



Mekong Express Mail

Volume 9, Issue 2

THE THAILAND LAOS CAMBODIA BROTHERHOOD, INC.

www.TLC-Brotherhood.org

Unexploded Ordnance in Laos today

*By Troy Pudney
UXO Coordinator
Sepon Gold & Copper Operation
Laos - PDR*

“The air is thick and the humidity is stifling, even for someone born and raised in this part of the world. His ears strain to hear the sound of movement in the dense Laotian jungle through the constant buzzing of swarms of malaria-infected mosquitoes, flies and other jungle animals. He looks at his watch; thirty seconds to go. He goes over the serial in his head, doing a mental check off. Have all entry points been covered? Has the local population been warned not to approach? Did I wire up the explosive charges correctly? Is there anything I have forgotten? It is too late now; ten-seconds—he counts down over the radio to the sentry position; 5... 4... 3... 2... 1... He presses the firing button. The noise of the explosion echoes through the jungle and all is silent; except for the mosquitoes, who appear impervious to it all and remain intent on sucking the last pint of blood out of him. He looks up at the shadowing EOD technical advisor and safety officer, who gives him a pat on the back for a job well done. Another square meter of Laos is reclaimed.”

No, it is not an excerpt from a cheesy Special Forces style paperback but something that goes on almost everyday here on the Ho Chi Minh Trail. After forty years, unexploded ordnance (UXO) technicians are doing the work that the arming devices and fuses did not do; in a time of peace blowing up the bombs that were dropped in a time of war.

Unknown to the men flying over Ban Boun and the “Chokes” in the 60s and early 70s were the riches that lay on and under the ground in the form of copper and gold. By the time



UXO worker in Lao jungle. Photo by the author.

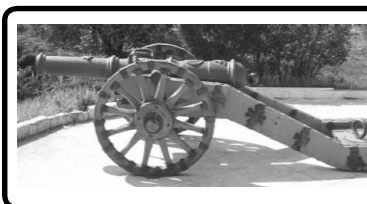
foreign exploration entered the area, there was something else there as well; UXO. In the early days of the mine at the base of Phu Padan, the bombs and cluster munitions were laid as far as you could see. There was so much contamination that other mining companies would not touch it. But someone did take the risk and employed a commercial UXO company to clear paths and pads for drilling to find out the extent of the ore deposit. In the early days of the mine a small team of UXO workers would be flown to the top of Padan and they had to jump into the treetops, cut and clear the spot and a drill rig would be flown in. With the expansion of the mine came the requirement for infrastructure; this led to improved roads (the trip from Vientiane to the mine was a two to three day trip—now it is six to seven hours) and electricity.

Bill Tilton asked me the other day how much the presence of UXO hampers the operations at the mine. To answer him and to give those of you

out there a bit of an idea how they look for and extract ore, I will try to explain how we go about it.

When they send the geologist out into the field to look for rock formations and soil samples the mine is required to send a pathfinding team with a UXO Level One searcher.

See UXO, continued on page 2



Reunion and Quilt? See pages 6 and 7!

UXO, continued from page 1

His task is to visually check the ground ahead and to sweep for any bombies (BLUs) in the path. This is followed up next by a survey team, who peg out the intended tracks and drill pads. It also requires the use of a pathfinder team.

A cutting team, controlled by an UXO supervisor, will then clear the ground of vegetation and do a visual search for UXO. The area to be cleared will depend on the task required. We try to reduce the impact that the mine has on the environment so only the areas that require clearance are cut. This does put us in a bit of a dilemma as we are here to rid the countryside of UXO, and we would like nothing more than to grid the area up into squares and get on with it. It would of course be cost prohibitive to do so, but when you are following a trail of BLU-26s into the jungle, you just need to stop or end up over the border in Vietnam.

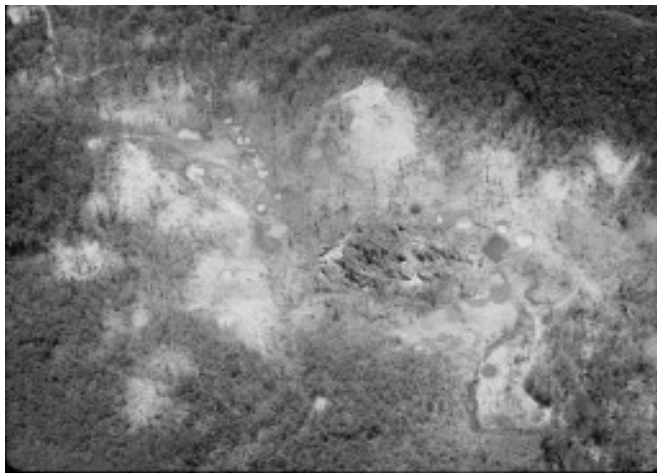
Before any earth works are carried out a full remediation team does a shallow search of the ground. They are your classic mine sweepers, swinging a metal detector across the ground



Left, a member of the Oxiana UXO team "clearing path." Above, UXO Technicians preparing a demolition charge to destroy a Mk-118 Rockeye. Photos by the author.



