



Mekong Express Mail

Volume 7, Issue 4

THE THAILAND LAOS CAMBODIA BROTHERHOOD, INC.

www.TLC-Brotherhood.org

1968: Waiting for NVA sappers with 10 rounds of ammo

by Bob Bennett

I was lying in my bunk in the barracks at Duluth International Airport, an Air Defense Command base, in early September 1967, when I heard someone coming down the hall hollering my name. I stuck my head out and let him know where I was. The runner came up and handed me some papers and said "Bennett, you're to report to HQ. You have orders cut for Thailand." My first thought was, "Where is Thailand?"

I also had orders to go on Temporary Duty (TDY) for two months to Mountain Home, Idaho, where I was trained in the Communications System used on the F-4: I was excited about the F-4 because I had heard it was a great plane and interesting to work on. I was going to get to work on something other than the ARC-34 and ARC-27 radios that were so prevalent at Duluth. I was also to spend about six weeks TDY at Lackland in Texas to train on radio cryptographic scramblers on the KSEC/KY8 and the TSEC/KY28, used for scrambling and descrambling radio transmissions.

I left the U.S. on December 22, 1967 on my way to Thailand. Our first stop was Honolulu, Hawaii - nice. The second

was at Tan Son Nhut AFB. That is where I finally realized, due to seeing so much armament, that there was serious stuff going on. The third stop was Clark Air Base, Philippines where some of the civilian staff or dependent wives gave us Christmas cookies and treats during our short stay. Their hospitality was very much appreciated. We finally touched down in Bangkok, Thailand on December 24. It was 94 degrees and during the bus ride to the billet I saw some

naked kids washing down an elephant in a klong. I knew I was not in Kansas or Missouri any more. I think it was the 26th when I took a C-130 Cargo hop to Udom, which would be-

come my duty station.

When I arrived at Udom RTAFB I found I had just missed the Bob Hope Show, which had been there a day or two earlier, so I did not get to see Raquel Welch. What a disappointment

that was! When I checked in at the radio shop I learned that SSgt Charlie Davis, who had left Mountain Home a few weeks before me, had already alerted the shop chief that an "experienced" ARC-34/ARC-27 specialist was coming in and he would be able to help reduce the huge backlog of over 60 inoperative radios used by the 7th Airborne Command and Control Squadron (ACCS). That "experienced specialist" was me.

My opportunity to concentrate on RF-4s

and F-4Ds went out the window and I worked daily for six months straight to eliminate the ARC-34 backlog. All that work gave me a great sense of accomplishment because it helped keep those 7th ACCS C-130Es flying.

The squadron was assigned to the 432nd Tactical Reconnaissance Wing at Udom. Their C-130Es were flying command

see *Sappers*, continued on page 4



1968: Bob Bennett with black powder Kentucky long rifle made by villagers near Udom.

2007 Dues Payable As of January 1st

See Page 5 for particulars

The Changing Face



Without your donations this modern language lab could be only a dream.



Above, students at Kham Thaw Elementary School, Kham Thaw Village, perform traditional Thai dance for their TLCB guests.



Below, the library at Na Sai Elementary School.

*By John Sweet
Assistance Committee Chairman
Photos by the author and John Middlewood*

The plane circled the runway at Nakhon Phanom several times in the heavy rain before landing next to the new airport terminal. The control tower built in 1968 still stands adjacent to the flight line but was replaced several years ago. The face of Nakhon Phanom is changing so much that tourists know nothing of the history played out here during the Vietnam War.

The road to downtown nine miles away has a center strip divider almost the entire distance filled with flowers and shrubs surrounded by modern street lights. The days of the old baht bus chugging through rut-filled mud roads are memories of days long gone.

Downtown is hardly recognizable, with new hotels, businesses and occasional new community shopping development. There are new restaurants along the Mekong and construction visible across the river in Thaket, in Laos. Plans are under way to tear down and redevelop the waterfront adjacent to the old "Uncle Ho's Clock tower" in the next few years.



