

# MEKONG EXPRESS MAIL



*The newsletter of the thailand-laos-cambodia brotherhood, inc. Volume 17, issue 3*

[WWW.TLC-Brotherhood.com](http://WWW.TLC-Brotherhood.com)

## *The “Real” River Kwai Story*

*The April 2016 Memorial Service on the Thailand-Burma Death Railway*

*By Paul Carter, TLCB Member*

On 25 April 2016 I attended the annual dawn memorial service at Hell Fire pass, Kanchanaburi, Thailand, as part of the annual Australian and New Zealand ANZAC Day memorial to allied POWs of the Thailand-Burma Death Railway.

In WWII the Japanese impressed over 60,000 Allied POWs (primarily Australians, New Zealander, Dutch, and some Americans) to build the 415 kilometer railway line from Burma to Thailand. Over 100,000 non-Thai civilians and 13,000 POWs perished during the construction of the railway due to inhumane working conditions, lack of shelter, scarce medical aid, little food, disease, and Japanese brutality which included executions. After the war, the allied-led Tokyo Tribunal found that for prisoners in all Japanese POW camps, “The death rate of Western prisoners was 27.1%, seven times that of POWs under the Germans and Italians.” Today 3,149 British Commonwealth soldiers lie buried at the head of the railway in Burma while at Kanchanaburi, 4,946 men are buried. The earth claimed many in between, never to be repatriated.

Hell Fire pass, located about 75 kilometers up the railway line, is a narrow, 85-foot-deep trench just wide enough for a train to pass. It was painstakingly cut through solid rock by POWs using nothing but hand tools. It received its name from figures of men toiling against the hellish red glow given off at night from fires, and the resulting smoke, which were built to provide light for the POWs to work.

Fewer and fewer Death Railway veterans remain, and this year’s ceremony was graced by two surviving Australians. One was Harold Martin, who, after capture in Singapore, spent two long and brutal years working on the railway. Harold survived the ordeal but was then shipped to Japan on one of the notorious “hell ships.” While being transported to Japan, U.S. submarines

*River Kwai is continued on page 4*



Harold Martin laying a wreath at the Kanchanaburi allied cemetery.

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## Editor's Notebook

Another "Members' Issue!" By that I mean the September issue is filled by contributions from the membership of the Thailand Laos Cambodia Brotherhood. What could be more appropriate? We start with the moving report by Paul Carter about the annual memorial to the victims of the notorious Death Railway; move on to Kerwin Stone's memory of his time at Ko Kha and his bittersweet return visit, next is Steve Sills and "The Disc Jockey and the Girls," followed with an excerpt from George Schreder's novel, "College Eye in the Sky." Go next to another installment of "Why I Joined the TLCB," this time by Dave Barton, and end with the first half of "A Guide to Space-A Travel Across the Pacific to Thailand" by Tom Ungelich. This issue of the *MEM* is truly a reflection of our dynamic membership. And let me add, we have some more great submissions already on hand for the next issue. So, guys and girls, keep those contributions coming!

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

## Job Opportunity !

The TLCB Website is our primary link to the outside world. Our Communications Committee Chairman, Jerry Karnes, has done an outstanding job creating and maintaining the site. He could use some help with this vital task.

Is there a member out there who would like to assist Jerry over the next year, and eventually assume the webmaster duties? Anyone with experience working with Word Press, MS SQL servers, Visual Studio, Facebook, and Adobe Acrobat who is interested in maintaining our website, please contact Jerry directly, at [jkarnes@texapp.com](mailto:jkarnes@texapp.com).

## Phillies Honor Vets on July 4th

As some readers know, John Duffin, who mails out the *MEM*, works for the Philadelphia Phillies. July 4th was a "Salute to Veterans" day at the ball park. All employees who are vets were encouraged to wear their respective military hats. John wore his blue TLCB cap. They had many patriotic pre-game presentations.

Says John, "The most memorable was that we vets carried the flags of all 50 states onto the field. There were more vets than flags, but we all 'marched' onto the field. As we came out of the tunnel thousands of fans gave us a standing ovation. Believe me, many of us had a tear or two. Many of us who were Vietnam/TLC vets appreciated this to the utmost."



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# *A Year at Ko Kha Air Station, Thailand—and a Return*

*By Kerwin B. Stone*

“K. Stone!” The voice blared over the sound system in the banquet hall. I was engrossed in a conversation with other attendees at a veterans’ organization meeting, and I assumed that I had heard it wrong. “K. Stone!” Again, the voice announced that name, and this time I looked toward the podium. As I approached the stage, the speaker announced that I had won a drawing. I always buy raffle tickets from every veterans benefit group that I see selling tickets, so I wondered what I had won. Then came the punch line: I had won a two week, all expenses paid trip to (dramatic pause) Vietnam! That sucked all of the breath out of me. I tried to graciously accept the prize, but my heart was beating fast at the prospect of going back to Southeast Asia after all these years. After another four months of debating the issue, I finally decided to go back. However, I thought that if I was going that far, then I would extend the trip and also travel to Laos, Cambodia, and Thailand, with the anticipated high point of my trip being a return to Ko Kha AS in far northern Thailand, where I had spent a year back during the Vietnam War.

## *Going Over, 1973*

Ko Kha AS was a tiny USAF base located about 10 miles south of Lampang, and about 60 miles southeast of Chiang Mai; it was less than a mile from the small hamlet of Ko Kha. The base was unusual in its construction. It was the better part of a mile long, but very narrow. Back in World War II the Japanese constructed it as a runway for its fighter planes; they apparently just bulldozed dirt up from the surrounding rice paddies so as to make some high ground in what was otherwise a very large plain prone to flooding during the monsoon season. The older Thais remembered well, and with strong emotions, that the Japanese fighters used to practice by strafing the Thais working in the rice fields. I was assigned to the 17th Radar Squadron in late 1972.

My entry into Thailand in early January 1973 was through U-Tapao RTAFB south of Bangkok, where my in-processing was performed. The Visiting Officers’ Quarters were located near the foot of the runway, and there were constant take-offs and landings by B52 bombers and U-2 recon aircraft, both of which seemed equally loud. After a five day wait, I caught a hop on a supply C130 which took me to Chiang Mai, and from there I went by ground transportation on to Ko Kha AS. I was assigned as a Squadron Surveillance Officer in the 17th Radar Squadron.



Entrance to Ko Kha AS.  
Photos furnished by the author.

Operationally, the squadron fell under the 14th Air Force, part of the Air Defense Command of the U.S. Air Force. In every other way, from administrative to all other kinds of support and defense, the squadron fell under the 13th Air Force, with all of those functions being provided by U-Tapao, about 300 miles south of Ko Kha. There was a small detachment of base personnel and Security Police, and there were also some small

but special detachments of communications and intelligence personnel. I doubt that there were more than about 40 USAF men in our squadron.

Dominating the landscape at Ko Kha AS was a giant, white radar dish at one end of the base; it was a four-horn Cassegrain monopulse radar, as best I can recall. It was operated by the 17th Radar Squadron from an adjacent building which had no windows and only limited access. This dish radar formed part of the SPACETRACK satellite tracking system, which literally circled the globe, and indeed most of our time was spent in tracking satellites and other space “junk” with particular attention being



Radar facility (17th Radar Squadron)

paid to U.S. orbiting laboratories, Soviet manned missions, and to maneuverable Soviet spy satellites. The installation was also part of the less-well-known Cobra Talon system. The site became operational about 1971 or so, and continued until the site was decommissioned in 1976 or so. Other articles have been written about how our mission may have changed when there were Soviet launches, or Chinese missile tests, or times of increased alerts (such as the Arab/Israeli War of 1973), but all that I feel at liberty to say is that for a few of us at least, the job entailed a great deal more than just tracking satellites. Most of my working hours were spent in a dark, dimly lit room with

*Ko Kha continues on page 5.*



Hell Fire pass ceremony. Photos courtesy of the British Embassy Press release of the ceremony, furnished by the author.

