCB-donated concrete for the floor. Above, finished school floor.



family received sleeping mats, blankets, shoes, soap, shampoo, toothbrushes and toothpaste. The recipient's appreciation is almost too hard to articulate.

Each student received notebooks, pens, pencils, erasers, pencil sharpeners and a prized school uniform. The youngest were so precious. Their little "praying hands" and "Khop Jai" "thank yous" were too cute.

We also purchased schoolbooks for grades 1—5 and distributed them to the Ban Nahom School (Grades 1—3) and the Ban Thongkham school (Grades 3—5). In addition, we shared some of the supplies and ~~and the~~ ~~with the~~ ~~two~~ ~~page~~ neighboring

flossing—an unheard of practice. Following their dental exam, patients received a new toothbrush, bracelet or toy and a Polaroid picture with the dentist. The prized pictures were a big hit as this would be their first ever.

Dr Greg also treated several dental conditions in some adults. These included one nighttime wisdom tooth extractions using only a headlamp for illumination. In all, Greg and Jeff saw over 70 kids and 20 adults. What an accomplishment!

Day 4

The next day's objective was to complete the school floor. The first day it took almost the entire day to complete a little more than 1/3 the floor. By the second day, we had the system down and completed the floor after lunch. The first day, we were very hands-on but by the second day, the last few sections of concrete were being laid entirely by the villagers.

The final day's agenda included distribution of supplies and a trip to my father's crash site.

The team distributed supplies to each head of family. Each

Below: At the crash site, around the bronze plaque that memorializes Jeff's dad. Back Row: Jeff Meyer (blue shirt), Jeff von Richter, Somboun, Ken Macon, Bill Brown
Front Row: Bob Brown (black hat), Dong Heng (District Head), Jeff Hudgens, Gome (in front of Jeff) and Greg Armi



Ban Nahom, continued from page 7
villages of Ban Thongkham and Ban Nachat.

A group of thirty or so villagers and team members made the 45-minute hike to my dad's crash site. We mounted a memorial plaque onto a prominent rock. This rock prevented many of my father's remains from being washed down the side of the mountain. It was here the JTFA found most of my dad's remains, including his identifying tooth.

While the plaque was being mounted, I stole a few moments by myself. I thought of my Dad, I thought of what we had just accomplished in the village, I thought of all the people who made it possible. From North by Northeast Tours to the A-1 Skyriders Association and the Thailand Laos and Cambodia Brotherhood, our co-workers, family, friends and wives, the Impact Laos team received a tremendous amount of support. Without all of them, this trip would never have been possible.



A vision that was spawned 14 months ago was complete for this trip. We will be back. We made a difference. We will continue to Impact Laos.



The plaque reads;

IN MEMORY OF MAJ. EDWARD M. HUDGENS
USAF
6 SEPTEMBER 1931 – 21 MARCH 1970
PILOT OF AN A-1 SKYRAIDER, CALLSIGN SANDY 06
DIED WHEN HIS PLANE CRASHED AT THIS LOCATION DURING
THE SUCCESSFUL RESCUE OF ANOTHER PILOT
DEDICATED 13 JANUARY 2004

In 1969 U-Tapao MARS had a real purpose

By Errol Savoie

“I love you, sweetie; over.”

“I love you, too; please be careful; over.”

“AI8BU, here, I have my next call ready; over.”

So it went every day and night, calling loved ones and hearing about the kids, schools, money, more money, the car, the house. Thousands of them all shared with a world listening in.

What a job being a MARS (Military Affiliated Radio System) Station radio operator was in 1969 U-Tapao, not to mention being thrown in with the various station chiefs and crew.

There were actually three station chiefs over the year as I recall. Must have been the stress. The initial crew consisted of this weird “loosey-goosey-type” from Iowa. He always wanted someone else to push the pencil and never wanted any lead on himself. There was a self-proclaimed cool guy from Philadelphia who had a long last name starting with an O and intimidated both the Iowa farm boy and the chief. His only interests in the country were the European tourists at Pattaya. Our second in charge was a fun person, but unfortunately, he had not met a drug he did not like. Then there was a young 19-year-old Polish airman out of rural Pennsylvania and myself, a 22-year-old Louisiana boy. An NKP dropout who had some local biker fame in his native Cincinnati would later join us. He freaked out farm boy when he ate a bug walking across his kowpot (sic) lunch at the Hojo's. Famous biker did not have a lot of enthusiasm for MARS. He preferred other activities and although he clued me in on Task Force Alpha, he was never quite clear as to why he was reassigned from NKP to U-T.