The old Nakhon Phanom still remains, however, within easy walking distance in any direction to small villages surrounded by rice fields and water buffalo where the vast majority are subsistence farmers still living off the land as they have done for centuries. Ancient wooden homes with tin or thatched roofs, which we remember from our youth, remain a testimony to the continued abject poverty, which prevails in the land of smiles.

Even here, great strides forward are being accomplished by the continued efforts of the TLC Brotherhood Assistance program which is radically transforming entire communities by involvement of local officials, teachers and citizens in self help projects funded by the TLCB.

Through coordinated outreach planning by John Middlewood, our TLCB Representative at Nakhon Phanom,

Of Nakhon Phanom



Assistance chairman John Sweet, on behalf of the TLC Brotherhood, accepting one of the many awards our organization has been presented with in Thailand, in gratitude for our help for needy children.

Left, please notice the sign behind these cute little performers at Kham Pawk Elementary School, Kham Pawk Village.



Kham Thaw Elementary School. Here is an excellent view of the result of a major on-going Assistance program—the concrete tables and benches at this little school. If you look closely you will see "TLCB" painted on the back edge of the bench in the foreground. We don't require this kind of recognition, but it does teach the children that somebody back here cares about them and their learning environment.

Below, that cowboy is our own Mr. John Middlewood, TLCB's Assistance agent in Northeast Thailand. Hundreds, indeed maybe thousands, of young people of Isan have a far brighter future because of his urging and encouraging, and bringing in the financial resources of our Assistance donors. At right, John Sweet's wife Nancy looks on.



administrative oversight and fund raising by the TLCB Assistance Committee, and, especially, the donations of TLCB members, thousands of children have seen direct lasting improvement in their daily lives.

At regional meetings held with local community leaders at nine different schools planning was discussed on developing the most needed self help projects over the next three years. The consensus, in order of need, was water filtration, (under \$600) bathrooms (a six-unit bathroom approximately \$1,000 in materials) tables and benches, libraries and desks and chairs.

There is renewed vitality and hope within these communities for, as they achieve results, they continue to expand their own economic development and involvement. Nakhon Phanom is changing, and the TLCB is changing the face of Nakhon Phanom.

posts over Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. They controlled the battles – thus the need for cryptographics. They had flown out of Udon for some time and were finally assigned there in March of 1968. Each 130-E carried about 60 radios that constantly cycled transmissions. They created a lot of radio work for me.

This extended period of work also got me a two-week TDY, via Bangkok and Tan Son Nhut, to Clark AFB to attend "Corrosion Control School". It was a pseudo R&R, since we were not allowed to receive R&R by being in Thailand, but the trip to Clark and stay at the "Marlon Mansions" was worth the 6 months of solid work it took to earn it.

While at Udon I visited the Ramasun 7th RRFS field station a couple of times. One of the guys stationed there was from my hometown area of Bowling Green, Missouri. I remember being impressed by their PX, bowling alley and air-conditioned billets, compared to the slat and screen wire barracks at Udon. If this was normal, I could not figure out why the Army thought the Air Force always had better accommodations.

During the latter part of my stay at Udon, Denny Moore and I held classes and taught English to Thai students, both boys and girls that attended the SEATO Trade School in Udon Thani. The students always wanted to sing songs like "Frowers in Your Hair" or "Up, Up and Away in My Beautiful Barroon". Our biggest accomplishment was teaching some of them how to pronounce their R's without sounding like L's and their L's without sounding like R's. I felt that our attempt at being ambassadors paid off. We made some good friends at Udon.

During the full year I think I worked on nearly every type of aircraft and helicopter on base as well as transients. I was even charged with putting a UHF radio on a pick-up truck so the ops people could talk to the pilots as they were approaching the base. However, I mostly worked on the C-130E flying command posts and A1E Sandy Spads because they always had radios that needed repairing.

My experiences were fairly run-of-the-mill, except for meeting some of the spooks, a grumpy samlor driver or snake once in a while. That was until my most exciting experience, which took place in late July of 1968. I was going to the radio shop for the night shift – 11 p.m. to whenever in the a.m.. I usually got off at 7 a.m. unless there were some problem birds that had to have their communication systems repaired. I went to grab a bite before my shift and just as I was going into the chow hall I heard a heck of a racket down toward the end of the flight line. Someone said they thought it was an ammo dump accident or something.