***“You feel a dreadful sense that something went seriously wrong here, but it’s hard to put it into context...” A POW who worked on the Death Railway***

torpedoed the Japanese convoy. Harold’s ship was sunk but he managed to survive by clinging to a makeshift raft for 4 days, drifting in the ocean until he was rescued by USS Pampanito, along with 72 other Allied soldiers.


This early morning service is one of the most moving veteran tributes I have experienced. The dark path down the wooded railway is dimly lit by bamboo candles hanging from the trees, a path hundreds slowly walked in the darkness without speaking, the jungle refusing to give up its stillness except for the sound of a thousand footsteps.

As one POW stated:

You can experience the heat, the humidity, and the mosquitoes at night. You can visit the railway cutting at Hellfire Pass and visit the graves and war museum in Kanchanaburi. But to understand what really went on there and how humans can treat each other in such a way is just unfathomable. You feel a dreadful sense that something went seriously wrong here, but it’s hard to put it into context...

As the first glimpses of light shown, the ceremony began, attended by the Australian, New Zealand, and American ambassadors, allied military attaches, as well as Thai dignitaries. The Australian embassy estimated approximately 1,110 attended. Later in the morning, a similar ceremony was held at the Kan-

chanaburi Cemetery.

If you have a chance, I highly recommend that you visit Kanchanaburi, the infamous Death Railway’s “Bridge on the River Kwai” (also the name of the famous British-American movie), the state-of-the-art “Thailand-Burma Death Railway Museum,” and Hell Fire Pass and its museum. There is also a documentary on-line regarding Harold Martin’s story. 

**About the author, Paul Carter.**

Paul Carter is 21-year Army veteran and master’s degree student in Thai studies at Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok. His thesis is on the Thai Forward Air Guides (FAGs) who were in Laos attached to the battalions of Thai Special Guerrilla Units. There were up to 20,000 Thai in Laos, 1970-74, involved in the fight, with just 100 FAGs liaising with the Ravens and other USAF assets.

He has been a TLCB member for almost two years, after having met Mac Thompson in Bangkok and accompanying him on two TLCB-related trips to Laos to inspect school funding projects. None of his 21-year service was in South East Asia. He did serve in Afghanistan and Iraq. Paul asks that if you served in Laos, Cambodia, or Thailand, particularly if you were involved with Thai, please contact him at carterpt82@aol.com

### **Ko Kha** *continued from page 3.*

radar scopes, sophisticated communications gear, log books, and other materials. I was in charge of my crew's operation of the radar; we had four or five separate crews, so that the radar was manned around the clock. My crew consisted of me (a captain), two lieutenants, and about five senior NCOs; among us, we handled the scheduling and tracking and reporting on satellites, along with a Space Object Identification capability. On occasion a loud bell would ring, meaning that a top secret communication had arrived, and while I would run to the cryptograph door to read the message, my crew would prepare for a shift in missions. The aftermath of the change in missions generally resulted in my conveying information to national security agencies via secure teletype. Ko Kha AS may have been at the periphery of the Vietnam War, but it was in the midst

of the Cold War. We had some times of increased Southeast Asia Alert Conditions (SEACONS), which were the counterparts to DEFCON conditions. Most of the time we were given a Green condition, sometimes a Yellow condition, but thankfully never a Red condition, which meant that an enemy overrun was imminent. When your defense is located 300 miles away, you really don't want anything bad to be "imminent." However, we were also on the edge of the Golden Triangle, famous for all of its opium production, and hence its own warring factions. Of course, the northern areas of Thailand were off-limits to U.S. personnel, as were the adjacent areas of Laos and Burma, and we took precautions for our own safety. For example, our little base being the high ground, the snakes (mainly cobras) also sought refuge there; when shots were heard, you always prayed that it was just a guard shooting at a snake, although that was not always the case. At the other end of the base was the formal entrance off the main highway running between Chiang Mai and Bangkok. That heavily travelled highway ran through the end of the base, not around it, and separated the main part of the base from its communications equipment. Most visible were two large black dishes facing south. I think that they were troposcopic scatter dishes.

The weather was much the same throughout Southeast Asia, although the monsoon season varied a bit depending upon where you were. Our monsoons obliterated most of August, and despite being on relatively high ground, we had to fill sandbags constantly in order to protect our high-voltage power station from the rising waters. The snakes, of course, wanted to occupy the same high ground that we were claiming.

We got along well with the Thais in our immediate area, and we spent a lot of time with them, including dining in their homes and playing with their children. A large part of northern Thai-

land was unspoiled by Western civilization back then, and there was much beauty to be found both in the natural features of the region and in the cultures and customs of the people. Bartering was an enjoyable and integral part of the economy. Although we

each longed for the next "mail call" (twice a week, generally), we also made the most of building relationships with our fellow airmen. There were too few of us to worry about observing many of the formalities between officers and enlisted men; we even had a consolidated open mess. The guys on my crew were the friends with whom I hung out when off duty. Rank had its place, and when things would start getting hot, rank played a major role, as is necessary in any well-functioning military unit.

The local cuisine was also very special. Most of it was what you would expect from a Chinese restaurant in the States (the Thais are an extract of the Chinese), perhaps with more spice. The most frequently

served dish was nothing fancier than a plate of rice with some kind of meat on top (which led to the first usage of the "don't ask, don't tell" slogan), referred to phonetically as Kow Pot. When eating fish, you learned to check whether the fish had been gutted before it was cooked. Most of us spent at least some time in local bars, where we would drink the heavy local beers or drink the deadly Mekong liquor, while chomping on some munchies in a little bowl on the bar. One time I made the mistake of peeling the fried batter off of one of those munchies, only to find under it one of those bugs that flies around lights at night. Very sobering. Curiously, the village of Ko Kha was home to a Mexican food restaurant; however, I don't think that any of us patronized that place. Back at Ko Kha AS, we were



My usual work attire.

### **Ko Kha** *continues on page 6*



Two women fishing in the klong for small crabs or fish

## **Ko Kha** *continued from page 5*

well fed, although the Thai cooks insisted upon using their own seasonings, judging by the taste. We had the same powdered eggs and reconstituted milk found at other bases.

Holidays were observed in varying manners. We were pleased to take part in the local Loi Krathong (1,000 candles) celebration, and we even learned the theme song for it and sang it for the locals. The parades were wonderful, with dragons and fireworks. The Tet holiday (lunar new year) was a time of heightened danger throughout Southeast Asia, so we did not venture out for that. Thanksgiving was a treat. In addition to turkey and dressing, we were surprised with a film of an old



Restaurant in village of Ko Kha (note the sign for Mexican Food)

(perhaps 10 years) NFL football game shown on a screen, grainy black and white, but still a touch of home. My most vivid recollection of Christmas time was sitting around the lobby of our barracks late one night, all of us being well lubricated and singing Christmas hymns and sharing stories about our families back home.

A civilian missionary and his wife came to Ko Kha about once every six weeks or so, and a few of us would gather for an ecumenical service. Those visits were vital reminders of the "World" we had left.

