



Mekong Express Mail

Volume 8, Issue 4

THE THAILAND LAOS CAMBODIA BROTHERHOOD, INC.

www.TLC-Brotherhood.org

When the president visited Bangkok

By Bill Jirsa

I was drafted into the US Army in Jan 1966. That month, over 100,000 were drafted. I understood that to be the highest number ever in one month. I took basic training at Fort Ord, (Monterrey) CA, then to Fort Gordon, (Augusta) GA for training in the Signal Corps, specifically a AN/TRC24 Radio Relay Operator, MOS: 31M20 (or was it 31M40?). (MOS = Military Occupational Specialty) When I got orders to Siam, my wife and I had to get out a map and see where that was.

For a while at Fort Gordon, I lived in a 12-man tent, which, in Georgia in the middle of summer, is mostly unbearable. However the build up had been so fast, most facilities were completely overtaxed. Later, my wife drove out from California and we lived in an apartment off post. Almost my entire training class went to Germany, which we had been hoping for. However, I was held back a week because I got the measles (of all things), so I was delayed finishing my MOS training. When I finally got orders to Siam, we were given two weeks to get to Oakland Army Terminal. We enjoyed a leisurely drive across country.

I arrived in Bangkok in August 1966 and rode a military bus up to Korat. It was a long and rough ride up the Friendship Highway but I got to see some of what was to be my new home for a year. In Korat, I reported to the 55th Signal Company Headquarters at Camp Friendship, adjacent to Korat Royal Thai AFB, and was assigned a hooch. At Fort Gordon, we lived in tents, so



55th Signal Company headquarters, Camp Friendship, Korat.

Bill Jirsa and the monkey, 1966. All photos for this article provided by the author.



I considered the wooden hooches a big improvement, especially when I found out we had house girls that took care of our laundry and lizards scurried around the ceiling and walls, eating the bugs. I had definitely moved up in life.

I really do not remember all the technical details of the AN/TRC (TRC = TeleRadio Communications) 24. It was VHF, and since it was line of sight, relays had to be located at certain distances. Relay equipment was set up in a container mounted on the back of a deuce and half ton truck. The radio equipment was on shelves on both sides of the inside of the container, with a narrow center aisle allowing access to the equipment. Our job, as trained at Fort Gordon, was to move the truck as necessary, usually in combat conditions, set up antennae (which were extremely directional), and keep the channels open. As I recall there were four channels in a typical set up. Therefore there

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TLCB President's Christmas Message—see back.

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were eight radio sets; an “in” and “out” for each channel in each truck.

However, in Thailand, none of the relay sites were mobile. A few were in their truck type containers, but most were in small air-conditioned buildings, which contained many channels. (One site named “Peppercorn” near Udorn, was still the in the container on the truck, on jacks, under a canopy.) Every TRC24 site I worked had become permanent. One could tell a TRC24 site by the distinctive olive drab fly swatter type antennae.

Since mobility had ceased to be a factor, our job sites were terminal locations, where the TRC 24 fed into a wider communication network of more sophisticated equipment. There were few actual relay sites. Instead of moving sites as trained, our job became one of tediously watching the equipment hum along, perform periodic maintenance and testing, replace some parts now and then, and twist a few dials when some one from somewhere called in complaining about line interference on one of the lines. This did not happen very often. Rarely, a radio set would go bad. In that event we coordinated the re-routing of radio traffic, replaced the unit and got everybody back on line. At least we never had to reset an antenna. And, hey, we were in air-conditioned buildings!

It was understood that we were there to support the Air Force, but we were told often not to be curious as to the nature of our business. NCOs and officers alike rebuffed any questions we had about our signals. We did not know to where our antennae were pointed. We could not listen in. Very soon I got tired of asking, and just did the job.

After a few weeks in Korat, I was sent up to Udorn to a very small Army post near, but not abutting, the air base. I cannot remember exactly where in relation to the base we were. It seems we turned west off of Friendship Highway, and passed a Thai Police or Army post. There was a large field on which soccer was frequently played. Our post was small, with perhaps only a few dozen troops. A lieutenant was OIC, and the NCOIC was an E6. There were wooden hooches and a single mess hall for all, to which you could come and go at will. Made to order breakfast cooked while you wait. (*Three eggs, over easy, bacon and toast, please. You got it buddy, comin’ right up.*)

There was a small bar (beer five cents) and adjacent movie theater. This was shaping up to be nothing like the Army I thought I was going into. The miseries of Forts Ord and Gordon drifted further back in my mind. My wife sent me a newspaper from the states with headlines stating that there were no American troops in Thailand. We kept that up in the mess hall for a while and got some laughs.

Our job site was a short truck ride away, known as Udorn Control, a small air-conditioned building. We had two or three dozen channels, and our fly swatter relay antennae were pointed in several directions. We

were set up amongst several semi trailers in an area bristling with a wide assortment of antennae. I soon figured out that we were the low ones on the hierarchy of comm equipment technology. The stuff around us was very sophisticated. But we never saw those guys. We could not go in their trailers, did not see them much, and when we did see them, many were in civilian clothes and only nodded at our presence. I never figured out how our equipment complemented all this other stuff.

We worked 12-hour shifts in that little building, watching our equipment and various meters. We logged meter readings, tested, dusted, and tried to keep busy during our shifts. But late one night I remember clear as it was yesterday. I was reading a book at the desk and the phone rang. A very excited voice complained about noise on a line and virtually screaming, pleaded with me to do something quick. Jumping to my feet and finding the appropriate radio set, I pulled

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it out of the wall on its sliding rails, and quickly began turning the knobs controlling the signal. The voice at the other end yelled happily that I had done it and hung up. I logged the event, and tried to settle down, but the adrenalin kept me hopping the rest of the night.