My initial commander at the 1985th Communications Squadron rotated out about three months into my tour and was replaced by a great fellow named—no kidding—Major Major. Fortunately, he was promoted and became Lt Col Major. The whole organization changed under his command and we at the

MARS station had a new NCOIC, an Italian Tech Sergeant who said, “We're going to go crazy around here if we don't get some business going.”

Just three months out of technical school at Keesler and I had orders to report to Eglin for survival school and then report to Task Force Alpha in Thailand. If I recall correctly it did not say specifically where that would be, although after getting to U-Tapao I eventually found out it was at NKP, a true garden spot I was told.

My wife and five month old son and I packed up our belongings, gave up our apartment in Altus, Ok where I was stationed and were about to leave when I was notified that my orders had been cancelled because my top-secret clearance had not been completed. We were in limbo. That year was a sparse Thanksgiving. Fortunately, no one had rented the apartment and we were able to stay put. My commander talked to somebody to either let me stay or give me another set of orders. Within a few days, the orders for U-Tapao came through and by January 1969 I was on my way.

I'll never forget the first thing that hit me when I landed in Bangkok. The smell. I grew up along the bayous and marshes of coastal Louisiana where we had shrimp factories and porgies plants, so I wasn't unaccustomed to strong smells. But, klongs had world-class status.

I was not crazy about working primarily in MARS for an entire year. The few months I had worked it at Altus were boring. I enjoyed the radio operator training at Keesler, but none of our training was actually MARS related. Technically, we were actually the back-up communications for U-T. We were even back-up for one of the moon shots.

MARS became fun though. MARS at UT had a real purpose. Part of the credit for my getting a better understanding of the service and living in a foreign country goes to a couple of repair guys who showed up and we all bunked together in a hooch and later in prefab barracks. One of them was fresh from the Peace Corps and the other was nearing the end of his enlistment and had been in the 1st Mobile Comm in the Philippines.

After slugging through day shifts and then taking over the swing position by working all shifts things started coming together for me. This MARS gig had real value; value beyond the cinder walls of the station house. And, the nighttime was the right time, especially after midnight. I looked forward to those night shifts and then when we switched to 12-hour shifts that summer, my young partner and I begged and got permanent nights. The rest was an unrecorded history of making calls to the U.S. for lots of soldiers. We literally ran unsupervised and we ran more illegal

than legal. We'd keep one set on the Air Force net and slug through with them, while running

three other rigs with renegade radio operators we would pick up by searching any frequency we would find "clear." They would hook up with a telephone operator in the states, we would give her as many as 20 calls at a time, limit to five minutes each, and the telephone operator would have her stateside people ready as soon as one call ended. We could not log any of those calls, but did we make friends.

Lessons of life and separation came soon. I assumed the first chaplain's priority note I received involved a death back home. To my surprise and naivety, most notes involved domestic matters. Lots of painful calls were shared with a world of listeners. Think about having to spill your guts in painful situations like a pregnant daughter, a wife's infidelity, separation, and divorce knowing that someone on your base now knows all your business as well as a lot of people listening all over the world. You would have to be pretty insensitive not to have that start working on your head. There is no doubt in my mind that the reason I later chose Psychology for a masters degree came in part from my experience at U-T.

I do not recall his last name, but a nice person named Allen was having an incredible situation with his young wife back home. You could not help putting yourself in his place and he had a chaplain's pass almost every day for months. After a few weeks of calling, I thought the wife just was not answering the phone anymore and then Allen gives me another number to try. Yes, the other guy answers and he does not have the decency to lie and puts Allen's wife on the phone. Oh, yeah, we hit the Airman's Club hard after that shift. There were others, too. Men who had been married for many years and the wives just

Ray Hatmaker

Mekong Express Mail is sad to note the death of Ray Hatmaker on March 26th, in East Tennessee. Ray was a retired US Army colonel who served as J-3 for Ground Operations at Nakhon Phanom in 1974-75 and in prior years as an advisor in MACV in Vietnam.

finally had enough of the life, or took advantage of the situation to call it quits.

But, there were great rewards and thrilling escapades too. A great staff sergeant from supply helped us work out a deal with the Navy at Sattahip for a pallet of beer (80 cases) in exchange for 40 pairs of jungle fatigues and boots. By the time we parceled out everyone's share to get the beer on the base we were down to about ten cases for ourselves, but making the deal was the fun part. We were welcome at the Flight Kitchen, flight surgeons loved us (watched Bob Hope's Christmas show from the ledge of a surgeon's quarters above and right behind the stage, read all of Hope's cue cards and watched costume changes), our refrigerators were always stocked with something

good, a medical indiscretion suffered by one of the crew was erased from his medical records, Main Gate

guards rarely checked us coming and going and we were accorded telephones in our individual lockers. Being in a communications squadron was a hoot.