We had occasional visits from Thai military commanders and U.S. Air Force brass, all of whom wanted to visit our operations area. We would quickly adjust what we were doing in order to provide the kind of situation they would be expecting, i.e., tracking satellites. The low ambient lights in our operations area helped in that regard.

Our transportation from the base to Ko Kha took the form of bicycles, primarily. A very colorful Thai bus provided service to and from Lampang. Within Lampang we got around by baht taxis (small pickups with roofs over the bed and benches in



Bachelor officer's quarters (Bike is in front of my room)

At right, part of my crew, L to R: 1Lt Don Becker, MSgt Manuel Padilla-Montesinos, 1Lt Pat Houston, me. (Looks like Doi Suthep, near Chiang Mai. Ed.)



the bed), pedicabs (bicycle-powered rickshaws), and horse-drawn carriages. If we had an opportunity to go to Chiang Mai, we could catch an occasional ride on an Air Force vehicle, but mostly we just

took taxis (small sedans). We were told that in Thailand the person who hired the vehicle was criminally liable and was civilly responsible for any damages if there was a wreck. Our instruction in the event of a wreck was to throw plenty of baht on the seat, and then run; I only had to do this on one occasion, fortunately.

## **Coming Home**

Despite the close bonds which I formed with the members of my crew, the Air Force was careful to separate each person from every other person in the squadron, when it came time for rotation back to the World. I don't recall ever again seeing another member of my squadron since I left Ko Kha AS. I travelled by USAF bus from Ko Kha to Chiang Mai, caught a hop on a C130 back down to U-Tapao, and from there I got on a Freedom Bird. After numerous stops, including Tan Son Nhut outside of Saigon, I finally got back to the World. It was a bittersweet homecoming, when you take into account the horribly distasteful experiences in the San Francisco and Los Angeles airports that almost all troops had to endure; it was worse, however, when I returned to Dallas. I was in uniform, of course, and had to haul my bag through the crowded terminal to get to the arrival area where I was to meet my wife and son. I will never forget how the crowd parted ahead of me, much like Moses parting the Red Sea. No smiles, no "welcome home" efforts, but instead just a silence among the people, with a very clear message being sent to me by way of the frowns on all of their faces. There and then, I resolved that I would never speak of my service in Southeast Asia, so that I would never have to face such derision again. I expected that humiliating treatment in California, but never dreamed that it was waiting for me in Dallas, too.

## **Going Back, 2011**

When I returned to Thailand in 2011, incredible changes had occurred throughout much of northern Thailand. Chiang Mai was no longer the peaceful and calm northern capital of

**Ko Kha** *continues next page.*

Thailand; instead, it had become a bustling city, complete with McDonalds and Burger King signs everywhere. Paradoxically, relatively few Thais speak English compared to my earlier tour there. Learning English is apparently no longer a requirement in their schools. Further, a substantial part of the economy appeared to have changed from growing rice over to cultivating sugar cane. Those same changes had occurred in the Lampang area and in the Ko Kha region. At some point after the Air Force removed all of its equipment, the government of Thailand abandoned the old Ko Kha AS,



Typical restaurant, including display case. [This could be anywhere in Thailand! Ed.]

and the jungle is slowly reclaiming most of the base. The small part of the base which contained the communications dishes was devoid of any development, except that the concrete guard boxes had been dug up out of the ground and were sitting in the open. The azimuth readings were still readable inside the boxes. The old sign welcoming visitors to Ko Kha AS was still there, as was the perimeter road (actually, it only ran down one side of the base) and many of the permanent concrete block buildings such as administrative offices, three story enlisted barracks, two story officer barracks, motor pool buildings, and others. I had to literally crawl through thick brambles and overgrowth to get to my old barracks room, which had been stripped of

everything which could conceivably be reused elsewhere. The jungle has already reclaimed most of the base. However, the end of the base where the radar used to sit was fenced off, and was apparently sold to some commercial undertaking; a large office building sits there now, with its access coming from an approach that was not through the old base. Altogether, my return to Ko Kha was a deflating experience, although it did help to bring closure to that chapter of my life. Am I glad that I returned to Ko Kha? Definitely yes. Would I ever go back to Ko Kha again? Highly unlikely. However, other parts of Southeast Asia have blossomed since the end of the war and the departure of U.S. forces, and they do hold an appeal to me.



## Newest Members in the TLC Brotherhood

The 9 members listed below joined between the last issue of the MEM and the end of August. 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	Email Address
01745	USAF	Richardson	Stephen	Oak Hill	WV	stevexp@mac.com
01746	USAF	Boulter	Frank	Canton	MI	fboulter@comcast.net
01747	USAF	Bousquet	Louis	Raynhan	MA	LAbousq@Verizon.Net
01748	USAF	Paski	Thomas	Butternut	WI	Knowpeacefrog@yahoo.com
01749	AA	Moen	Karen	San Mateo	CA	Moen_Karen@yahoo.com
01750	USAF	Dierdorff	Todd	Colorado Springs	CO	foothillfella@outlook.com
01751	AA	Yang	Shaw	Las Vegas	NV	Yang_worm@yahoo.com
01752	USAF	Gangi	Michael	Sarasota	FL	MGangi@Comcast.Net
01753	USAF	Stoughton	Kenneth	Indianapolis	IN	KenStoughton@yahoo.com

# The Disc Jockey and The Girls

by Steve Sills

I had just turned 20 when I stepped foot in Nakhon Phanom (NKP), Thailand. I spent the first 14 years of my life in New York and the next four in Los Angeles before I joined the Air Force. Having been raised on both coasts, I thought I was quite worldly. In reality, the only other trips I had ever taken out of the country was a day trip to Tijuana, Mexico and six months in Amarillo, Texas for basic training (well, it seemed another



“Good Morning Naked Fannie!” Photos provided by Steve.

country to me).

One of the first things they did in orientation was show us movies about venereal disease, along with a narrative about men on a ship in the Philippines who were in such pain that they couldn't even be covered with a sheet. These men would never go home again. That movie had such a tremendous impact on me that I didn't go downtown for three days.

I was assigned to AFTN, the Armed Forces Thailand Network, working as a disc jockey on AFTN 770 and as newscaster and announcer on the television station. In addition to my DJ duties, I was also put in charge of production at the radio station, which meant creating public service spots and “commercials,” such as ads for the Base Exchange, which were aired during the shows.

Once the Air Force realized that there were no warnings strong enough to keep the airmen from going to downtown NKP, they tried to devise other ways to keep them safe and free from the onslaught of what are now called sexually transmitted diseases. Each woman who worked in the bars and massage parlors of NKP had an identification

card with an I.D. number assigned. Periodically, they were required to report to the local hospital for a test to make sure they were fit for “work.” A list was prepared with the numbers of those women who did not pass and it was provided to the radio station. At various times during the day, the disc jockey would read the offending numbers on the air. The hope was that each listener would write the numbers down, take them to town with them, meet the woman of his dreams, ask for her I.D. card, compare it to the list, and make the appropriate decision. Clearly, the Air Force didn't count on the combination of day-old Mekong whiskey and young male hormones. Airmen would get caught up in the heat of the moment and forget to ask for their companion's identification until after the date was over. Then, they would come back to the base, call the radio station, and ask if their girlfriend was on the list. We would either tell them they could relax or to head down to the base hospital. It seemed that the list always got shorter the week after payday. I always thought that might be the time when the girls had more money to pay off the doctors at the hospital in downtown NKP.