That whole episode lasted less than 20 seconds. I have wondered for 41 years what that was all about. I did not know the guy that called or from where he was calling. Next door, or miles away? After joining TLC, I have read more and more about what was going on up there about that time. I want now to believe that I contributed something that at that time was very, very important to someone somewhere. But I will never really know for sure.

The antennae pointing north relayed to an actual pure relay site up the Friendship Highway about 2/3 of the way to Nong Khai, on the Mekong River. An E5 Sgt and three EMs manned the Relay. There was a small contingent of Thai Army there, along with their wives and camp followers. The females took care of our guys’ laundry and cooked some meals.

The relay site was powered by huge towable generators. There was an outhouse and an outdoor shower served by rain-

Signal is continued on the next page

Udorn Control, STRATCOM.





Mekong Relay

water, and several bunkers. Those antennae, pointed north, could have only been going to Laos, probably Vientiane, but again, hey, don't ask.

One day some Army brass came up to Udorn to check things out, and were to also go up to the Relay. I had been up there once on a supply run, and was selected to drive a "bird" colonel and one of his entourage in a jeep. He never said one word to me all the way north. Not one single word. He just sat there scowling, as though he did not want to be there. (Well, hey, join the crowd.)

About 2/3 of the way to the Relay, there is a river called Nam Suai. It was flooded and covered the road for several hundred yards. There was great activity on both sides of the river, as the Friendship Highway was heavily traveled. A thriving industry of Thai long boats was ferrying people and their goods across the flooded river. I was selected to stay with the vehicles, and the rest of the party, in their finely starched uniforms piled into several long boats along with a couple of replacement radios and assorted gear. It seemed incongruous to see several high-ranking sharply-dressed military personnel and some very expensive radio equipment piled into a pretty shaky-looking long boat.

Soon, a dozen or more kids surrounded me. We had a great time. Two or three would hang on my arm at a time to great gales of laughter. I would swing them around and toss them up in the air. They weighed so little, and at 6'3" I must have seemed like a giant to them. We had a little impromptu soccer game, and they all piled in the jeep, and we roughhoused and laughed a lot. I spied an ice cream vendor, and bought all the kids some ice cream. Then a jolly green giant helicopter landed, and all the kids went running off toward the dust and noise. The helicopter was from the Red Cross. I talked to the RC official a bit; they were terribly frustrated with so many refugees coming across the Mekong River, and now the flood.

Just then I noted the brass coming back across the flooded

river, and quickly returned to my vehicles, which were thankfully all accounted for. The colonel looked at me with disdain, and I realized that my formerly stiffly starched fatigues were now crumpled and soiled with dirt, sweat, dust, and ice cream. Saying nothing, we started driving and soon passed all those kids near the helicopter. Seeing me, laughing and yelling, they swarmed around us, reaching out to touch me and the colonel with their grubby little hands and climb in the jeep. Escaping, the colonel looked at me square on and scowling, asked if they were friends of mine. I replied with a big yes, sir. On the way back to Udorn, I thought I saw the colonel smile a little when we passed kids, and he actually waved once or twice. I never saw the colonel again.

After being in Udorn a few weeks, I was sent up to the relay to sub for a guy who had been sent to the base hospital with some ailment. Those guys had been together for some time, and I did not get a chance to fit in. This post was remote, and in addition to keeping the radios working, we had to take



When the Nam Suai river flooded it blocked the road for hundreds of yards

care of the generators. We were supplied every three or four days from Udorn.

One day a Methodist minister and his wife came into our camp. He was doing missionary work in a nearby village. His wife had made an apple pie out of a large can of apples that the guys had given her a few days before. Man, being out there in the wilderness, lonely and not quite feeling safe, that was the best apple pie I have ever had.

I was only up there four days and then returned to Udorn, where I was informed that I was going to Korat, to join a contingent of 55th Signal Co guys going TDY to Bangkok to set up communication facilities for President Johnson's upcoming visit to Thailand. Well, this was pretty exciting, so off I went.

We stayed for a while at the Capital Hotel in Bangkok, but

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I want now to believe that I contributed something that at that time was very, very important to someone somewhere. But I'll never really know for sure.

it was eight miles away, which took about 30 minutes at rush hour. So later, we moved to another hotel, but I cannot remember the name. We got a little tourist time the first day, then went to work every day for about three weeks at Borom Phimam Mansion, where the President was to stay. It is adjacent to the complex that includes the Temple of the Emerald Buddha. Our comm equipment was to be installed across from the mansion in a little utility building. This necessitated a daily commute from our hotel to the palace, and I got my first taste of driving in Bangkok. What a hoot that was! I learned to rev up the engine of the deuce and a half truck and lay on the horn as I approached the infamous traffic circles. It was like a parting of the waters.

There was a lot of equipment and guys from different units in that little room. But we worked well together and helped each other, working way out of our MOS. I spliced cables, wired switchboards, and installed phones in the Mansion itself. There were lots of channels to site in and calibrate. We got it all done in fine fashion. Then it was just a matter of keeping it all running. We had no incidents that I know of.

The inside of the Mansion, which tourists never saw, was incredible, with intricate teak décor. and five-foot elephant tusks with hanging brass gongs. We had to take our boots and shoes off inside to keep from scuffing the floor. Unfortunately, my camera with pictures from inside the mansion was later stolen.

I never saw President Johnson or much of his party. During



This antenna linked President Johnson to the White House.

one night shift, we had to stay inside. Secret Service did not want anyone wandering around. I spent a lot of time that night chatting with mysterious guys in suits and dark glasses with strange tales of far away places. Very interesting. Night shifts were the best. No brass around. During the day, every officer remotely connected would show up and decide to exert some authority to impress the troops and Secret Service. The President's visit ended about Oct 28. We spent a couple of days taking things down, and I got a three-day pass for some unofficial R&R in Bangkok. Then back to Korat.