Below left, Chokepoint Alpha as seen in 1966. Photo at right is the karst in the center of the 1966 photo, as seen in 2008. Left photo, Bill Tilton; right photo, Troy Pudney.



looking for all shallow ordnance and near-surface contamination, clearing away the pieces of fragmentation and scrap metal. The ground is now deemed safe to walk on only. It speeds up the searching of the next phase, the deep search team. Their task is to look for the GP (general purpose) bombs, those that failed to detonate or only low ordered (see box on page 3). So by removing the surface scrap and frag, their equipment is not reading false targets. The deep search magnetometers only look for ferrous items and do not normally find cluster munitions. Once this is complete the ground is deemed safe to drive on and dig to a depth of two and a half meters.

Once the drill pads have been constructed the drill holes need to be checked every couple of meters down to the historical depth of the deepest item recovered. This ties in with the theoretical depths from EOD publications. This is to alleviate the risk of a rig drilling into an item and causing it to high order (see box on page 3). Every ground disturbance activity requires a clearance of UXO below the last deep search. To put that in perspective, if you had to dig a ditch five meters deep, it





At left, bomb is roped off with red tape. Left below, CBU Canisters at a scrap yard in Ban Nabo, near the town of Sepon, Laos. Photos by the author.



“High Order” and “Low Order”

The Low order is when the item has not fully exploded or it burns instead of going bang. High order is going bang as it was designed. We have found various items around that had the rear blown off but still full of explosives. I have done a bit of research and it appears the earlier bombs with the less sensitive fillers did not have ample boosters to reach full detonation. This I believe was rectified later on, from what I can gather.

of M-83 butterfly bombs with their anti-disturbance fusing. A thriving scrap metal trade has sprouted from the recovery of Mk 81s (250-pound) to Mk 84 (2000-pound) low drag bombs. M117s (750-pound), and AN-M41 20-pound fragmentation bombs.

The photo at right is of a group of locals
See UXO, continued on page 11

Below, Choke Point Alpha—inside the Karst at Alpha. “We investigated the cave system inside of the Karst and it would have sheltered quite a number of people and stores during bombing missions. When the weather improves we intend to climb to the top to find any remnants of the war. Around the base we saw fuel drums still buried, never recovered.” Photo by the author.

would require a full search at the surface, then a deep search at the 2.5 metre mark.

As you can see, to dig an open cut mine like the one at Sepon requires an enormous amount of UXO support. UXO clearance impacts every facet of the operation because the remnants of the war are everywhere. So what do we have here in the way of ordnance? It is not only the air munitions that were dropped by the US and her allies. There are the items thrown out from the air strikes and left by the NVA, from hand grenades, 60-mm to 120-mm mortars, RPGs to MDH type anti-personnel mines. We have found almost every variant of cluster munitions produced by the US during that time. The most common of these is the BLU-26/36. The BLU-36 contains a time delay fuse and is the one that causes the most injuries among the local people. It is indistinguishable from the BLU-26; thus all are treated as worst cases. There is also an abundance



The day the Quality Control guys were never there

In the March issue of the Mekong Express Mail, BX Shopkeeper Bob Pruiksma, who served at Korat RTAFB, told MEM about his maintenance work on BATCAT RC-121 Super Connies. In this issue he gives details about keeping the Super Connies flying and describes his time at Nakhon Phanom RTAFB, and his maintenance work on C-123 Candlestick flare ships.

MEM Did you know then, that there were two types of C-121 at that time?

BP Yes I did, because I had worked on them both. I had worked on the picket ships that had radomes on top and bottom, at McClellan. Those were the D and H model, I believe. They did the coastal picket patrols on both coasts, and they did the “College Eye” mission. That was the group that deployed to Korat with the picket ship models. Our call sign was *Batcat*. The College Eye program that [TLCB president] John Loftus worked on, went by the call sign *Ethan*. Our planes were camouflaged and the Ethan planes were gray. Our planes had five or six orbits they flew in Vietnam and also Laos.

MEM How long did the Connies stay in Southeast Asia?

BP I’m not sure, but I do know that they did not start out at Korat—they came in from Vietnam and they were at another Thai base, briefly. Shortly after I left, in July of 1970, they pulled out. By 1971 they were all gone. As far as I know, there are no R models left anywhere. There is one on display at Tinker AFB but I do not think it is an R model, but rather one of the radome types. The Batcats were EC-121Rs.

MEM I understand there were some pretty serious accidents, at least two. Were those the only losses?