When I got to the radio shop I was told to report to Air Police headquarters because I had been designated as an AP "augmentee". I had no idea what an AP "augmentee" was, but I went on over to check in at AP HQ. When I got there, I and about 10 to 15 other "augmentees" were issued M-16s and a couple of clips of ammo, five rounds in each clip. We were then put on a truck and taken down the flight line to where I had heard the noises earlier. They dropped us off along the end of the flight line two or three at a time about every 100 yards or so and told us to spread out keep our eyes open and not to shoot

anything.

I backed out into the weeds, which is where I thought I was supposed to go, and squatted down. I never even thought of the snakes and such. All I could think was, "What am I doing here. I'm a radio repairman." Within a half hour or so flares lit up the whole runway for what seemed to be an hour or more. After being out there for quite a while after the flares went out, I saw headlights coming along the flight line. They stopped from time to time. It was dark, I did not approach the headlights and they just went on by me. I stayed where I was. Throughout the night while I watched the cobalt blue lights along the runway and flight line, my imagination really started to work on me. I started imagining I was seeing figures darting between me and the lights. It was so dark I could not discern much of anything, but I sure did a lot of thinking that night.

Unfortunately, I cannot remember a thing that was important about what I was thinking other than "What am I doing here and what is expected of me?" About 5 a.m. another set of headlights came down and around the end the flight line but this time, they were using a spotlight to shine along the perimeter as they drove around. When they got abreast of where I was, I stood up. They spotted me and yelled for me to approach the truck. They wanted to know what I was doing out there. I told them they needed to tell me what I was doing there.

I then found out that they had picked up all the other troops around 2 a.m. when I had seen the first truck come by. I had apparently been out there by myself from 2 a.m. until 5 a.m.. I felt a combination of fear, stupidity and anger. Rather than take me with them at that time, they said they would radio for another truck to pick me up. They even took the M-16 away from me and gave me more time to think. The next truck came about a half hour to 45 minutes later as it was starting to get light. I could have walked up the flight line in that amount of time, but I did not want to take the chance of having someone see me in the subdued light after what had happened the night before and mistake me for what I now know as a "sapper".

One of the memories I have of that night was when I got off the truck and chambered a round, an AP that was directing us made me pull the clip, eject the round and put it back in the clip and then he said, "Don't shoot anything or anybody". I would nearly always do as I was instructed, however, as soon as he got back on the truck, I chambered a round and started backing into the weeds. An even more vivid memory was, during the night, scanning the Runway and Flight Line after the flares went out and being mesmerized by those near-Cobalt Blue lights.

I realize that the attack that night was not nearly of the magnitude or importance of actions experienced in other areas throughout SEA. However, it was unique for Udon. I read both Lee Lindgren's and Bob Wheatley's accounts of that night at Udon. I really appreciate how they both felt about their experiences. However, if anybody else reading this was involved that night in July, I would like to have your recollections of the experience as well. I know there are a lot of things I did not know and/or do not remember about that night and I would like to be enlightened. My email is RebelB13@hughes.net

Thai kids are grateful

By Les Thompson

This past September, Carolyn and I returned to Thailand to attend the AESEA reunion, visit with friends and vacation a bit. We spent the first week in Bangkok, hanging out with the expats and others attending the reunion. The following week we went by minivan up through Isan.

On Wednesday of that second week, we were to spend the entire day in NKP. This was good timing as John and Nancy Sweet were scheduled to visit various schools that day with John Middlewood. They invited us to go along.

A first impression is how basic the schools are compared to what we have here. Most food preparation and eating areas are all open air. Classrooms are not normally air-conditioned, just the good old fans we remember from years ago. Teaching aids are very basic and extra-curricular reading books in general

are in short supply.

At each school the children and the parents had gathered waiting for our arrivals, we were welcomed with snacks, cool drinks and a presentation ceremony. We were presented with mementos by the parents and teachers; it was hard to accept the gifts without being overwhelmed by their generosity.