I fully expected to be sent back up to Udorn, where I had felt very comfortable with some new buddies. But, it was not to be. They shanghaied me into company headquarters, where I spent the rest of my tour in Thailand. At first I thought this would be good duty, but I was wrong. I soon longed to be out on a post somewhere doing something more active. I was very bored, and frankly, perhaps not a very good garrison soldier. My first three months in country had been filled with new and exciting experiences, but the next eight were a bit of a letdown.

Nevertheless, in March of 1967 I was selected to drive our company commander, a captain, on a circuit route of Northeast Thailand. Why he needed to do this I do not know. I was issued a rifle and several rounds of ammo, which I had not seen since Fort Ord, loaded up the jeep and off we went.

Our first stop was Roi Et, a beautiful little town that I wish I had had more time to visit. We stayed there the first night in a hotel, then off to Ubon where we gassed up and got directions to the Mukdahan Army signal site. I do not remember much of the road to Ubon, but I do remember the road to Mukdahan. It was dirt, and every bridge over every river or creek had been bombed or burned out. We had to slow down and ford the crossings. It was dry season, so I do not remember much water. This made us both very nervous and we had our weapons at the ready. There were no incidents but it was slow going and we arrived late at Mukdahan in the dark.

I do not know the geography of Phu Mu and Mukdahan. The note on my Phu Mu pictures say "near Mukdahan." At any rate, I remember noting the direction of the flyswatter antenna, due east into Laos, and being a good trooper, did not ask any questions.

We stayed the night there, departing for Nakon Phanom very early in the morning. Halfway to NKP, an F-4 or F-105 flew over us about 100 feet up. We saw him for about half a second. He was well in front of us before we heard the noise, which scared the hell out of us. As he disappeared behind the trees, he was wagging his wings as if to say the road is clear, you are fine. We felt a little better all the way into NKP.

We had a great meal at the NKP Air Force mess hall, and it reminded me of the great meals I had had at Udorn, and the not so great meals at Korat. We pressed on and passed Sakon Nakorn, on our way to Udorn, the Mekong Relay and Nong Khai. After a night at Udorn, we drove back to Korat.

At some time during my year, probably about Feb 1967, one of my wife's letters announced that the B52s had come to Thailand. She was teaching elementary school in our hometown of Merced, California. Many of her kids were from nearby

Signal is concluded on next page



Author, stringing wire during the president's visit.

Castle AFB, a SAC base. One day the kids were very sad, and asking them why, they told her their daddies had gone to a place called Thailand. (I think they went to Sattahip). The rest of the time in Korat was uneventful. Somewhere along the way we moved into new barracks, and got all up tight with parades and inspections and dress uniforms and more officers. One of our lieutenants began getting us some day trips on Saturdays. I remember a major shrine at Sara Buri and a picnic place called White Falls. In the summer I was promoted to Sergeant E5, which was not well received by the other Sergeants in the company. After all, I was "just" a draftee and I'd only been in for a year and a half. I saw their point, but I did not turn the stripes

down.

I rotated home to the 78th Signal Battalion at Fort Lewis, Washington, near Tacoma and McChord AFB. I spent the last 4 ½ months in the Army in Battalion HQ. The Battalion Sergeant-Major was very kind to me. I think I helped his workload considerably on administrative matters. My wife and I got in several rounds of golf at the terrific Fort Lewis Golf Course. I was discharged at Fort Lewis in January 1968.

A few years ago, I began searching the Internet for info on my time in Thailand. I wanted to know that there was some meaning to my time there. I learned more about the "secret war" and what the Air Force and other units were doing at the time. I found and joined TLC Brotherhood, and after a few years of reading the MEM and server traffic, I now feel some pride in my contribution during my time in Thailand. At least I can conjure up a happy ending to that frantic call I got in Udorn on that long dark night, and have some satisfaction that I really did make a difference during our Commander in Chief's visit to Bangkok. And it really pleases me to be able to give some money to TLC assistance efforts to help the kids over there. They made me laugh and were always a bright spot for me.

I did not volunteer for the service, but when the draft notice came, I went almost eagerly. I could never have dodged the draft. I was proud to serve my country, and still am. Vietnam was a sorry mess at the end, but I believed then, and do now, that its origins were well intentioned and necessary. I did my part, be it ever so small.

I have posted some pictures of my time in Thailand at <http://www.flickr.com/photos/calbillstravnstuff/sets/72057594122629485/>.



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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 343
Locust Grove, GA 30248

Always write *payment purpose* on memo line.
Dues (\$25 per year) **Student Assistance Fund**
Assistance donation **BX purchase**
Monument donation **Medical Fund.....etc.**