When I first arrived at AFTN 770, the presentation of the numbers was done in a formal manner without any fanfare. The announcer would open the microphone and simply read off the list of girls that had failed to pass muster. Along with my production partner, Jim Cissell, we decided to spice up the “reading of the numbers.” We started to prepare skits and backed up the readings with songs like “You Only Hurt the One You Love” and “it Only Hurts For A Little While.”

One of my fondest memories of my year at NKP was staying on the air for 53½ hours straight during the “Texts for Tots” marathon. During that time, we raised almost \$8,500 from the men and women on the base, which was used to buy three libraries, each consisting of 30 books, for each of the 77 school districts in Northeastern Thailand. The marathon ended with a beauty contest, dance performances by some of the local schoolchildren, and there was singing and dancing by the staff of AFTN 770, all of whom stayed awake for a little over 2.2 days.

I was reassigned to Norton Air Force Base in San Bernardino, California after I returned from Thailand. Norton was only one hour from my home in Los Angeles, so it was a nice assignment for transition back to civilian life in 1970; I tried to find a job in radio after my discharge, but was drawn back to my first love, which was performing. I was in a rock ‘n roll band before I joined the Air Force and ended up back in the music business when I got out. That lasted a few years until I realized that you need to make money to live; and to make money, you need to get a job. Eventually, I went back to school (thanks to the G.I. Bill) and became a CPA and an attorney. Whatever I've accomplished since 1969, my year at NKP was one of the most fun and fulfilling experiences of my life.



“Good Morning Judge!” Attorney/CPA Steve Sills today.





# Hognose Silent Warrior

*Excerpted from the book, by George Shreader*

Veteran Sgt. George F. Schreader served with the United States Air Force Security Service (USAFSS), 6990th Security Group, Kadena Air Base, Okinawa, from July 1971 to July 1973. During his two years in the Southeast Asian theater of operations, he functioned as an “Airborne Voice Processing Specialist” assigned to Combat Apple intelligence gathering operations, which were highly classified RC-135M (nicknamed “Hognoses”) missions manned by USAFSS “silent warriors” in the backend of the aircraft, and flown by Strategic Air Command flight crews of the 376th Strategic Wing, Kadena AB. (Combat Apple missions flew continuously, 24/7, for an incredible eleven years!)

A graduate of the Defense Language Institute, as a student of the North Vietnamese language, his specialty was intercepting and processing real-time voice communications of North Vietnamese Air Force tactical air activities, particularly those of MiG fighter aircraft. During the final air campaigns of the Vietnam War, he was twice assigned to temporary duty in Thailand. During the height of the Linebacker I air strikes against North Vietnam (July-September 1972), he was assigned TDY to Korat RTAB in support of Operation Teaball, which was a networked, centralized, real-time intelligence control center headquartered at Nakhon Phanom Air Base. Operation Teaball was supported by such airborne intelligence platforms as the RC-135s of Combat Apple and Burning Pipe, the U-2s of Olympic Torch, the EC-121s of College Eye Disco, Monkey Mountain in Da Nang, naval Red Crown in the Gulf of Tonkin, and several other air force and naval agencies. Teaball was the U.S. Air Force’s last and most effective airborne intelligence coordination program to combat the MiG threat by providing American fighter pilots and bomber crews with instant situational awareness capability.

Following is an excerpt from his soon-to-be published third book, tentatively entitled, “Hognose Silent Warrior,” in his “Generations at War” series of three books. This book series chronicles four successive generations of the Schreader family (all named George) and their connection and service to the U.S. military, and each person’s connection and participation in four historical American military battles from four different wars.

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## *College Eye in the Sky; Shut-Eye at the Chom Sarong Hotel*

Of the many attempts by the U.S. military to provide early warning of enemy aircraft actions during the course of the Vietnam War, College Eye was probably one of the longer-lasting operational programs to serve that mission. The Task Force utilized the Lockheed EC-121 Warning Star aircraft nicknamed the “Connie,” a diminutive version of the aircraft’s designation “Constellation.” These aging, four-prop aircraft were used extensively in Southeast Asia from 1965 to 1974 to provide early radar data warning and limited air control of Air Force fighters engaging in aerial combat with MiG fighters. The extent of their overall effectiveness and contribution to the early warning operation, both signals intelligence [“SIGINT”] and electronic intelligence [“ELINT”], but NOT communications intelligence [“COMINT”], has been diminished simply because of the fact that the missions were scaled back at the height of the air war, but nonetheless their task was an integral part of the overall effort to combat the MiG threat. The scaling back of their missions began as early as 1968, and by 1970 new deployments were discontinued in the expectation that they would no longer be needed. They were then re-deployed to Korat Royal Thai Air Base, Thailand in 1972 to support Linebacker I, and then later Linebacker II operations. In the Vietnam archives of today, there is a whole lot more written about College Eye primarily because it wasn’t nearly as highly classified as other programs—Combat Apple for instance, which you read very little about.

At the height of Linebacker I, from the end of July until the beginning of September, I was assigned to temporary duty with



An RC-135M “Hognose” refueling over the friendly skies of Thailand during a Combat Apple mission (note elongated nose). Photos provided by the author.

Aerospace Defense Command (ADC,) the 552nd Early Warning and Control Wing, recently resurrected at Korat RTAB, where a fleet of nine EC-121Ts had been re-deployed. As was typical, linguistic specialists and air mission supervisors (AMSS) of the 6990th were always being called upon to “supplement” other units to support their mission objectives. We always felt we were “bailing out” our sister units and other agencies, but

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then again at the same time, I presume we were being viewed by the personnel of these units as non-entities being given the chance to finally contribute something, as nobody actually knew what we did because the Air Force kept such a tight lid on us. These College Eye planes never did carry voice communications intercept operators (linguists like me) to gather COMINT, but the powers-to-be decided it was suddenly necessary to put Tactical-Air Controller linguists and AMSs on board the Connies when Operation Teaball was in full swing as the air strikes were intensifying in late July. As pointed out in the previous section, Teaball was yet another reinvention of Seventh Air Force to coordinate and dispense the varieties of real-time intelligence from a single dedicated control center, this time located in remote NKP away from the hub-bub of South Vietnam. Regardless of the politics involved, there I was in Korat to fly on dedicated mission orbits designated as College Eye Disco (orbits in the Gulf of Tonkin off the coast of the DMZ) with ADC, compliments of USAFSS.

At the very first College Eye mission briefing I attended, I was somewhat amazed at how much less formal it seemed to be conducted compared to the Combat Apple briefings. One thing was for certain. This wasn't SAC and this wasn't USAFSS. This was Aerospace Defense

Command with a whole bunch of guys who seemed fresh out of America, and they conducted things a little bit differently. They were an air force command with roots deep back in the homeland, but like everything else going on politically in the military world of Southeast Asia, they wanted to get their hands back in the juicy pie that was still being baked in Vietnam. So here they were back at Korat RTAB flying the "new & improved" College Eye Disco platform missions, again on the same antiquated and smelly EC-121s, some of the actual airframes rumored to have been brought out of mothballs. I'm still not sure what ADC's focus was on at the briefings, but it didn't seem to have the same level of intensity as the mission briefings back on Oki. But like the good trooper I was, I listened intently and learned, as you never knew when your world might suddenly be turned upside down, and I wanted to always be prepared for that. Flying combat in Vietnam didn't have much room for error no matter what mission platform you were assigned to fly on, and that credo has stayed with me for my entire life even long after Vietnam. Always be prepared for anything to happen, as life comes at you very fast sometimes.