BP Yes, they were the only Connie losses that I knew about. The one during landing, happened in September, a month before I got there. Both were pilot error. The other one was in April. They took off in a violent rainstorm and crashed shortly after takeoff. At least 18 people died in that one. The one in September was landing in a rainstorm and had made one approach, then executed a missed approach and came around for another try and landed just short of the runway in the field. It took out a number of approach lights; it took out the Thai guard shack out there and killed the Thai guards. Also four of the crewmembers died. Later in life, when I went to work at Dobbins AFB as a civilian, I met one of the guys who had survived that crash. He had been a crewmember in the rear part of the fuselage.

MEM A number of times you said how much you enjoyed working on that airplane. Can you say why?

BP It was probably my first real work experience away from home. Being in a war zone, there was a lot of freedom given that would not necessarily be allowed back in the States. There were things we just went ahead and did, that in the States they would have a specialist come out and do. There were certain things I did because I was good at it. For instance, one of the things I did on a regular basis was, every

time you had an engine failure the engine oil tank had to come out of the aircraft. As you know, there is a firewall shutoff valve for all the fuel and oil lines passing through the firewall. They are cable actuated on that aircraft and that all has to be disconnected when you take out the oil tank. This is a metal 35-gallon oil tank. It had to be taken out and steam-cleaned to remove all the debris. You could see the flecks of metal shining in there after an engine failure. So we would get it pressure-washed and then put it back in. Usually by the time you got that tank cleaned up and dried the new engine was already hanging and somebody had to get up there and re-connect all that.

MEM Are there other maintenance mishaps that stand out in your recollection?

BP There is a personal mishap that I remember very well. I was running to catch the bus to town and in my haste I tripped over a curb and thought I sprained my ankle. I was going to an Indian tailor for a fitting of a jacket or something. By the time I hobbled to his shop my ankle was swollen to a huge size. In fact, the shop owner put me in his personal van and drove me to the base. I ended up in a cast, which meant I had to work in the maintenance office for a while. The guy I worked with in there just drove me crazy! I was desperate. I went back to the clinic and got a cast with a walking heel on it and then begged them to put me back to work out on the planes, which they did. So I went back to work, and I was sitting up on the wing refueling a Connie at night with my bright white cast catching the light from those light carts we had. The supervisor came by and said, “Get off that so-and-so wing! We let you come back to work but you can’t be up on the wing.” That was what we did—we refueled planes, we towed planes; but then I had to stay off the wing. But at least I did not have to work with that guy in the office. By the way our hangar and our office, they called it the “Bat Cave,” are still standing today. You can see them on *Google Earth*. That is still an active base with the Royal Thai Air Force.

MEM Did they still have the F-105s there when you were at Korat?

BP Yes, they did, but they left and were replaced by F-4s. Later in the year they came back and Korat had both F-4s and F-105s. Later both were replaced by the A-7s, and when the Connies left, the EB-66s came in to replace them.

MEM What made you accept a voluntary PCS offer to Nakhon Phanom and C-123s?

BP Change. Something new.

MEM Did you have the same duty assignment there?

BP Yes, aircraft maintenance. I had similar work. There was a four-lane bowling alley, but the BX had hardly anything in it. We had a movie theater at Korat that was in the wood slat wall type building with a screen inside, like they constructed all the hooches. It was so close to the flight line that when the F-4s started to roll you could not hear the movie. So the Air Force, in their infinite wisdom, built one of those all-metal Butler Buildings. It was *worse!* That metal would start to rattle and you could not hear the movie in there either. It was hotter, as well.

MEM You could hear the movie at NKP, but every time that powerful Invert radar antenna swept around you could hear a loud beep in the sound system.

BP I never knew Invert was on the base and I never knew all those computers were there underground. I do remember that it was kind of rainy when we got there and the road going downtown was just ruts and mud, and the town was not as nice as Korat. Afterwards we said, "Why did we do this?" Steve Petersen and Eric Froberg were my friends who went there with me from Korat. We talked about maybe we had made a mistake. At Korat most of the roads were paved and there was a railroad station, too.

MEM How would you compare working on the C-123 to working on the Connie?

BP It was much smaller and less maintenance. It had the little jets, but I do not think I ever even uncowed one of those jets. We got a good look at "Patches" at Dayton last summer. That was the 123 from Vietnam that had so many bullet holes in it. The author of the book, *Flying Through Midnight*, is a C-123 guy who had an emergency landing at Long Tieng or someplace like that. He talked about the navigator lying on the floor, and I thought, "I don't remember the navigator lying on the floor!" I did not even know there was a hole in the floor. Then, when we went inside that one at Dayton, they showed me where the hole was in the floor.

We had certain jobs that you had to do that required a checklist. When refueling an airplane you were supposed to have a refueling supervisor and a refueler. The airplane was supposed to be grounded with ground wires. You had to have a fire bottle. We were short of people. Everybody was short of people at that point. It was raining. I had my poncho on. The fuel tank on the 123 was filled at the trailing edge of the wing; they had some "non skid" up there but most of it was worn off, so you were always balancing up there on that wing and trying not to fall off the trailing edge.