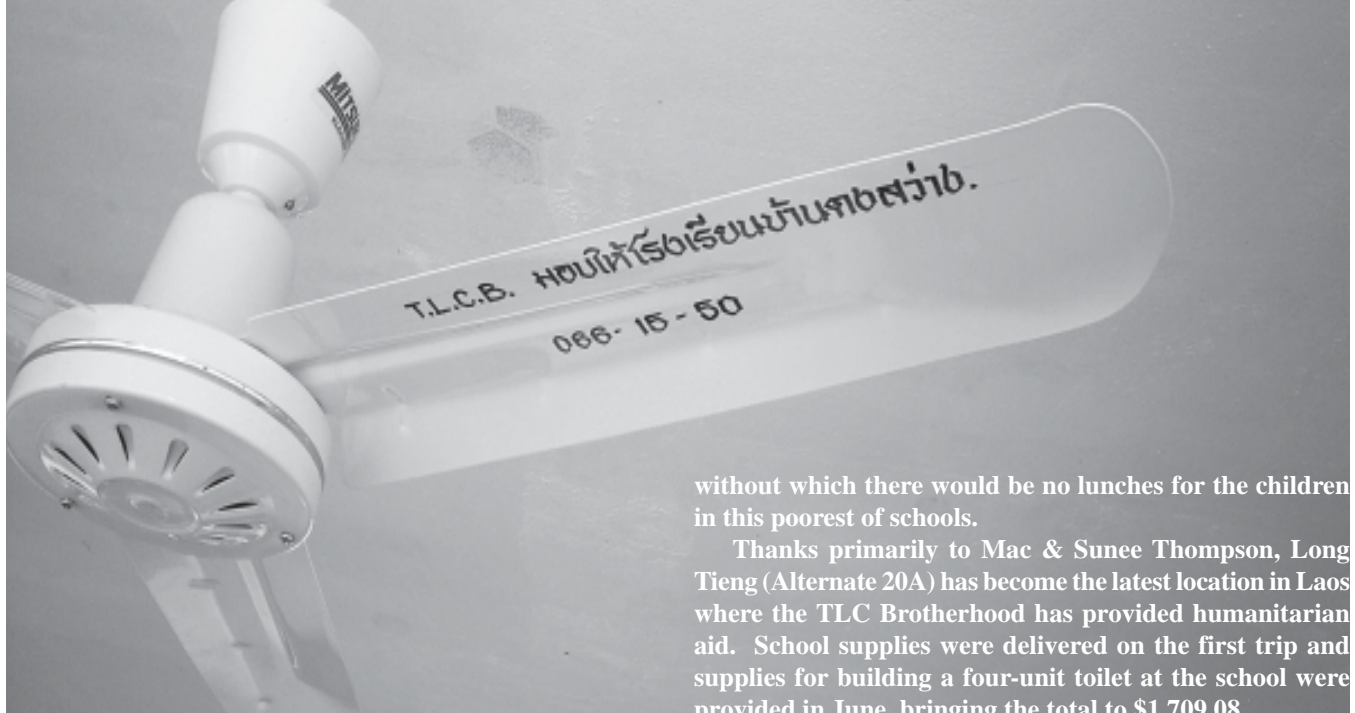
Reunion 2008: Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

TLCB tax return and board minutes: On web site, in *members only* section. _____

The Need To Know

By John Sweet

Throughout life we seldom have the opportunity to know ourselves as others know us. Our perceived perception of ourselves is rarely accurate and fleeting at best even then. We do not realize how important we are in the eyes of others; sometimes even those we have never met. The world is a strange place where events often weave tangled webs within our lives and hearts to ever so slowly change the entire world.



In the past nine months alone members of the TLC Brotherhood have changed the lives of many.

151 sets of picnic/dining room tables with chairs have been provided to schools in northeastern Thailand. Sixty-three fans were installed in schoolrooms along with 80 desks and chairs. Eighty-seven sleeping mats were distributed to kindergarten children along with 62 hygiene kits.

Seven bathrooms were built or rehabilitated, most of them four seaters and seven water filtration systems were put into schools, which not only provide clean water but vastly decrease the chance of viral diseases spreading throughout the school to hundreds of children.

Six schools were rehabbed at a cost of only \$2,094.91. Where could you do that here? Two computers were repaired, supplies were provided to the 20 children remaining at Thare Orphanage on a quarterly basis and seven children were provided with medical assistance in the amount of \$1,656.98.

Over 163 children were provided food packages, which will provide a single meal a day for the entire family for a month. It might not seem like much, but \$300 provides 30 packages and helps to keep all the children in the family in school. By the way, these food packages are distributed to the children most improved in their schooling each month and thereby are rotated to all students who are in need. Food support was also provided to Nong Ka Koh Koong School in the amount of \$646,

without which there would be no lunches for the children in this poorest of schools.

Thanks primarily to Mac & Sunee Thompson, Long Tieng (Alternate 20A) has become the latest location in Laos where the TLC Brotherhood has provided humanitarian aid. School supplies were delivered on the first trip and supplies for building a four-unit toilet at the school were provided in June, bringing the total to \$1,709.08.

Last, but by no means least, the Air Commando Association raised and funded \$2,145 for a kindergarten bathroom at a school and provided three water purification projects in addition to those listed by the TLC Brotherhood above.

The Kham Thuey Elementary School was provided with a computer lab, which was donated in memory of Major Eugene P. (Geno) Valentine. The Dong Suwang Elementary School was provided with \$850 for picnic tables.

The children and people of Thailand and Laos do not know us, but they know our hearts from our deeds, which are changing their lives. Total aid provided within Thailand and Laos over the past nine months amounts to \$34,128.96, which is available for viewing, as always, on the TLC Brotherhood Assistance Web Pages: http://www.tlc-brotherhood.org/TLCB_Assistance2007.html

You certainly have the need to know what you have accomplished. During this holiday season we hope you will contribute to aid the children through our TLC-Brotherhood Assistance Program. Checks should be made out to the TLCB Assistance and mailed to the following address:

TLCB Assistance
PO Box 343
Locust Grove GA 30248

Photos furnished by John Middlewood.



"Thank you TLCB" at Kham Pawk school.

Food Packet Contents
 A box of MAMA (instant noodles) with 30-40 packets in it. This gives the child one hot meal a day at home. The rest is made up of a variety of sauces mom can use for seasonings in the kitchen, a variety of noodles, sometimes canned sardines (they love them), salt and sugar.

The "John and Phan" show.



John Middlewood, our representative in Thailand, and Khun Phom Phan, local radio personality and politician, visit various schools throughout Nakhon Phanom Province. Khun Phom Phan has given TLCB frequent and very positive publicity throughout the area.