EC-121 refueling at Da Nang AB while awaiting commencement of a College Eye Disco mission to cover air strikes against North Vietnam. The C-121 airframe was adapted from the Lockheed Super-Constellation airliner.

I also remember how surprised I was when I was issued a personal weapon as part of ADC's standard protocol for combat support missions. I had previously qualified as a small arms expert on rifles, but I don't think that made one hell of a difference anyway with ADC. All their crew members evidently had small arms handgun training, and since we were now on the crew, albeit temporary, it was probably assumed we also all were proficient in the handling of handguns. Most of the USAFSS guys I was with certainly were not. They just kept quiet about it and took the guns, but as for myself, I was unquestionably proficient – not at the direction of the U.S. Air Force, but because I was from the coal region of Pennsylvania, and a lot of coal region families grew up around a gun culture. I had routinely fired, and even owned some handguns, as a youth growing up, so it was a no-brainer to be issued one for self-defense. Even when I qualified during basic training back at Lackland AFB with the M-16 (easiest rifle I ever shot!), I remember the instructor singling me out and asking what part of the "East" I was from (must have been my accent). I replied, "Sir! Coal re-

gion, Eastern Pennsylvania, Sir!" He replied, "Thought so. You're a good shot, kid."

Anyway, each College Eye crew member at all the briefings drew a personal handgun to carry in the event of a shoot down of the plane. Keep in perspective that this was a whole lot more likely to happen on a College Eye mission, since

the EC-121s flew relatively low-altitude combat missions at 14,000 feet and below, well within range of a variety of SAMs and other anti-aircraft weaponry, not to mention the omnipresent MiGs. Being very familiar with handguns, I was surprised that the standard ADC issue was a Smith & Wesson .38 caliber revolver plus a few extra rounds. Not nearly enough to fight off your local, unfriendly Viet Cong bad guy. Hey, but at least it was a weapon available if I got shot down and survived. It was probably more of a security blanket, and all I could think of was Linus from the Peanuts comic strip. A handgun with a few cursory rounds wasn't going to do a thing if you were shot down and survived the bail out and had to fend off the whole Viet Cong army, but it was supposed to make you feel secure. Remember that ADC, as suggested above, was keeping its hands in the political pie with this "MiG detection" program of theirs, as inferior as it actually was compared to the Combat Apple platform. Somewhere in the air force arsenal of small weapons there was probably a leftover cache of S&W .38s, and ADC

*Hognose continues next page.*

got to keep the hoard of weapons for old time's sake. So they made them a part of the mission briefing protocol, this issue of handguns, to make the crew members feel so much more secure. It worked for them. Not for me.

I do remember a jolting thought about carrying a sidearm on the College Eye missions. It was really more of an awareness of the realization of all things military. USAFSS didn't issue any personal weapons of any kind. The primary weapon of USAFSS was the brain, and brains weren't issued. We were the crème-de-la-crop of the U.S. Air Force. We fought the war with intellect, not physical weapons. No need to issue guns to these guys, especially those guys on the Combat Apple crews flying on the RC-135s. Bullshit! We were every bit as susceptible to getting shot down as any other combat aircraft in the Southeastern Asian Theater of operations. It didn't take much for me to figure out that the real reason USAFSS didn't issue us personal weapons had nothing to do with our "intellectual" mission. It had to do with potentially not wasting good military supplies. Sure, they provided us with top shelf high altitude flight gear, and appropriately so! It was the best equipment available, and was state of the art for the period. We were equipped with gear to give us every chance of making it down to the ground alive, but that probably was not going to happen. So why bother to equip us with supplementary expensive hand guns or survival rifles when our chances of surviving a shoot down in an RC-135 were next to nil? Like I said before, if you managed to bail out of an RC-135 you were more than likely to be dead before you got to the ground. Why waste another unused weapon in the air force's arsenal, even if it was just another simple handgun, no matter how insignificant it was? From a logical standpoint, I had to agree.

I flew a total of thirty-one missions on a variety of nine different EC-121Ts. In my personal opinion, it was an awful plane to fly on, probably because by that time I was spoiled on the RC-135s. The Hognoses were the palace beauties of the air force fleet while the Connies were the dungeon beasts. These Connies were loud as hell inside, were uncomfortable to sit in no matter where you tried to sit or were assigned to sit, and the smell of exhaust fumes and hot oil and fluids that coated every visible mechanical part clung to your clothes and permeated your skin like a coating of sprayed aerosol lacquer. The ADC crews seemed to share some nostalgic adventure on these old planes, but it took me years after the war to appreciate my experiences on the legendary Connies. (I've mellowed some, but I still preferred the Hognoses.) As far as the missions went, nothing much spectacular ever happened that wasn't happening elsewhere. Oh, sure, I managed to gather a lot of intercept listening in on MiG coms, instantly translating and reporting actions and intent in a timely manner, but at the same time I was constantly aware that my fellow Tactical-Air Operator colleagues way up there on the Combat Apple plane were simultaneously intercepting the very same transmissions, only with much more clarity and for certain, with much more

expediency getting the real-time intel down to Teaball. These College Eye Disco missions were only flying for a few hours a day during daylight hours and only when certain air strikes were occurring. We'd fly the long "safe" route from Korat into Da Nang, South Vietnam via Cambodia, over all those crocodile-filled lakes, and along the coast of South Vietnam, then wait

***Our role on College Eye was nothing more than an absolute unnecessary duplication of effort—nothing more than to fulfill a political agenda. It was the epitome of military bureaucracy that was one of the marques of the Vietnam War...***

on stand-by in the flight line air-conditioned ops building. When the strikes went in that we were supposed to cover, we'd head back out into the Gulf to orbit and do our thing. Then back to Korat via the reverse route. The entire mis-

sion from briefing to de-briefing took about ten hours. Combat Apple was up there twenty-four/seven, and those missions lasted twenty to twenty-four hours each, with minimum twelve hour orbits alone. Our role on College Eye was nothing more than an absolute unnecessary duplication of effort—nothing more than to fulfill a political agenda. It was the epitome of military bureaucracy that was one of the marques of the Vietnam War, this one having a linguist on board these College Eye missions when the more superlative endeavor was already being conducted more efficiently on Combat Apple.

The only more pleasant memorable part of my TDY to Korat RTAB was staying at the Chom Sarong Hotel in downtown Korat City, one of the jewel historical cities of Southeast Asia and second in size only to Bangkok. What a beautiful place, Korat City, and what a lasting memory of this beautiful country. When we first arrived at Korat RTAB at the end of July, the air base was beyond overcrowded. Remember that this was at the height of the Linebacker I strikes over North Vietnam, and there was so much going on all around Southeast Asia at all the air bases in Thailand that they were all overcrowded. Korat RTAB was the largest front-line facility of the USAF during the war. Thirteenth Air Force was garrisoned there, and the principle Tactical Fighter Squadrons of the entire air war called Korat their home base. Practically every type of fighter aircraft of the Vietnam War was at one time assigned there. It was a hub of activity, and flyboys populated the base by the thousands. The residents of Korat City, of course, were overjoyed by the prospects. Business at the downtown hotels was thriving just handling the overflow of American personnel.