I was sitting there under my poncho with my little 90-degree flashlight over the tank trying to keep water out of it, and I was fueling, and here came two guys walking toward the airplane,

Quality Control personnel. They asked me what I was doing. I said, "I'm fueling," and they said, "Did you know your airplane is not grounded?" I said, "Yep." They said, "So, where is your fire bottle?" I said, "I don't have one." Then they said, "You got a check list?" I said, "Nope." They said, "Supervisor?" "Nope." The guy said, "You know we're going to have to disqualify you. You're going to have to go and get re-qualified." I said, "Nope." That got their back up a little and they said, "What do you mean, 'no'?" I said, "I'm going home in three days. Do you want me to stop fueling?" They said, "Nah—we weren't here," and walked off.



Fairchild C-123K as shown at WWW.WarbirdAlley.com (source unknown).

C-123 Origins

This aircraft was based on a heavy assault glider designed for the Army by the Chase Aircraft Company in 1943. An XG-20 glider was actually built in 1949, but USAF had Pratt and Whitney Double Wasp engines installed and named the resulting powered cargo plane the XC-123 Aviatruc, which flew in October, 1949.

USAF ordered 300 C-123B Providers from the Kaiser-Frazer Company (steel, aluminum, ships, automobiles), who had taken control of Chase. However the faltering production program was taken over by Fairchild Aircraft Company, of Hagerstown, Maryland. The C-123 became operational in 1954 and in the early 1960s the first jet augmented "J" model appeared (jets were J-44s, later replaced to create the "K" model with 2800 pound thrust J-85s).

Most US Air Force C-123s served in the Vietnam War, where they served as troop and cargo haulers. Some were utilized as defoliant (Agent Orange) sprayers (UC-123Ks) in Operation Ranch Hand, and at least two were modified as armament-carrying AC-123K/NC-123Ks, which operated at night against enemy truck convoys.

(Based on information at Warbirdalley.Com).



See you in Philadelphia in August

by Gary Beatty, Reunion Chairman

Time is running out to make your hotel reservations for the Philadelphia reunion. Reservation forms for the various events and Sisterhood Raffle tickets were included in the March MEM. The registration forms are available on the TLCB website, and raffle tickets can be purchased at the reunion - right up to the time of the drawing.

The hotel facility this year provides suites at our group rate, and that rate includes a full breakfast - that's right, a free meal with each night you stay, and you get a suite for the price of a room! However, to curtail potential costs to the TLCB, the hotel has limited the number of suites being held at the reunion group rate. Once those are taken, you may not get the group rate. So get 'em while they are still available.

As for activities, we have confirmed there will be a former US Army Commanding General in attendance at the Saturday night banquet. In addition to the tour of historical sights in Philadelphia, we are working on a tour of nearby Valley Forge National Historic Park [see below]. If we get enough interest in the Park tour, we may be able to arrange free transportation for this trip.

The auction this year will include some items brought back from some members' recent trip to Laos. I have yet to attend an auction where there was not something I bought. You will still be able to buy tickets for the Sisterhood Raffle right up to the drawing.

Aside from the planned activities, the business meeting will be important this year. The Board will be reporting on and proposing, some significant issues of interest to the membership - and we want your input.

So make your reservations, and get your registration in.
See you in Philadelphia!

News Break! FREE VALLEY FORGE TOUR!

President John Loftus has notified Mekong Express Mail that in addition to the attractions shown on the reunion registration form, a free tour of Valley Forge National Historic Park will be included in the package for this year's reunion. This tour will be offered at a time to be announced.



2008 Reunion, Philadelphia, PA
Liberty and Freedom

Reunion Facts

Dates: August 7-10.

Place:

Doubletree Hotel Plymouth Meeting,
640 West Germantown Pike,
Plymouth Meeting, PA 19462
610-834-8300

Events:

Friday, 8/8: City tour of historic Philadelphia; Assistance auction in the evening.

Saturday, 8/9: Annual Meeting in morning, banquet in the evening.

Sunday, 8/10: Brotherhood memorial service at 0900.

Registration:

Self-reserve your rooms with the hotel at the number given above. *Be sure to identify your special group—TLCB.*

Use enclosed registration form or call (817) 251-3551 to register for the TLCB reunion and events (not rooms). This is due by July 11th. After that date there will be a \$10 late charge per person.

(Note: the registration fee of \$40 per person will be used to cover expenses we incur in holding this event. Any surplus will be returned to the treasury for future annual meetings and reunions.)

The Quilt

By Bob Wheatley on behalf of Rosie Wheatley and the TLC Sisterhood

It is already June, and the annual TLC Brotherhood reunion is drawing near. As in the past, the annual TLC Sisterhood quilt raffle will again play a major part in this year's reunion activities. Each year, the TLC Sisterhood Quilt Raffle has contributed significantly toward the TLCB's overall fundraising efforts to aid the children of Thailand and Laos in the name of our brothers who did not return with us. This year, with the recent passing of long-time TLC Brotherhood member and TLC Sister, Donna Bartholomew, the quilt will be offered for raffle in memory of Donna, and appropriately, it will be dubbed "The Donna Bartholomew Memorial Quilt."