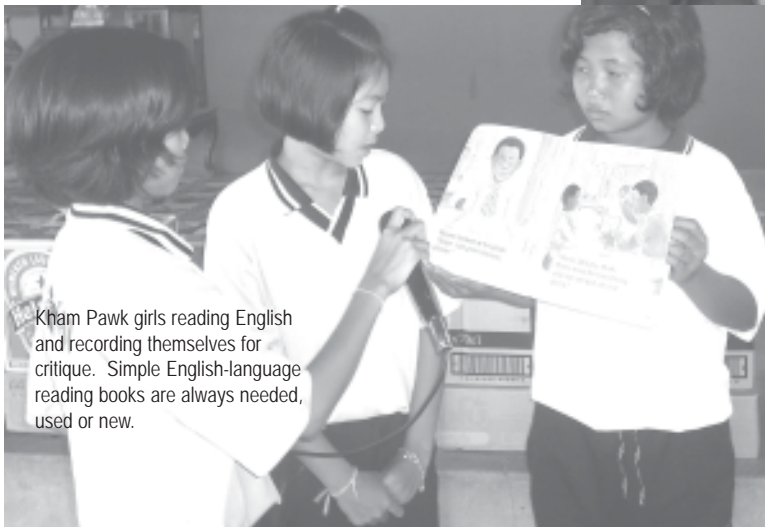
Middlewood

Phom Phan



Food packet presentation at Nong Yao school. Phom Phan at right.

John Middlewood encouraging Tong Moon school students to do their best.



Kham Pawk girls reading English and recording themselves for critique. Simple English-language reading books are always needed, used or new.

Ceiling fans being presented by John Middlewood to Dong Suwang elementary school, below.



Helping TLCB to communicate

by Howard "Hap" Wyman
Communications Committee chairman

After spending five years as a TLC board member-at-large, president Loftus recently asked me to chair the TLC communications committee. I have been an active member of the committee for several years and very much involved in committee operations since the early days so I accepted his kind offer. The communications committee is a major function of the TLC and includes MEM, the TLC list servers, and our award winning web site and I feel it an honor to be asked to chair the committee. I would like to take this time to let you know where the committee currently stands and what is in the picture for the future. Along with the communications committee, I will remain an active member of the membership committee, with which I have been involved for many years.

There will be times during this report when I refer to different members of the TLC team. All your TLC team members can be found on our web site, under the toolbar "TLC Brotherhood Committee Chairman and members", at the following link: http://www.tlc-brotherhood.org/tlc_brotherhood_committees.htm

Mekong Express Mail, or MEM as we call it, will continue to be published on a quarterly basis under the capable guidance of MEM Editor, Dave MacDonald, and the rest of the MEM team. MEM will also be posted on the TLC web site 14 days after being published. If you have stories of interest about your experience in SEA and would like to share them in MEM please contact Dave.

Ed Heyliger, my very first TLC acquaintance after John Sweet, is our long time listmaster and is responsible for the daily operation of the three TLC email list servers. Being our listmaster is a thankless job but Ed is always there to lend a knowledgeable hand with your list problems. If you need assistance or have a question about the TLC lists there is a section of assorted list information, including *Mailman List Instructions*, linked with the TLC Server Regulations and User Information toolbar of the main web site page: <http://www.tlc-brotherhood.org>

The TLC list servers continue to be the biggest thorn in the side of the TLC. The reason is that some members do not think of, or care about, what they post on the servers. There are rules governing the servers, governing what can be posted on the different lists, as well as tips on etiquette, et cetera, all listed on the TLC web site link: http://www.tlc-brotherhood.org/server_status-1.html. The TLC server regulations are controlled and approved by the board of directors. The communications chairman has been given authority by the board to enforce them. If you do not know the rules, please read them. The regulations are simple but if you do not follow them you can expect reprisal. The board has made provision for those who feel that rules are for everyone but them. Please use some civility when posting on the servers. We have wives and kids who read our server messages. Your bad manners are just that, *bad manners*, and you only impress yourself. Remember, I did not write the rules. I just enforce them.

Spam filtering of TLC server email by a group of large Internet Service Providers (ISP) continues to be a major problem and is affecting a sizable portion of the TLC membership.

Apparently the only solution to spam filtering for some ISPs is, effectively, to kill and filter out all email arriving at your inbox, including email from any list server, including TLC email. TLC management, along with our service provider, *Nexus.net*, have attempted to discuss the problem with numerous ISPs but what we have received is mostly deaf ears plus a ton of big brother arrogance. Your ISPs have shown that they do not care if you receive email so long as they filter out spam or what they think is spam. Some of the affected ISPs are AOL, Netscape, Roadrunner Cable, Comcast, Bellsouth, AT&T and Hotmail. There are others; this is just to name a few. The mail filtering problem is explained in detail on the TLC web site at the following link: http://www.tlc-brotherhood.org/server_status-1.html There is nothing the TLC or Nexus can do to control your ISP but you can make your lack of service dissatisfaction known to your ISP. The TLC does offer some work around suggestions on the web page link.

During the most recent board meeting there were several changes in TLC policy initiated by the board. One change was that there is now an established policy for posting TLC officer election campaign information on the Official server, and in MEM. The new policy is posted on the TLC web site server information page at: http://www.tlc-brotherhood.org/server_status-1.html "Election of TLC Officers Campaign Posting Policy" section. The new server election campaign policy is designed to make TLC office campaign electioneering equal and fair to all involved and to eliminate flaming or detrimental behavior and posts of current politics on Mission and Brotherhood. The policy is precisely laid out. Deviate from the new policy and action will be swift because your personal action will be a server regulation violation. This is a *zero tolerance* policy!