Most of the schools had performances by the different grade levels, mostly classical dancing. Some gave recitations in English welcoming us to their school, at one grade school the students counted to 30 in four different languages. Try to find a grade school here where they can do that! At one school a group of the youngsters did a demonstration on unicycles. It is a joy to watch the dances in classical dress to music from classical instruments. Seeing the gleam in the kids' eyes when they are performing or just practicing their English on you really warms your heart.

At each school you could see evidence of the Brotherhood's work. Sleeping mats, desks, sturdy tables to eat on, concrete flooring in place of dirt in the eating areas, food packages for deserving and needy students. It is quite amazing to see how much is accomplished with the donations that go to the Assistance Program. You start realizing how important the auction is at our reunions and the other donations that are given throughout the year.

It is hard to describe in words the feelings and emotions that you get when visiting the schools. If you have the chance to go back to Thailand, make sure to include enough time to visit at least one of the schools that the Brotherhood is working with. It will be the high point of your visit.



Look HERE

Dues Info in Block Below

Payable in month of January

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Monument Committee: in suspension: contact Pres. Hopkins

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TLCB Official Addresses and payments to TLCB

ALL payments of any kind, as listed below, are to be made payable to: **The TLC Brotherhood, Inc., and shall be mailed to the treasurer, at:**

**TLC Brotherhood
P.O. Box 1093
Defuniak Springs, FL 32435**

Always write payment purpose on memo line.
Dues (\$25 per year) Reunion registration
Assistance donation BX purchase
Monument donation (other: specify)

Reunion 2007: Dayton, Ohio

TLCB tax return and board minutes: On web site, in *members only* section. Password, 1/1/07: **Junon**

Waitin' for Dayton!

Mark your 2007 calendars: August 9th thru August 12th

As announced at the 2006 annual meeting and reunion in Las Vegas, the 2007 TLC Brotherhood, Inc., annual meeting and reunion will be held at the National Museum of the Air Force and at the Holiday Inn Fairborn I-675, near Dayton, Ohio and Wright Patterson Air Force Base.

This time of year will be great in Dayton, and is a time when the AF Museum is available for our memorial plaque presentation. Furthermore we will be able to have our banquet right *in* the museum.

We request that you make your hotel reservations early so we can make further plans for the banquet and transportation to and from Wright Patterson AFB area.



Above, Republic F-105D. Crew chiefs, come fondle your old friend for just a little while!

At right, Bird Dogs taxi in during liaison fly-in at the museum, October 2006.

Below, right, North American/On Mark A-26K. Wouldn't it be great if they would crank up those big R-2800 engines?



Hotel Facts and Details

2800 Presidential Drive
Fairborn, Ohio 45324
Phone: 937-426-7800
Fax: 937-426-1284

Rates for August 9th thru August 12th are \$89.00 per night, plus 12.5% state and local taxes, for a total of \$100.13 per night. This is for King or 2 Doubles. The rates are good for 3 days prior or 3 days after the reunion.

You must call the Reservation department at 937-426-7800 and request the group rate for "TLC-Brotherhood".



John Loftus, Reunion Chairman



**NATIONAL MUSEUM
OF THE UNITED STATES AIR FORCE**

We are the keepers of their stories

If you haven't been to the museum since 1998 you will be surprised to see the expansion. TLCB will present and dedicate a bronze memorial plaque in the memorial gardens seen to the right of the exhibit halls, above. It was in this garden that a vote was taken at the informal reunion in 1988, resulting in election of the first board of directors and creation of the organized TLCB.

Shown below is the memorial of the Forward Air Controller Association.

All photos courtesy of the museum.



Monument: The Next Step?

by Bill Tilton
former Monument Committee Chairman

Members who have followed the saga of the TLCB Monument in Southeast Asia may experience joy or disappointment over the most recent developments, and others will be surprised to learn that *anything at all* is happening. But we know that our friends in the East approach life at a different pace than we seem to in the USA, and so the course of this long-enduring project is not surprising. Not that Asian people don't get impatient. A few years ago we heard comments that while we were still discussing the design of our monument the people in Northeast Thailand had built and opened a replica house and a museum commemorating the era when Ho Chi Minh turns out to have lived in the little Vietnamese refugee village that is half-way between Nakhon Phanom city and the old Royal Thai airbase so many of us served at or visited.