The quilt will follow a patriotic theme and will be done in varying fabrics in shades of Red, White and Blue. In keeping with this year's reunion venue, it will include images of Independence Hall, the Liberty Bell, the founding fathers and their signatures from the Declaration of Independence interspersed among the blocks. The finished size will accommodate a full or queen-size bed. Machine quilted and hand-bound, as always this quilt will be a quality work, crafted with tender, loving care by accomplished seamstress, Rosie Wheatley of the TLC Sisterhood. It will be a one-of-a-kind work you will be proud to display in your home.

Thus far the quilt has raised \$500 in ticket sales, a significant amount, but still well short of the numbers we have seen

in years past. Our thanks go out to those who have already participated. We are hoping for an enthusiastic and generous response from our members between now and the time of the drawing at the reunion in August. You will find a sheet of raffle tickets enclosed in this issue of the MEM. Ticket prices are just \$2.00 each, making one full sheet of tickets \$20. There is no limit to the number of tickets you may purchase. No order for tickets is too large or too small. Every purchase, no matter how small, gets us incrementally closer to our goal of \$2000. If several sheets of tickets are desired, one sheet may be filled in and simply photo-copied.

On the other hand, we want to make it as easy as possible for you to participate. If you prefer, you need not fill out tickets at all yourself. Just mail your check or M.O. with request for the desired number of tickets. We will happily fill them out for you and enter them in the drawing, if you so desire. Requests for raffle tickets to be filled in on your behalf should be received no later than August 1. Tickets will be available for sale at the reunion as well. Once again, you need not be present at the drawing to win. Send your tickets or your request for tickets and your check or Money Order in the appropriate amount made out to The TLC Brotherhood, Inc. to

TLC Brotherhood
P.O. Box 343
Locust Grove, Ga., 30248

In the memo line of your check, please indicate the purpose is "Quilt Raffle." As we have in years past, let us all once again join hands in making this year's raffle and reunion an unqualified success.

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TLC Brotherhood, Inc. Tax ID #54-1932649

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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. Password (8/1/08): AnneMarie

An unofficial visit to Nakhon Phanom

Assistance projects

by Bill Tilton; photos by the author

Excerpted from a report on a trip taken with John and Nancy Sweet in February, 2008.

Our second day at NKP started with a little ceremony in our hotel lobby, where the TLC Brotherhood honored two local friends of TLCB with certificates of appreciation from the board of directors. This was done at the recommendation of John Middlewood, who depends on the goodwill of city and school officials. Popular local radio announcer, Phomphan Groomlipan, was honored for his special help, on the radio and in person. Another certificate went to the district director of schools and was accepted in his absence by his deputy—he would have attended but there was a major event at That Phanom that day and he had to be there instead. Then, as a little surprise, a certificate from the board of directors was also presented to John Middlewood, without whose enormous efforts there most likely would be no Assistance program in Nakhon Phanom province at all.

The visit to schools near Nakhon Phanom was one of our chief objectives, but in advance we asked John Middlewood to limit the number of schools (both to allow more time at the ones we did visit and because we were concerned about saving our energy), and to limit the amount of “performing.” The latter not only disrupts the schools, but also makes it even harder than usual to see the

kids and the schools as they are. For the most part this worked out. The first school we visited, Nong Ya Sai, was the only one where we had a formal performance, and it was very touching and well done. It was preceded by a long and animated session between Phomphan, speaking loudly over a speaker system, and



the very responsive students, who clearly enjoy getting English “lessons” from Phomphan (who is learning English himself).

The last dancers, all dressed up in the costumes of their local tribe, were pretty teenage girls, who very sweetly and politely served us tea and cookies after the dance. Then it was our turn, as the teachers distributed cookies from a huge tin we had bought on our way to the school. John Middlewood cringed a little at this because the big problem is to get the kids to eat nutritious foods. But they indulged us “just this once.” Yes, junk foods are extremely popular in Thailand too!

The schools we visited were well chosen, as a cross-section. Some were new to TLCB, and some were just about to be dropped because they no longer need us as much as others. All are within the same province, so travel from one to the next was always less than half an hour. It was that afternoon as we passed a school we were not visiting, but which our Assistance program has helped, that I saw one of the nicest little signs of our work. Kids were walking down the road with blue sleeping mats under their arms or over their shoulders. Even from the moving van I could read “TCLB” on each one. John Middlewood explained that it was Friday, and they



had only recently got approval to use its funds to create “living monuments” by providing enhanced school libraries for a number of these same schools, and we saw several that are candidates for this very popular plan. The existing libraries were obviously of little or no benefit to the students. In fact, one of them was in the kindergarten building, and another was stocked with old teaching manuals and other adult-level books and brochures that appeared to be of little interest to secondary school students. The schools need readers, some of which will be in English, of course, that are appropriate for and appealing to grade school and high school students. The school officials were busy drawing up their lists of school-age books and other things like furniture and possibly even separate buildings that they can purchase under this wonderful program.