The TLC web site is maintained by Webmaster "Bongo Bob" Norway. The web site includes much information about the TLC and its current operations and TLC history during the war in SEA. Many of your questions asked on the servers can be answered by a simple trip to the TLC web site. Members have pictures of their time spent in SEA during the war and continually post and share them on the servers. How about putting your pictures on a CD along with a description of each, including known people or locations pictured, year, et cetera, and mailing them to Bob so he can post your history on the TLC web site? Please contact Bob and he will tell what to send, how and where. While you are at it, include a now and then picture of yourself for the web site roster. Members constantly

COMM is continued next page

refer to the web roster section where pictures are stored in a special section in an attempt to fix a face to a server name. Add yours to the list.

Additional members of the communications team include Bill Tilton, who assists Dave with MEM, Norm Corley is assistant webmaster, Ray Hayes handles MEM mailing and Larry Hughes runs the internal special purpose email servers, and yours truly, "Hap", assists Ed with the Nexus list servers.

Our TLC web site has nowhere to go except to grow and get better. One of the things I have envisioned with the web site for years now, is to create new sections for the rest of SEA branches of service, Air America, USAID, et etcetera. I constantly hear "the TLC is only an Air Force thing," and "the servers only talk about NKP," and "the web site is all Air Force stuff." Sadly, some of these comments are true. The subject matter on the servers is your responsibility and the TLC will not write your email for you. If you want to see subjects related to your branch, location or experience of your service in SEA, you will have to post it. One thing, just remember the Air Force was by far the largest contingent of personnel in the TLC area so you will get more Air Force related traffic, period. It cannot be helped. It is just a fact of life.

To gather and post the additional branch information will take member assistance from the other branches of the service and civilian organizations. The Air Force does not keep your branch history or order of battle so your input will be required.

I have the US Army Order of Battle, for Thailand, but much of the branch histories are not readily available on the web and will take research, participation and recollection and lot of hard work to establish. Part of the responsibility should go to the TLC History committee and I am asking John Binfield and his committee to assist me and work with Communications on this endeavor. I will also be asking members from the other branches and organizations to assist. This will involve a lot of work, but it will also create the web site many of you have been whining about for years and establish a history and tell the whole story of our involvement and participation in the war in SEA. We can truly make our web site better, but it will take the help of all to see this project through. So stop whining and become part of the team.

Last, please remember to keep your contact information current with TLC management. We need a *good* mailing address and your email address and phone number to assure your MEM arrival and your server participation stays active, or in case we need to contact you. When you move, remember the TLC with your notifications. If you need assistance from a department of the Communications committee do not be afraid to ask. We are all here to help. Remember, a contact email address for all TLC departments is listed on the web site at: http://www.tlc-brotherhood.org/tlc_brotherhood_committees.htm and also in your quarterly MEM.



Tragedy, humor and respect with Nimrods

Part 3, Conclusion by Randy Ryman

On July 23, 1966 we were awakened in our hooches in the wee hours of the morning as rain was pouring down. I heard others outside the hooch. Someone said a plane had crashed.

Through the rain, in the distance, I saw flames coming up through the trees. As the rain pounded on the hooch roofs, we watched in silence. It was almost certainly one of our planes. There was hardly any other traffic in and out of NKP during the night except the A-26 sorties. I watched for a while, then returned to bed and fell asleep to the sound of the rain.

The next morning, I learned that it was A-26 #643 that had crashed. Pilot, Major George Duke, and navigator, Captain Miles Tanimoto, died in the crash. In addition to being a pilot, Major Duke was our armament officer. He was indeed an officer and a gentleman. Wherever he was, he always spoke to me, and was friendly.

Although not known to me at the time, Major Duke had a three-year-old son. Over 30 years later, I would have an email exchange with George Duke Jr. I was glad to have the opportunity to tell him what a fine officer and gentleman his father was. I was sent a picture of Miles Tanimoto by his nephew who lives in Hawaii. Ironically the picture shows Captain Tanimoto the day of their arrival at NKP, standing in front of the plane that he would die in just over a month later.

During the day, we learned what apparently had happened. Major Duke was trying to land in the monsoon rains we were having, and was having trouble finding the runway. Someone who had been on the flight line said he

See **Nimrods**, continued next page



A-26K. Photo provided by author.

had made several attempts to land, one of which was very nearly on the flight line. In any event, while he was turning final for another approach, an engine quit, due, apparently, to fuel starvation. The aircraft went into the trees just short of the runway, and caught fire. Major Duke and Captain Tanimoto died in the crash. There was ordnance and there apparently were .50-caliber rounds cooking off in the fire.

There would be another memorial service to attend in the chapel and another empty space on the flight line. The war was getting closer to home for us. We had lost four of our aircrew, one observer and two aircraft in just over a month of combat flying.

Life at NKP was not all work and no play, although the work end of it certainly was in the majority. Something I still reflect on is how time became unimportant. After we got settled into the routine at NKP, the only thing we needed a watch for was knowing when to catch the last bus from town and when to get up in the morning for work. Within a week after arriving, all track of time was lost. I could not tell you what day of the week it was. When the work schedule was basically seven days a week, it did not matter what day it was. You quit working when the work was done for that day. I remember on several occasions going to work and seeing people going into the chapel and thinking, "It must be Sunday." When we would get a day off, which was rare, we would simply be told we could have "tomorrow" off. It did not matter what day it was. Work did not stop due to the rain. We learned to live with it. At least it was hot and the rain did not feel cold.

We did have the occasional party within our detachment though. The Air Commandos were undoubtedly the tightest knit group I ever served with. I guess the best way to describe it was that there was not the wide gap between "officer" and "enlisted" that existed in other units. The respect for rank was there, but everyone had a common goal – to get the job done. The officers and pilots with Project Big Eagle did not show the aloofness that those in other units showed. Even though I was a lowly E-3, the officers in our detachment always returned a salute with a smile and a kind word. It meant a lot. They would come up to us on the flight line and anywhere else and ask how things were going. They cared. I always felt at ease around any of them, except for a couple of 2nd & 1st lieutenants, who were paper pushers.