There were eight of us in my TDY group from the 6990th, six enlisted and two officers. I was the lowest ranked guy in the group and was only there because I was a newly available Tactical-Air Controller. The whole 6990th only had about a dozen of us "7-Ops," and they needed four of us and four AMS's to go to Korat for this project. The overcrowding worked to my advantage, however. At least, I guess it did. There were no billeting quarters available on base, so they "temporarily" put us up in what was supposed to be the best hotel in downtown Korat, which actually ended up being for more than a month before we were moved back to base in the final week of our TDY. Of course, you were always skeptical about being told

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you were going to the “best” place in town, but as it turned out, it probably was the finest hotel in the district.

The Chom Sarong Hotel was a really nice and friendly place, and we got the red carpet treatment from the hotel owners and staff, which obviously had a huge contract with the military to house both civilian contractors and military overflow personnel. We were in the center of the historic city in a welcoming part of town, and the cultural experience was beyond memorable. You always worried about being safe anywhere you were in South-east Asia, but this place seemed safer than most other places I had been previously. There always seemed to be a parade of some sorts passing by the hotel along the main street, and I’ve often wondered if it was mostly because there were so much American personnel staying there. I took photographs of some of the events, but had no idea what they were commemorating. I just watched and enjoyed the faces of the innocent children, light years detached from what was going on just a short distance beyond their secure borders. They didn’t seem to have a clue as to what was happening outside their microcosmic world. But nobody seemed to care. It seemed overly safe and secure. It actually gave me a good feeling, all war thoughts considered, and I welcomed the notion, cultural differences aside.

I took advantage of wandering around the nearby streets during my time off, and wandering in and out of the shops was nothing less than fun. I purchased some keepsakes that still remain today as personal reminders of the good memories I brought home. Korat was a friendly place, and the people genuinely seemed to like the Americans, aside from the money they were spending to support the local economy. The hotel was beyond clean, and they were constantly trying to impress their American visitors. I got to know a couple of the hotel workers behind the desk, and I was more than happy to help them with their English, which they were so enthusiastically eager to learn. I had a private, air-conditioned single room, room service (every time I came back into the room, it had been spotlessly cleaned... again!), meal vouchers, laundry service. It was amazing—a far cry from the old barracks back in NKP when I had to share the communal shower stall with the house girls at their convenience. Coming from the coal region of Pennsylvania, it was the first time in my life I had ever experienced what I guess you could call “amenities” at the Chom Sarong Hotel. I may have been perceived as a “privileged” American by the natives of Korat, but nobody had ever waited on me up to that point in my life. To be honest, I didn’t like it. It just wasn’t me, but I tolerated it and respected them for their efforts.

The one thing I did like tremendously, however, was being down at poolside. The Chom Sarong Hotel had a real fine swimming pool with lounges and tropical umbrellas and, best of all, you just had to clap your hands and out came a waiter or waitress with your drink of choice! They remembered everything about your habits, including what drink you preferred. On the first day I had ordered a specific type of tropical drink. They remembered it, and I never had to name it again, unless I wanted to change to a beer or something else. Looking back

in retrospect, there was something very bizarre and probably not right about this setup. I was flying College Eye combat missions every other day (a special bus would pick us up at the hotel and take us to the flight line), and on the in-between days, there I was clapping my hands ordering drinks around a tropical pool. But this was the way the Air Force operated on occasion. The notion of being a privileged air force flyboy never hit home more than it did on that TDY to Korat while staying at the Chom Sarong Hotel. I almost hated to leave when they finally moved us back to base at the end of August for my final week of TDY. Almost. I was sorry to leave on one account, but glad on the other. I didn’t belong here. This wasn’t the kind of air warrior I was meant to be. This wasn’t the way war should be waged. These beautiful people of Thailand neither deserved nor should have welcomed our presence the way they did. This whole region of the world was engulfed in a horrible struggle of ideologies, far removed from the ideologies of western civilization. I re-entered the world of conflict, interrupted only briefly by what would become a fleeting pleasant memory in the years to come. I left my short respite in Korat at the doorstep of bliss, and then passed again across the threshold of the horrible world beyond the borders that was Vietnam. There was so much more ugliness yet to come before this war would be over. 

*The first two self-published books in the Generations at War series: *Unsung Hero*; *Forgotten War and Sergeant Doughboy*—both by G. F. Schreader—are available in hard copy from Amazon and Barnes & Nobel, and also available as e-versions on both Kindle and Nook.*



The author at Korat before a College Eye mission. Photos provided by the author.

## *Why I Joined the TLC Brotherhood*

### *Dave Barton*

I had thought for a while about contributing my reasons for joining the TLC Brotherhood, and after reading some of the newer members' inputs, I figured it was about time.

I enlisted in the Air Force in June 1965, seven days after I graduated from high school in Langhorne, Pennsylvania. Things were heating up over in Southeast Asia and I didn't particularly want to wait around for Uncle Sam to call my number. I did my basic training at Lackland AFB and headed off for my first duty station at Keesler AFB, Mississippi. I figured I would get my training out of the way—Protective Coating Specialist, not a very glamorous occupation—and then volunteer for duty overseas. As my fellow painters began receiving orders to Nam, I knew my chance was right around the corner.

To my surprise, instead I received orders to Japan. That was a choice that I had even forgotten about putting on my dream sheet. My father had mentioned to me since that he had been stationed there after World War II, during the occupation. So off I went to Misawa Air Base in northern Japan for three years and while there, opportunity knocked, and I cross-trained into Corrosion Control, which got me out of painting houses and onto working aircraft.

In 1971 after a very short stint at Barksdale AFB, Louisiana, and working on B-52s and KC-135s, I finally received orders to SEA, the 40th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron (ARRS) at Ubon Royal Thai AFB. I flew out to San Francisco in July 1971, bused over to Travis AFB, caught the contract flight out, and landed at Tan Son Nhut, in Vietnam. I never got off the plane; it was there to drop off the troops headed to assignments up country. Next stop was Bangkok. Thankfully we got there late in the day and missed the klong flight, so we got billeted downtown. It was a relief to say the least after spending what seemed like forever on that plane.

Anyway, the following day we were bused back to the MAC-THAI/JUSMAGTHAI (or whatever they called themselves at the time) side of the airport, where I got my indoctrination into the C-130 aircraft and troop seats. First stop Ubon, which I thought would be my home for the next year. Nice looking base.

However, I was to be disappointed. When the personnel reps read my orders, they informed me that the 40th was not at Ubon and they weren't sure where it was based. By the next day, they had figured it out and told me that I would be going further up country, and with very large grins on their faces, they broke the news that Nakhon Phanom would be my base of choice for the next 365 days. I figured one base was a good as another so I had no complaint, although Ubon certainly fit the bill for me. Back on the C-130, next stop NKP. As we approached the field, and looking out the small side windows, I was expecting to see a large city with the base situated within its confines. What I did see was a jungle of trees and not much else until we touched down. Again anxiously looking out the windows, I realized why the Ubon folks had sent me off with "Cheshire Cat" grins. Needless to say it wasn't what I was expecting.

Grabbed my bags and got into the back of a Dodge Power Wagon which took me to Tiger Village; a grouping of hooches set apart from the other barracks on the base—very exclusive digs. I've never been much for hot climates, especially for sleeping, so it wasn't long before the six of my fellow boarders decided to submit a form 332, self-help request for materials to board up the inside of the hooch. Of course this was with



Dave Barton at Nakhon Phanom in 1971. Photos furnished by the author.

the understanding that we would all chip in and purchase a window air conditioner from the BX and have the civil engineering folks come out and install it for us. That first night in air-conditioned comfort made it all worthwhile. It became the local hangout for all the Thai pooyings in the area who were doing laundry and cleaning.