My closest brush with death as a MARS operator came about halfway up one of those mountains. Our chief met his Army equivalent at some establishment and the next thing we know we are offered new radio equipment. We were still using an amplifier that was the size of a refrigerator and had tubes so big they looked like glowing, giant Christmas ornaments. It also made a weird noise every time we engaged it. The Army had all new sexy Collins stuff. The only problem was it was the rainy season and the Army's stuff was on top of a mountain.

No problem, my roommate from the 1st Mobile says. The 1st Mob is on base and he knows a guy who can provide a 4-wheel six pack to take us up the mountain. The "road" up the mountain was narrow and muddy. Our experienced driver forgets to lock in the front hubs and halfway up the mountain I am staring straight down as we are hanging off the road. It took some tricky maneuvering to keep from going over.

When I left U-T in January of 1970 the only souvenir I took from my job was a custom-made headset the maintenance guys made for me. It allowed me to walk through the entire station plugged in. Its important function was to allow me to monitor the Air Force net while running renegade on the other sets. However, I never used them again since the Air Force cross-trained me into another field when I got to Seymour Johnson. I never made another "over" call again either, not to this day.



A Heartfelt Response to “Table of 13”



Last issue Asia Editor Jim Michener wrote about a meeting of Amerasian children (“Table of 13”). Here is the group. Jim received a very touching letter in response to his article, which is reprinted here with permission of Willie Simmons.

At the table (all Amerasian unless otherwise identified), Luck Jones (29), holding her daughter Jeanie (3) and next to her husband Alsis Jones (30); Pongsak “Terry” Pratumchai (31); (Thai) Kanjana Suwunnakaseam holding purse, former Udon Thani branch manager, Pearl S. Buck Foundation, Thailand; Mekong Jim Michener (bow tie, 59); Suphaphor “Irene” Phansan (25); Phattaya Phokhathai (behind Irene, 32); Kheaowan (8), son of Phattaya; (Thai) Chuanpis Nammar (55), mother of Alsis; Tothsapol “Jody Swain” Siphumat (36); (Thai) Phakawun Phokhathai (54), mother of Phattaya. Inset, left, Pearl S. Buck; there in spirit.

Photo by Lao-national Sithong Dinidvongphanh, the “13th person.”

Jim Michener’s article in the December 2003 MEM about Amerasian children brought the following response from a TLCB brother who was stationed in NKP, Korat and Ramasun Station.

My name is Willie Simmons and I live in New Britain, Connecticut. I read your article in the [Mekong] Express Mail and I just felt like writing you because it really touched my heart.

I am a Black ex-GI and I was stationed with the Air Force for a total of about 24 months in Thailand from the time period of Dec 1971 to July 1974. While stationed at Kadena Air Base on Okinawa I first went to NKP for a 30 day TDY in Dec 1971. I fell in love with the country and its people. My next trip came in April 1972. I returned TDY to Korat Air Base and was there for a total of 5 months. By then I was really hooked and when I returned to Okinawa I requested and received a PCS assignment to Ramasun Station up the road from Udorn Air Base. I arrived back in Thailand in Feb. 1973 and stayed until July 1974.

While stationed in Korat I met a very wonderful young woman that I fell in love with, she was from Surin province. She had a small child by a former Black GI whom she had met previously. Unfortunately she found out she was pregnant just after he left; the father to this day does not know she had this baby for him. She did not hide the child with her parents as a lot of the girls did then; she wanted to raise him and I had no problems taking care of them. I often visited her village and family in Surin. The child was not mine but I loved the little guy very much — I had heard so many stories about how the Amerasian children would be looked down upon by Thai people, especially the

I am a member of the TLC Brotherhood, a very fine organization. I read children by Black soldiers.

In Korat I met a Thai couple with a family that had helped me a lot in the past. They owned property and I had rented one of their houses, so I contacted them to see if my girl could stay with them and they agreed. I was going back to Okinawa and I would be returning in Feb 1973 and going to Ramasun Station. I wanted my girl to go with me so I would send money to support her during the period I would be gone. Everything worked fine. I returned and we went to Udorn. During the 16-month period I was in Udorn I built a house for my girl in her village in Surin. It was a nice place; it was out in the rice paddies with no running water or electricity but I watched them build it and it was strong and much better than anything else around there. While I was with her we talked about marriage many times and I really loved her and her son.