Along the way we saw impressive examples of projects TLCB has provided. All labor involved has been self-help,

take them home to be washed over the weekend. One of the schools serves two villages that are one or two kilometers apart, and parents from each village have been helping to improve the school. As we arrived at another they were just finishing work on a waist-high wall around the eating area. This wall is to keep out small animals like the ubiquitous yellow dogs one sees so much in Thailand. It is concrete, and TLCB has furnished the materials. Village volunteers have provided all construction work, most of whom are parents of the students. We saw a number of the very solid and substantial, and badly needed, water purification systems that TLCB and Air Commando Association through TLCB, have provided. We saw the very clean and sanitary toilets that have made such a difference in the health risks these children are subject to

This visit was not all about Assistance, of course. At the time of our visit the Monument Committee



but we have provided the materials and supplies. At one school they were just finishing a four-foot concrete wall around the kitchen and eating area that will keep pets and farm animals out of this area. Several workers were doing the final cleanup and smoothing of the last layer of concrete. We knew the materials had cost about \$240, but we asked who was paying these workers, and learned that they are parents who have been doing all of the work as volunteers. This is the

See **Assistance**, continued next page

Above left, dancers serving tea and sweets to their “falang” guests and school officials. Above, John Middlewood and Khun Phomphan “teaching” the young students by entertaining them.

Left, a water treatment facility furnished by a generous grant from the McCoskrie Threshold Foundation of the Air Commando Association, working jointly with the TLC Brotherhood.

policy on nearly every project. The only exceptions would be things like computers, for which there is no free expertise. But even there, we have been able to get some special cost breaks over the years. We saw TLCB water purification systems, sanitary toilet facilities, and a whole kitchen that will soon replace a very unsanitary lean-to arrangement. There appear to be hundreds of desks and scores of fans neatly labeled "TLCB." And most schools we saw had solid concrete dining tables, topped with blue tiles, which had been purchased for surprisingly little money.

Our presence was always a cause for excitement, but since it was a Friday we did not have to keep going too late—the kids get to go home a little early. The last school we visited had a formation of kids out by the flagpole saying some prayers and preparing to dismiss. Then they were off, many of them carrying their little blue "TLCB" sleeping mats, which they take home on Friday to wash.

In the afternoon Nancy Sweet met some parents who are deaf. They were thrilled to find they could communicate in sign almost perfectly, though we teased Nancy about having an American "accent."



Top right, school toilets furnished by TLCB; this is our standard design. Middle right, TLCB provided the materials and the parents are doing the work to put a wall around this school dining area. Grateful parents greet the visitors. Below left, unsanitary and inadequate kitchen soon to be replaced by Assistance Program funds. Below right, Nancy Sweet is profoundly deaf. Here she is conversing with Thai parents who are also deaf. Sign is nearly a universal language, so Nancy had an advantage most of us do not have. She also spent an afternoon "chatting" with a small club of deaf Thai women in Nakhon Phanom.



recovering hollowed out M117s and 82s from Choke Point Foxtrot. They dug out the explosive on the other side of the Nam Kok. For those that flew over Foxtrot, it is to the east of the river as it bends away from the trail.

The “Mk-82” ended up being a Mk-36 Destructor mine. Destructors were seismic, magnetic and acoustic sea mines that were 80 series and M117s fitted with sensor units in place of normal tail fusing. After being dropped they would arm and wait for a passing target. Once a set time passed the mine would self destruct; that was the theory anyway—it did not always happen.

With all of this scrap metal trading going on there has been a marked increase in the casualty rates across the country.

The national government has put a ban on the sale and ownership of metal detectors and sale of war scrap. But the lure of the kip for the Vietnamese scrap metal traders has been met by a thriving underground industry. On average the scrap dealer buys one kilogram of scrap for about 1500 kip. This equals about seven US cents per ounce. They sell the explosive filler and the fuses to fishermen who then do a bit of expanding-bait fishing. You may well ask if this is dangerous. Yes, it is. We had a man blown up last month just outside the gate on his way fishing. He must have had one of the BLU-36 fuses. In 2006, Handicap International did a survey on the impact the UXO has had on the local community since 1973. It reported a little over 4800 people killed or injured. This year the Lao National Regulatory Authority on UXO (NRA UXO) has redone the survey with a wider reach, encompassing more villages. It has found that the earlier report greatly underestimated the impact. At the time of this writing the survey is continuing and figures are not available.