But the fact is, TLCB has been ready to move forward on the monument for several years, and yet nothing quite tangible ever got going. The talk was often supportive and even enth-

Monument is continued next page.

siastic, and indeed this idea originated among city leaders in NKP, but we have never come to a point where actual contracts for construction could be entered into. Dirt was turned, dirt was blessed by nine monks and speeches were made over that dirt, and a permanent-looking marker erected in it (though that was subsequently damaged by trucks delivering debris to build up the site and has been stored for safe-keeping). So where are we and where is this going?

The last word we got back from the mayor's office, through the good services of member Tom Penn's wife Phongsy (who comes from NKP Province) was that "they need more time." Then this fall John and Nancy Sweet made yet another visit to Thailand. The Monument Committee asked John to see if he



could determine what was actually going on with proposed Elephant Head Lagoon Park, where the Chris Jeppeson/Dusty Henthorn monument was to be erected (Dusty designed the monument itself, and the late Chris Jeppeson designed the site and produced computer-prepared engineering drawings for the site and the monument).

John reported he was told the park project was dormant for lack of development funds and nobody could project a time when it might be prepared. In short, said John, they were saying, "it isn't gonna happen."

A group of us visited Thailand immediately following the California annual meeting and reunion in October of 2004. Upon seeing the old control tower at NKP newly-elected President Hoppy Hopkins suggested that tower itself might be an alternate if the park fell through. This year John Sweet, who also mentioned the possibility at NKP in 2004, brought up the idea to the city fathers to get their reaction. John went with the mayor and others to visit the base. It turns out the local RTAF unit likes the idea, and as of this writing we are conducting some exploratory discussions through an interpreter with the

commanding general of the region. It may be a long shot, or it may be something we and other interested groups like ACA and VO-67 Association would find appealing. The RTAF mentioned that a military school will be located at NKP, and we understand that they will provide a full-time caretaker. If this comes to anything we will be sure to publish the details in future issues.

Neither snow nor hail...

by Dave MacDonald

It was a dark and stormy night in early 2003 when a group of TLCB stalwarts came together in Northern Virginia to talk about the TLCB's plan to build a monument in Nakhon Phanom, Thailand, to our fallen brothers and all who played a part in the battle against Communist expansion in Southeast Asia.

They met in a Manassas hotel just off Interstate 66, which had been a contender for the 2002 Reunion hotel. Monument Committee Chairman Gerry Frazier had called the meeting to discuss the status of the project and to show a draft brochure that could be used to persuade corporations and other contributors to help to finance it.

The commitment of the group to the project was emphasized by the effort it took for some to get to the meeting location on a night of heavy snowfall. Gerry and TLCB President Bill Tilton drove from Springfield, VA, to meet Manassas residents Jim and Donna Bartholomew, who had organized the dinner meeting. I came in from DC.

The toughest trips began with Jim Henthorn, who came down from Baltimore. Ira Cooperman, who came in from western New York State, and Floyd McGurk, who drove down from West Point, New York, made the two longest journeys. Getting there on traffic-choked, slippery, snow-covered highways in poor visibility was a challenge for everybody, and most of us were late.

Jim was there as our design man, working with our California brother Jepp Jeppeson, a wizard with computer-assisted design. Ira was our adviser on fund-raising, a world in which he had done well after working as a newspaperman on the Los Angeles Times. Floyd, an engineer officer in the 82nd Airborne Division in Vietnam, was our adviser on everything to do with materials, pricing, soil problems, and laying out a project timetable.

The committee's major decision of the evening was to recommend to the board of directors that the monument be dedicated to all who served on the non-Communist side, and in remembrance of those who did not return. If the board concurred, the committee recommended that Thai leaders in NKP, who had set aside Elephant Head Lagoon Park for our planned monument, be given the same recommendation.

This done, the meeting was adjourned for some of the good fellowship that is to be found at TLCB reunions and minis. Then everyone went out to face the storm again for the journey home.