We would have parties. One of our first parties was put on by the enlisted folks. It was set up behind our hooches. Master Sergeant Carlous Christian, or "Chris" as he was known, put up one fine party. The party would get under way in the early evening, and go all night as the air crews returned from their missions. Chris had a way of getting things done. He had been around long enough to know how.

This particular party I remembered for the stew he concocted. I heard him explain how he got all the vegetables for it. It seems that he became friends with the mess sergeant in the new mess hall built over the hill from our hooches. Chris had apparently got the mess sergeant drunk, and then raided his chow hall. I remember Chris telling the story of how he was in the kitchen gathering up the stuff he needed for the party, and

some Thai cook ran up to him saying, "You no take! You no take! I tell Sergeant!" Sergeant Christian pointed to his stripes on his sleeve, and barked at the Thai, "I AM SERGEANT," and kept going. It was great stew.

As the night would wear on, pilots would show up and join in, describing the action they had encountered that night. It was exciting stuff, and I wished I could have been along with them. That was the night Joe Kittinger talked about his time in the balloon experiments and the subsequent record he achieved on August 16, 1960.

Joe Kittinger holds the world record for the longest delayed drop with a parachute. He stepped out of a gondola attached to a gas balloon from 102,800 ft. over New Mexico and was in free fall for four minutes and 37 seconds. It was research on high altitude bailouts.



Joe Kittinger. USAF Photo

On another occasion, the officers threw a party at their quarters. This turned out to be something. As the night wore on, and the pilots started returning, the action increased. I believe it was Captain Gorski who came down to the party and had a battery operated rotating beacon, which he sat up on the roof of the picnic shelter. Someone asked what it was for, and he said, "Joe (Major Kittinger) wanted to know where the party was at." Some time later, the sound of an A-26 got closer and closer, and shortly everything shook as Joe buzzed the shelter. He arrived a short time later. There was this crew chief that had also arrived shortly before Joe did, and said, "When the major gets here, ask him if that Air Policeman chewed him out when he stopped him." It seems that Joe had commandeered a jeep to get to the party, and was in a bit of a hurry. The crew chief had seen it. Sure enough, someone spoke up and said, "Major Kittinger, did that Air Policeman chew you out a while ago?" Joe got a sheepish grin on his face, and then announced, "Yeah, he did, but he was standing at attention when he did it!" The party went on through the night, with the stories of the Trail and the night's activities mixing in. This was definitely the group to be associated with.

Next day, hangovers notwithstanding, everyone went back to the job.

Some of the missions got pretty interesting. On one occasion, Major Welch returned with a .50-caliber round through the bomb bay. When he shut down on the ramp and opened the bomb bay doors, we heard a distinct "clink" hit the PSP. The round had been stopped by something and was lying on the doors, and fell out when he opened them.

Major Kittinger was the next one leaving and he and Major Welch discussed the location of the gun emplacement that had

fired on Major Welch. After studying the maps, Joe knew the location, and departed. Several hours later, he returned and pulled into the de-arm area located at the South end of the runway. They would shut down the plane, and it would be checked over for any ordnance that might be left, the guns would be "safed", which involved taking the ammo belts loose and removing the chambered rounds before returning to the ramp and any safety pins installed as necessary. The A-26 had a safety that would disarm the armament systems once the wheels were down and locked, but this was an added precaution.

When Joe opened the canopy, he said he thought he had taken some hits. As the aircraft was looked over, they found that a round had gone through the right tip tank; one had gone through the ADI tank in the wing, (this tank held a mixture of alcohol and water which was injected into the engines on take off to give an added 200 h.p). A round had hit a wing spar, one had gone right through the propeller blade at the wide part almost at the tip, and one had entered the fuselage from the front and lodged in the cockpit heater located below the navigator position. All the rounds had hit the right side of the plane. The A-26 had side-by-side seating. After the damage was assessed, Joe said, "Here I was scared and all the time they were shooting at my navigator!" The navigator said something about watching 4 and 1 tracers coming by like a freight train between the nacelle and fuselage and Maj. Kittinger sitting over there, saying, "They're shooting at you!"

The aircraft was "Triple 6", as we called it, tail # 17666. It was out of commission for a while for repairs

The story that circulated about "triple 6" was that Major Kittinger flew over the suspected gun emplacement looking for it, and they apparently knew he was looking for them. The word was that after about four passes he still had not drawn any fire, so he flashed his landing lights at them. It was then that they opened up. We also heard that he got the gun emplacement.

Another thing that was unusual was the time when Major Kittinger had all the cases of empty beer bottles rounded up that could be found. He had them stacked in the bomb bay between the bombs, then scattered them along the trail. I thought the reason was to create as many flat tires as possible, which, if it did, would be fine. Per an email from Col. Kittinger some years ago, he said it was done more to demoralize those poor suckers hauling the stuff along that trail, to see all those empty beer bottles lying around!

On another occasion I also saw a large box of Road Stars taken aboard to be dropped out, hoping to flatten some truck tires.

After the loss of #650 and #643, two additional planes were ferried over with aircrews and we were back to our original strength of eight aircraft. The daily grind continued through the latter part of 1966. Sergeant Salazar and I branched out from the guns systems to checking out the entire armament system. It was just the two of us handling the gun maintenance during the day. It was a good system. We got pretty good at it. It gave more time to the other armament crews for loading the other ordnance.