The NRA UXO has done a great job of bringing in operating standards and pushing laws through trying to reduce the effect of UXO on the local people. Most of their funding comes from UN donor organisations and from foreign aid. Other than a small number of expatriate technical advisors, it is staffed by Lao nationals. The mine here has been a major supporter of the NRA UXO, as it has helped enforce a safety standard across the country. At this time there have been no UXO casualties at the mine since it started in the late 90s. Following on the efforts of our first UXO contractor Milsearch-BPKP and our current contractor, BACTEC Lao, we have a very strict set of rules regarding where and how people work at the mine. We



have one simple rule, “If you are in the RED, you could end up DEAD!” This relates to the marking system used across the country, with red posts delineating the uncleared areas from the cleared area, yellow for shallow and white for deep searched.

There is much more I could talk about as the work here is always interesting and every day holds something new. My job here has meant I have needed to become a bit of a historian and a bit of an investigator, studying old US bombing data while also scouring the Internet looking for information about missions in this area. If anyone has a copy of the complete US Navy, Marines, USAF, and Army bombing data from 1965 to 1973 I would love to hear from you. We have a freelance consultant heading to the US National Archives to dig up the old databases. We use all this information to conduct risk assessments in some of the areas further away from the main trails.

I can be contacted on troy.pudney@gmail.com and although I can be a bit slow in answering, I always endeavour to get back to anyone with the time to write.

Lastly, before I sign off, Bill asked how a Navy Diver became involved in UXO. Well in Australia the Clearance Diving Branch of the Navy is charged with the Mine Counter Measure Diving, Explosive Ordnance and Improvised Explosive Device Disposal. We work closely with US Navy and Marine Diving and EOD forces and have been actively involved in conflicts and war zones from the Vietnam War through to Iraq and Afghanistan. I was a member of Australian Clearance Diving Team Three in Southern Iraq in 2003 as an EOD Patrol Commander and Diving Supervisor.



Long Tieng Visit, February 2008

by Bill Tilton, John Sweet & Mac Thompson

For some miles we saw the famous Skyline Ridge when we were passing over a high mountain, and then a little before noon we arrived at the gate of Long Tieng. On one modern map we were using there is a note in a yellow box, "Warning: Restricted Area, Entry Not Always Permitted." In fact we did not know if we would be able to see Long Tieng at all, even though Mac and Sunee are fluent in Lao, and had been here four and three times before, respectively, since 2006. But the official who had been helpful in the past, possibly the commanding officer there, had been transferred, and Mac was not certain that he would be able to wangle another entry this time.



There was a young officer at the gate, which Mac said was a first for him. Mac advised us to stay in the car and not to take photos (too late; I had already taken one). But before Mac could even get out of the car the elementary schoolteacher rode up to the gate from the other direction on his motorsai. This was a fortuitous coincidence because he said just a few words to the officer and the gate went up. Then we were in, driving alongside that storied runway, with Skyline Ridge high to our right.

Our big concern and main purpose for this arduous trip was the "crapper," as Mac inelegantly calls it, that TLCB Assistance had funded for the elementary school. This is the only instance where the Assistance committee waives the in-kind policy and allows us to hand cash out to responsible officials on site, there being no practical alternative. Mac said he was worried and even offered to pay the whole thing (\$900) himself if the money had been misused. Seeing the teacher on a shiny motorbike at the gate did not give Mac any encouragement, and then the teacher told him that the crapper "is not finished yet." Mac half expected to find, in fact, that it was not even *begun*.

So it was with great delight and relief that we found on the school ground a fine, four-room toilet building made of concrete, on a concrete slab, and with a good corrugated roof. There were solid wooden doors, and the squatter-type china fixtures were in place. In fact, just about the only thing not yet done is the completion of the septic system. The hole is dug behind the building and the pipes lead to it, but the tank needs to be installed. This was very good indeed. Prior to this there was no



Above, left, Sunee and Lao driver at guest house in Longxane, where we staged out of the night before the "final assault" on LS20A. Land Cruiser was needed because most of the route was on rough dirt roads. Above, Mac, Bill and John near the NW end of the runway with the "vertical speedbrake" in the left background and famous Skyline Ridge to the right. Village and VP house are to the left, and control tower base is off to the right. A T-28 actually bumped into that piece of karst during the war. Photos by Mac Thompson.

Below, schoolteacher in the elementary school, discussing the shortage of suitable desks. Existing desks were homemade by parents. Replacements may be a good future project for TLCB. Photo: Bill Tilton.





toilet and the situation was not sanitary. We all posed proudly for photos by the wonderful new Long Tieng crapper.

Inside the classrooms we saw the next serious need—desks. What they have now were made by local families and are an odd assortment of wooden tables and benches. They are designed for two students each, but in fact they have to put at least three and sometimes four to a table. Mac said he would investigate ways that we could help them acquire something more satisfactory.