Duty kept us very busy. Twelve hour shifts, six days a week. Obviously with the climate of Thailand things had a tendency to deteriorate if you didn't keep after them. The helicopters and support equipment were no exception. When I got there, things were looking rather "used." It took a concerted effort over that year and a lot of jawing with the Ops folks to keep the choppers in Phase Inspection for an extra day so we could work our magic. And then there were the occasional sheet metal repairs to patch bullet holes when "Charlie" got too close.

For all that, it was very rewarding working on the HH-53Cs, Super Jolly Green Giants. Knowing that keeping them flying meant that those pilots who might be shot down over North Vietnam would have a good chance of being rescued by our crews. And while I was there we did make a few rescues. One

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included Capt. Roger Locher, who by coincidence would be my Vice Wing Commander with the 432 Tactical Fighter Wing back at Misawa Air Base in the late 1980s. Half-way through my NKP assignment, I was lucky enough to wrangle leave and



Dave Barton today.

returned to Japan and married Chiyo, now my wife of 44 years. So NKP has many memories for me. What I thought would be my final excursion into SEA was again to Thailand at Udorn RTAFB in 1975, when things were pretty much winding down. I ran the aircraft wash rack during my 6 months there with a really fun group of Thai workers who took me into their homes and on trips around to various sites in the Udorn area and up country to Nong Khai to see the “White Buddha.” I’ll never forget the day the Thai King visited. It was quite an experience for everyone. The wash rack gang dragged me along and I remember everyone having to kneel down when he approached and walked by. Evidently the King could not look up to any of his subjects, and we could not look down on the King. So kneeling or sitting was the polite form of address. After this abbreviated tour of

duty, I left in January 1976 leaving with a great fondness for Thailand and the Thai people.

After Udorn I finished the last 6 months of my short tour obligation at Clark AB, Philippines. Then off to Kadena on Okinawa for 3 years, back to the states and Eglin AFB in Florida, where I was reintroduced to the HH-53 with the 55th ARRS in 1979. A couple years later I was selected for reassignment to Headquarters Military Airlift Command (MAC) at Scott AFB, Illinois. I spent 6 years there as the Command Corrosion Control Manager and with many, many TDYs around the states, Europe, and the Pacific.

As fate would have it, I returned to Misawa Air Base in 1987 when the build up there had begun after the Korean Air Lines was shot down by the Russians. Misawa was not the same “Sleepy Hollow” it had been in 1967. That brings me to the final excursion back to Thailand. I had the opportunity to accompany the Wing F-16 aircraft back to Korat RTAFB for a Cobra Gold exercise in 1989. Although we were only there for a few weeks, it sure brought back some great memories of friends and the beauty of Thailand and its people.

That pretty much brings me full circle. I retired from the Air Force in 1996 after 30 years as an Aircraft Maintenance Manager and Chief Master Sergeant. That also is the reason why Thailand holds a special place in all my fondest memories over that 30-year career.

Although I’m sorry to say I haven’t been able to attend any of the Annual Reunions yet since I’m still living in Japan and not getting back stateside very often, I want to be able to support the good work that the Brotherhood is doing in Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia. That has to be my primary reason for joining so that I can give back to all those wonderful people who made my stay there so memorable. Knowing that there are so many of them who just don’t have the same means that we have to lift themselves up and be all that they want to be. If I can contribute to their successes in just a small way, by my membership in the TLC Brotherhood, then I feel my time with them is fulfilled.



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## *A Guide to “Space-A” Travel Across the Pacific to Thailand, Part 1*

*By: Thomas R. Ungleich*

In January 2012, my wife and I embarked upon my first attempt to fly military aircraft on a space-available basis in a retiree status. This was planned to be an overall ambitious trip across the Pacific Ocean to Thailand, and possibly China.

The title is somewhat misleading, as there have not been any regularly scheduled USAF cargo flights into Thailand in almost 10 years. On rare occasions one might see a flight to U-Tapao or Bangkok on a departure screen at Hickam or Travis, but there is no guarantee that those flights would take Space-A passengers. Some of these flights will be supporting an Exercise, like Cobra Gold, and will be carrying troops with their weapons, precluding non-duty passengers. However, in

general, one can attempt to fly as close as Singapore on scheduled cargo aircraft.

### **Background**

In 2008 my wife and I flew commercial airlines to Thailand for a vacation, and I calculated that I had spent roughly 40% of the entire trip’s expenses on commercial airfare. Consequently, I vowed to try to reduce that sum as much as possible on my next trip, which would take place after I retired from civil service. In the fall of 2011, I started a rough draft of a vacation

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plan that would take my wife and me from Florida (our home) to California via commercial air (for convenience), and then from Travis AFB, California, to Hawaii (where we were going to stay one week at our timeshare condo), then to Japan, and hopefully to Singapore, via U.S. Air Force Air Mobility Command (AMC) aircraft.

From Singapore we would, by necessity, fly to Bangkok via commercial air. Later, if everything went smoothly, we would fly commercial into China, ending up in Hong Kong. From Hong Kong we would either fly back to Japan to return to the USA via Space-A, or, if we could obtain a reasonably priced commercial air ticket, fly directly back to the USA. By using military aircraft for roughly half the total trip miles, I estimated that I would be saving over \$1,000 in commercial airfares.

### ***The Saga Begins***

Due to American Airlines (AA) partially ruining an earlier mini-vacation to Martinique, French West Indies, we were in possession of two \$250 vouchers for future AA flights. I decided to use those vouchers to start our journey by taking an AA flight from Fort Lauderdale to San Francisco right after New Year's Day 2012. Since Travis AFB is located some 65 miles from San Francisco Airport, and we had several pieces of luggage, I decided that it would be best if I rented a car at San Francisco. Of course, this decision would increase the total cost of our vacation expenses, but it turned out to be worthwhile. Consequently, we arrived in San Francisco on the afternoon of Thursday, January 5, 2012. I navigated the interstate highways to Fairfield, CA without much difficulty, but by that time it was dark and the signs were not clear to me, this being my first trip to Travis AFB since I returned from Southeast Asia in 1973. A couple of wrong turns resulted in a delayed arrival at the gate to Travis. I erroneously stopped at the visitors center thinking that I needed a vehicle pass, but after standing in line for 15 minutes I was told that it was no longer necessary to obtain a pass for a rental vehicle.

Signs to the AMC Terminal were adequate. At the counter we were told that there had been a C-5 scheduled to go out that evening, but it had been cancelled. That action resulted in a throng of people still inside the terminal at about 10:00 pm. We signed up for flights to Hawaii, as that was where we needed to get within a week. I should have signed up earlier, as will be more fully explained later. We went over to billeting, where we had already reserved a room on base for the night at a reasonable rate of \$39.00 (the same room is now \$60.00). I set the alarm early for the next morning because there had been a flight on the screen destined for Hickam AFB, HI. Being somewhat exhausted from a long day of traveling, we quickly cleaned up and went to sleep.

After less than a satisfactory night's sleep, the alarm woke us up and we quickly left the room. At that time the front desk clerk informed me that it was "UTA Weekend," which meant

that the Reserves were drilling, so retirees would not be able to obtain rooms on base the next two nights. So we packed up, checked out, and headed for the AMC Terminal.