Throughout project Big Eagle we encountered various problems with ordnance or the armament system on the plane. We

experienced "hung ordnance," where a bomb in the bomb bay would not release during the bomb run, but would drop on to the bomb bay doors after they had closed them and pulled out of the dive. We experienced premature detonation of bombs due to old fuses we were using. They were detonating as soon as they armed, rather than on impact. One pilot wrote in his discrepancy report, "All bombs detonating 50 ft. above ground." Sergeant Handley, not without a sense of humor, wrote in the "corrective action" section, "Fly 50 ft. lower next time." True story.

Then there was the time we were told to take all our 2.75-inch white phosphorus rocket heads to a tent between the ramp and runway and store them there. There had already been some loaded on the planes. Someone determined that some of the heads left the arsenal in "partially armed" state. The Army flew in an X-ray unit to check all of them.

While we were at NKP, a couple of us decided that we needed our own unit patch. We got together and came up with a design for a "Project Big Eagle" patch. When we came up with a final design, one of the guys took it downtown and had about 150 of them made. I think they ended up costing us about a dollar apiece. I had at least one, but it would be later traded back at England AFB for some insulated flight underwear and a pair of boots at base supply. It was never an officially authorized patch, but we wore it anyway and no one said anything about it.

As the months rolled along, our deployment was coming to a close. During Project Big Eagle, some of the original personnel that deployed to NKP were rotated back home as replacements arrived. Some of the munitions types that served in the ammo dump were rotated back about September. I remained with the detachment. About the middle of November, we learned that our turn would come soon.

A contingent of armament and ammo personnel would rotate back about Thanksgiving. Sergeant Handley approached Sergeant Salazar and me one day and said that because none of us had taken R & R during our time there, we would leave a day early and spend some time in Bangkok.

Our replacements arrived and we were to bring them up to speed on the gun systems on the A-26. The only significant thing I remember is thinking that they seemed pretty unfamiliar with the operation of the A-26. So was I when I arrived!

The day of our departure, the three of us boarded a C-123 that would take us to Bangkok. We left NKP for the first time since we had arrived in June. Some of the aircrews remained behind until their replacements arrived and were checked out. They returned to England AFB about mid-January 67, when Project Big Eagle officially ended.

During the six-month test program of Project Big Eagle, they flew 1,349 sorties, dropped 2,126 tons of bombs, expended 717,595 rounds of ammunition and released 8,349 flares.

While NKP certainly could not have been considered "choice duty" in 1966, there was something special about my time there. It was an honor to have been a part of Project Big Eagle-Detachment 1, 603rd Air Commando Squadron, and to have served with the others as well.



CHRISTMAS MESSAGE

At this time of year, as President of the TLC-Brotherhood, let me extend my family's best wishes to everyone. No matter what your beliefs or even if you embrace no particular religion, may the Warmest Joyous Wonders come upon you and all of your family. I hope the coming year will bring prosperity and fulfillment to all of us. May the Lord protect and guide our military men and women who are in harm's way to protect us. They, by the thousands, will spend a Christmas away from their family. Look after their families and give them the strength to see the long and lonely separation through.

May the Good Lord bless and keep each and every one of us.

John Loftus,
President TLC-B

Margaret (Peggy) A. Loftus
My wife

Greetings:

The Mekong Express Mail staff wish you a very merry Christmas and all the very best in 2008. We are particularly grateful to those who contribute the material for us to publish. If you have a story to tell, big or little, please let us know. We are always glad to help with the "fine tuning" and we do all the layout and style work for you. If you have photographs of interest to our readers, please consider submitting them.

Dave MacDonald
Bill Tilton
Ray Hayes

Board Defines Ribbons Displayed On New TLC Logo

by Hap Wyman
Comm Committee chairman

Some time ago a new TLC official logo was designed with the service medals of the Vietnam era included on the logo. Members who did not serve during the actual period of war designated by the US government, or in the SEA theater itself, have expressed the view that the ribbons do not reflect their service or apply to them, so therefore, they cannot wear the logo. In the last board meeting the board defined what the ribbons on the logo mean to the TLC and how the new logo applies to all of our members, not just those who served during the government defined "war" designated years. The opinion of the new TLC logo, as interpreted by the TLC Board of Directors, is as follows:

It is the position of the Board of Directors that the ribbons on the logo are signification that the TLC is about something that happened in the Vietnam War era. Nothing more, nothing less. You can buy the same generic identification ribbon hats for the Korean War and WWII. A perfect example would be U.S. Navy ships that served in the waters off south or north Vietnam during the war. All ships that were in the war zone received the same awards and they were forever after stenciled on their sides under the bridge. Anyone who served on the ship afterwards sailed with the award on the ship. It does not mean they were entitled to wear the award on their uniform; the ship earned the award, not them. The TLC is about something that happened in the Vietnam War era and the awards on our logo signify awards issued in the Vietnam War era, not specific individual awards issued to you or me personally. The National Defense Service Medal was issued to all US Military personnel, period, in the Vietnam era. The Republic of Vietnam Campaign Medal is the award of a foreign government no longer in existence. The only award in question is the Vietnam Service Medal and for the medal on our logo to be personal it would have to be embossed with bronze or silver campaign stars indicating the service of the individual in the war zone, which it is not. These are generic awards of an ERA and that was the original intent of the BOD when we put them there. The idea was to give the TLC a recognizable logo immediately identifiable with the Vietnam War Era.

Membership in the TLC is open to anyone. It says nothing about being a veteran or having served in the actual Vietnam War Theater:

1. To provide a benevolent, non-partisan association primarily for veterans, both military and civilian, of the ERA of United States involvement in the armed conflicts in Southeast Asia, with a primary interest in service outside the Republic of Vietnam, and open to all who contribute dues, if any, and agree to support these objectives. <snip>

This same logo information is posted on the TLC web site at: <http://www.tlc-brotherhood.org/>