When my tour of duty came up I was to be sent to McGuire Air Base in New Jersey. My girl packed all her things and we moved everything to her home in Surin. Our point of contact would still be the Thai couple in Korat as they were the most trusting people I knew. During the time I left some things happened that changed both our lives. Contact was broken in Nov 1975.

Continued next page.

I have never returned to Thailand partly because I am afraid of the memories of what once was. The one constant that has stayed on my mind for 30 years is what about the children. What happened to the beautiful children that were left behind? I know our government did not do a lot about it. I have always tried to get information on what was happening with their lives and how they were living but there has not been too much in the news concerning this issue.

During a move I lost the information I had about the village that my girl lived at in Surin. All that remains are the photo albums and memories. My girl's son would be about 31 or 32 years old now. I pray that he is doing well now.

I sit and I think about all the lovely young women that loved us and we loved them. What are their lives like now? Sometime I do not want to know and at other times I cannot stop thinking of Thailand.

I am 53 years old now. God willing I am going to make that pilgrimage back this year 2004. There has to be something I can do to give this some closure. We were young men doing the things that young men do. Now hopefully we are older and wiser.

Thank you, Jim — your article brought flowing tears to my eyes just thinking about the children that were left behind.



Way Out West:

September 24-25-26, 2004

Ontario, California



Hey Brothers and Sisters, it is not too early to start firming up your plans to attend our first ever West Coast TLCB reunion and annual meeting.

Here are some preliminary details. Look for complete details and registration form in the June *Mekong Express Mail*, and on TLCB's website, www.tlc-brotherhood.org.

Place: Doubletree Hotel, Ontario, California
909-937-0900
222 North Vineyard Avenue
Free shuttle from Ontario Airport!

Group Room Rate: approximately \$90 single or double per night

Registration Fee: \$70 per person (June issue will detail what is and is not covered by this rate)

From the Secretary

Sawadee Brothers and Sisters! I am writing an abbreviated report to you for this issue. I have experienced some major computer problems; some deteriorating health issues; and a new job more compatible for my health in the Postal service, but heavily loaded with overtime. As of this writing these personal issues have improved greatly. My involvement with some board issues was limited in the past four months but my support for our present board has never ceased.

I am hoping that we will have membership cards mailed out at approximately the same time as this MEM mailing. Remember, only the second year renewals will receive a laminated card, which becomes your permanent card. All other renewals will receive a post card acknowledging receipt of your renewal payment from our president, Bill Tilton.

The last issue of the MEM, Volume 4, Issue 4, brought you current on Board motions (#110). This year's first Board meeting is not completed and the minutes are not approved at this time. Have a great spring and maybe get those old TLC photos unpacked.

Chok Dee!

Ed Miller, Secretary

TLCB President's Message

Greetings, Brothers and Sisters of TLCB. The board of directors has been restructured during an unusually active cyber meeting this winter. I am pleased to welcome Dave MacDonald to the board, taking the seat of the late Jim Bartholomew. We miss Bart, who was a great supporter of the Brotherhood and who set up and ran the BX until he and Donna moved to Arizona last year. The board has also asked Dick Hopkins and Bob Santo to join us, filling out the terms of Jimmie Butler and Hap Wyman, who resigned in February.

During this meeting the board adopted the policy that, unless necessary to ensure continuity of operations, board members will not also serve as committee chairmen. This policy doesn't apply to those positions (Reunion and Memorial) that are included in board positions, nor to board members currently serving as committee chairmen, until those positions are up for election. In accordance with this policy, I have appointed Dan Decker to succeed Dave MacDonald as chairman of the Communications Committee. Dan was the first chairman of the History Committee. It will be good to have him back in the Brotherhood leadership. By the way, Dan has asked Dave to continue as editor of this newsletter.

We have quite a few newer members who may wonder how our Assistance program works and what safeguards we employ. TLCB's Assistance program has had two overriding principles ever since before the Brotherhood was formed. We have always insisted on having trusted agents in place at the receiving end, to handle our overseas funds, and grants are

always “in kind” rather than in cash. This way we see that beneficiaries get things they really need and we get the most accomplished with our funds.

Donations are tracked in and out, to the penny. They are logged in and deposited in one of TLCB’s accounts, and collected in the main Assistance bank account. We are very proud that all administrative expense is covered out of dues, or simply paid for by workers without reimbursement. The main cost is the post office box, and there has always been a residual from the \$250 annual budget. The residual is generally turned over directly into the Assistance Fund. The result is enviable among charities: 100% of the donations go to help the beneficiaries.