This being my first Space-A flight as a retiree, I was a fish out of water, with so many people running around, and a large group gathered at the TV monitor that showed the flights in and out for the next two days. I determined that I needed to "check in," which I did. I then looked to see where my name was on the roster, and was very disappointed to see that my wife and I were at the very bottom of a long list of Category VI, which is where the retirees are. Over the next hour more people kept arriving, mostly women and children, so I started to

***It seems that the Army has privatized its lodging at Tripler Hospital and Schofield Barracks, so their room prices were almost \$150 per night. The Navy Lodge, Hickam AFB billeting, and Pearl Harbor were full, so it was back to Travelocity to look for a cheap hotel in Honolulu. We ended up at the marginal Pagoda Hotel.***

ask some guys what was going on. It was then that I received the education that I probably should have obtained a couple months earlier, as follows:

When I was on active duty or a DoD Civilian overseas, I could usually travel Space-A on leave status in Category III, which greatly improved one's chances of getting selected for a flight. Now I am flying in military retiree status, basically the bottom of the pile

and the last group to be called for vacant seats. However, the one positive aspect of flying retiree status is that one has a full two months to sign up in advance. This is unlike the active duty guy, who is supposed to be on leave status before he can sign up for a Space-A flight. At some point in the foggy past I had known that fact, but it had escaped me. Consequently, my decision to wait until I arrived at Travis AFB to sign up for flights turned out to be a near-fatal mistake.

My second mistake was planning to start my trip right after New Year's Day, instead of waiting another week for the kids attending Defense Schools (DoDDS) in the Far East to clear out of the transportation pipeline. In this instance, apparently many moms had procrastinated getting to Travis, which created a large backlog by the date I arrived there.

On-base billeting for retirees on a space-available basis is never guaranteed. Most often you do not know whether the lodging building will be undergoing renovations, or if the base will have an exercise, conference, Reserve weekend, or some other event. In my case at Travis, the Reserve weekend resulted in my only being able to stay on base 2 nights out of 4. The other 2 nights were spent at a low-rated motel in Fairfield, at an extra cost of about \$30 per night. Fortunately, because I had a rental car, getting to the off-base motel did not require expensive taxi rides, but it did add to the total trip expenses.

Anyway, that first day was mostly spent at the air terminal trying to figure out the flight patterns and being demoralized at, (1) the continued changes on the TV monitor—all the C-5 flights kept being canceled (which could have taken as many as 73 passengers each), and (2) more moms with kids continuously showing up

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*Space-A continued from page 15.*

By Saturday, it was becoming evident that I needed to develop a Plan B. So after that morning's first flight departed, I went to lodging to use their computer and I checked Travelocity for flights from San Francisco to Honolulu. Fares were high, almost \$300 each for a one-way ticket! After lunch we went back to the terminal, and I resumed talking to some of the guys who have been flying Space-A for quite a while. One of them told me that there might be cheaper flights out of Oakland airport, maybe even with direct flights to Maui, where our timeshare is located. So, later that afternoon, after the last flight to Hickam had been called, I went back to lodging's computer and started checking for Oakland departures. Sure enough, there were some much cheaper flights from Oakland, either one or non-stop to Maui. Then I started doing the math: (a) Each additional day in billeting - \$39; (b) each additional day with rental car about \$40; (c) flight from Oahu (if we could get there by Space-A) to Maui about \$69 each person, plus baggage charges; (d) each day I procrastinated without buying a commercial ticket from Oakland to Maui, about \$30 additional each ticket. Consequently, I decided to wait at Travis only one more day to see what would happen, as there was a C-5 aircraft on the schedule the next morning going to Hickam and then on to Yokota.

***Diverting to Commercial to Hawaii***

On Sunday morning the C-5 to Hickam did not materialize—it was re-routed directly to Japan. There was, I think, a C-17, but it was only advertised for about 20 seats, tentative, not firm. When role call came, the retired guy and his wife I had been speaking with were the last Space-A's to get on that flight—and he had signed up six weeks earlier. According to the TV monitor, there were no flights scheduled for Hickam the next day. Therefore, I went back to billeting and booked a flight on Delta Airlines from Oakland to Maui. That flight cost me \$179 for each ticket.

On Monday morning we had to wake up very early to catch our flight at Oakland. It was a hassle because of rental car issues and TSA security. However, we cleared security just in time and boarded our flight as scheduled.

Several hours later we arrived at Kahului Airport, Maui, without incident. As I did not make a previous rental car reservation, I ended up paying more than I should have had to pay. Anyway, we then called the condo management company and were able to check in 2 days early. The rest of our stay on Maui was very enjoyable.

While on Maui I attempted to make firm plans for our relocation to Oahu and anticipated Space-A flight from Hickam AFB. I did make commercial airline reservations from Maui to Oahu, a rental car reservation, and sent a sign-up form by email to Hickam AFB Pax Terminal asking to be put on a Space-A list for Japan and Okinawa. Then I started calling all the military lodging offices on Oahu, but was disappointed that I was unable to get into any of them. It seems that the Army has privatized its lodging at Tripler Hospital and Schofield Barracks, so their

room prices were almost \$150 per night. The Navy Lodge, Hickam AFB billeting, and Pearl Harbor were full, so it was back to Travelocity to look for a cheap (if there is such a place) hotel in Honolulu. We ended up at the marginal Pagoda Hotel.

Well, after 10 glorious days in Paradise, it was back to Kahului airport for our short flight to Honolulu. Hawaiian Airlines now has a virtual monopoly on the route since Aloha Airlines went bankrupt a few years ago, so they could get away with charging us almost as much for the "extra" baggage as they did for the tickets! Upon arrival at Honolulu we decided to go to

***This would become a pattern—waking up at oh-dark-thirty only to find out upon arrival that your hoped-for flight was canceled.***

the Hickam Passenger Terminal before going to the hotel. The sergeant at the desk said she did not get my email sign-up from the prior week. So, I had to walk over to USO and print out a copy of my email, which she then accepted. This caused us to move up the Space-A roster considerably.

The TV monitor's schedule for the next day was encouraging, although we really preferred to see some old friends on Oahu. Anyway, the next morning we woke up very early to run over to Hickam, only to find out the first flight to Yokota had been cancelled. This would become a pattern—waking up at oh-dark-thirty only to find out upon arrival that your hoped-for flight was canceled. We did not get selected for the other flight. As we then knew we would be staying another night, we called one of our friends to arrange dinner. As a point of information, it turned out that Hickam AFB is an excellent location from which to obtain flights to the Western Pacific. They seemed to have at least two flights a day going to someplace in Japan or Korea, and even announced occasional flights to Philippines and Australia.

The next morning there was a flight to Guam and Yokota, but we were not called due to the large number of Filipinos wanting to go Space-A to Guam and from there get a cheap commercial flight to Manila. Later, we ran into another couple we know, who were in Hawaii for appointments at Tripler hospital. Later that evening we went back over to the Pax terminal and noticed a flight early the next morning going to Kadena AB, Okinawa. Knowing that there used to be frequent C-130 flights from Kadena to Yokota, we decided to go to Kadena, if we could get on.

Consequently, that night we went to bed early, so that we could check out by 4:30 am and get to the base for roll call. When we arrived there was much confusion, and it turned out that the departure time had been moved up, so they were already calling names off the Space-A roster! Thus, I had to scramble to get the bags out of the rental car so that we would be "ready" if called.

We were very happy to be called for the KC-135 flight to Kadena, and were quickly processed and put into a holding room. I was charged a total of \$9.10 for two box lunches. However, the crew had overslept or something, so we ended up staying in the room for over an hour.

**The conclusion of Tom's Space-A saga will appear in the December issue of Mekong Express Mail.**