Getting Assistance funds from USA into Thailand can be costly. Like our Assistance bank account in New Hampshire, we have found a no-charge means to do this via two checking accounts at the Pentagon Federal Credit Union. Vichit Mingrachata, in Udorn, and John Middlewood in NKP, both trusted agents, have check-signing authority—as controlled by the Assistance Committee through a voting process. Separate checks are written for each motion passed to make tracking of our expenditures extremely easy to accomplish. These motions, which describe what the grants will be used for, are posted quarterly to the Assistance page of our TLCB website.

In Udorn our program is guided by VFW Post 10249 members on a non-voting advisory committee which assists Vichit in proposing grants. At Nakhon Phanom John Middlewood proposes grants. At each location, the schools are contacted and discussions held over what items, or materials, are most needed, what the purposes are, and who the recipients will be. The Assistance Committee then votes on the submitted proposals which are numbered as passed during the year, and are later posted to the Assistance page at www.tlc-brotherhood.org. Usually grants must fit within quarterly budgets established for each location, which are set to keep an even balance and to avoid exhausting Assistance funds faster than donations arrive. Sometimes members ask us why we don’t have programs in

other communities, such as Korat. The simple answer is that we have no trusted agent there. But also, at our present funding rate added programs would dilute the existing programs too much.

There is a trusted agent in Laos (“Mekong Jim” Michener). We have had some false starts there, but we also helped provide rice and supplies to a flooded-out village. As depicted in this issue, we also helped fund improvements in the village of Ban Nahom under the guidance of Jeff Hudgens, and we have some more interesting grant plans in development for that country.

Reunion funds are kept separately because, while reunions/annual meetings do fit our charitable purposes, they are fully funded by the fees participants pay to the local committees. We have one thousand dollars that the local committee gets for startup expenses, and as they close out their business that is forwarded to the next local committee. Fees and expenditures are carefully tracked, just as with all other Brotherhood money. Usually there is some residual, which is donated to Assistance.

The Monument fund is starting to grow now, and that has its own checking account at the Pentagon Federal Credit Union. Donations are acknowledged and Gerry Frazier is keeping a detailed spreadsheet for tracking all income and expenditures. Soon we will have \$10,000, but with a goal of \$150,000 we need to tap some deep-pocket corporations.

As an IRS-recognized charitable organization, TLCB is required to make our tax returns available for inspection. To do this we have now added a page in the Assistance section of the Brotherhood website where members can see the latest IRS Form 990 as well as a summary of expenditures from the current budget. This page has a password, which will change each quarter and will be given on page 5 of the MEM.

These and other improvements are signs that the Brotherhood is still maturing and growing to meet the needs of our very special group, and the friends and family who wish to join us.

Bill Tilton, TLCB President



Monument Funding Grows in Memory of Two Lost Brothers

by Gerry Frazier

The effort to fund construction of a memorial monument to be built in a new park at Nakhon Phanom Thailand is beginning to bear fruit. As reported in previous editions of the MEM, TLC Brotherhood was approached over two years ago to serve as designer and focal point for fund raising to build the monument. Jim Henthorn served as chief designer, aided by Chris Jeppeson, and other members of the Monument Committee.

A year ago, at the height of a snowstorm before his move to Arizona, TLCB Board Member Jim Bartholomew and his wife Donna assisted in hosting a meeting of the Monument Committee in Manassas, Virginia. Two members, Ira Cooperman and Floyd McGurk, drove from New York state through poor weather to join the Bartholomews and other committee members from Baltimore and DC, to review plans drawn by Chris Jeppeson, and to decide the purpose to which the monument would be dedicated. At that meeting, the committee voted

to dedicate the monument to “All Who Served”, an inclusive statement encompassing American vets of the In-Country conflict, and allies.

Since fundraising formally began last fall we have now collected just over \$8000 toward a goal of \$150,000. In 2003 Jim Bartholomew helped kick off the fund raising effort by soliciting a major gift of \$5000. Since then, almost all the additional funds have been earmarked in memory of Chris Jeppeson and Jim Bartholomew. If you have not contributed yet to the Monument Fund, please consider doing so as soon as possible. Your contributions can be mailed to **SEA Monument, PO Box 425, Springfield, VA 22150**. All contributions will be acknowledged. If you know of corporate or private sources able and willing to make larger contributions, please contact Gerry Frazier, Monument Committee Chairman, at the same address, or by email at gfrazier@gisystems.net.