We then crossed the road to a restaurant just opposite the ramp area and a few hundred feet from Vang Pao's main house/office (which will now be headquarters for a dam building project). Our Vietnamese noodle "pho" was cooked over wood in this dirt-floor, open-sided place because electricity has not quite reached Long Tieng (expected by May or June; the poles were up). Somehow the Beer Lao was icy cold. After our meal Mac and John convened a meeting of China Post #1, Shanghai, in Exile, for the purpose of inducting Bill into the American Legion, making him the first member to join at LS 20A since 1975. There probably won't be another for a while.

Then we asked the teacher if we could go out on the runway and take some pictures. We got photos down the runway and up toward the famous vertical wall of karst at the Northwest end, and the teacher snapped our cameras for some group shots in the middle of the runway, which



Above left, elementary school. Above, upper school with Skyline Ridge in background. Photos by Mac Thompson.

Below left, school officials, John & Nancy Sweet, Sunee Thompson, Bill Tilton, and Mac Thompson in front of the TLCB-funded first-ever elementary school toilet. Below, John, Mac and inductee Bill, in an official meeting of China Post #1, Shanghai, in Exile. Photos: Bill Tilton.



appears unused but fully serviceable. But several of us noticed that the teacher did not really look comfortable during this part of our visit. Perhaps we looked just a little too gleeful and touristy at that point, but it was hard not to feel a certain thrill to be standing at such a famous, and long-forbidden, spot in the Lao PDR.

We then drove up the road to the upper grades school, which looks somewhat better and newer than the elementary school. Nevertheless, there is much need, particularly for desks, in that larger school. Mac discussed all the future needs with the teacher, but, of course made no commitments.

At last we drove back along the runway and said farewell to this spectacular one-time secret base that was once the bustling, crowded headquarters for the "Secret War" in Laos.



Living Monument project completes libraries in first two schools

Photos by John Middlewood

The Monument Committee reported with pleasure that the first library funded by this program has been completed, at Kok Suwant High School. John Middlewood, our official representative in Northeast Thailand, reports that they visited this school on May 29th, and took the pictures depicted in this article.

The principal of Kok Suwant HS is Mr Wirat, who is now at the third school at which TLCB has provided support. John has worked with him for five or six years, in the TLCB Assistance Program, and Mr Wirat and his staff greatly appreciate the various things Assistance has done. The Monument Committee is confident this “living monument” will also provide a tangible and substantial benefit to them.

This school was chosen as the first because John knew it would be a success and is very confident the books will be put to good use. (In fact, he is already working with the principal on other ways TLCB may be able to assist him in his English program, which would be an Assistance project).

The total cost at this school was right at 40,000 baht, or about \$1,350. John says he is hoping to be able to reduce the cost for future schools, since the dollar is so low at this time. At this cost there is enough remaining in the Monument Fund to support at least 15 more schools. However, not all projects will be identical. Some schools need less help than Kok Suwant, and some need substantially more, including computer learning centers in some libraries. We are depending on John Middlewood and the local school boards and principals to design the best program for each chosen school.



Above, John Sweet looks at nearly useless old collection at a Thai school in February. Below, Students making use of their newly-furnished and stocked library.



Top right, books laid out for bar-coding and stickers. Right, the sticker that is placed in each book. Bottom right, Maew Middlewood holds book showing TLCB Monument sticker.



Election of TLC Officers Campaign Posting Policy

The TLC list server regulations specifically state “no current politics” on the Mission and Brotherhood list servers. There are guidelines posted in the regulations outlining the description of “no current politics”. The fact is, the regulations state no current politics, period, TLC or otherwise. The no current politics regulation was initiated in an attempt to keep the ever flaming political arguments off the Mission and Brotherhood server, a subject which seems to cost us a large number of lost, thin-skinned members every year. Mission server posting is limited to the subject of war in SEA, and the politics of that war. The Brotherhood server states: “The term ‘current politics’ is defined as any attempt occurring now, in the near past, or in the near future to control or influence the conduct or policies of government at any level. Politicians may be discussed ONLY if they are deceased. Political events may be discussed ONLY if they are no closer to the present than 10 years in the past. Future political events, like upcoming elections or election campaigns are forbidden. If you must discuss politics, do it back channel or directly or on one of the many venues where such discussions are welcome”. Nowhere is current politics, TLC or otherwise, allowed or acceptable on Mission and Brotherhood.

In late 2003 the TLC introduced a third server to the members. The server is called the “Official server, or “Board” server by some, and was created to give TLC management an avenue to post official announcements to the membership. A sizeable group of TLC members chose to monitor only the Official server and not receive the standard email traffic posted on Mission and Brotherhood, and the list has the most subscribed members of any TLC server. Coverage on the Official server runs about 80% of the members, which is quite remarkable when you figure in a good portion of the remaining members are permanently off-line. The Official server is available for posting by all board members and committee chairman. The TLC owns and operates a web site and is part of the World Wide Web. The TLC publishes its own quarterly newsletter called MEM, which reaches all members.

To give the members an open avenue to campaign for the TLC offices available for election or appointment and eliminate the recent rash of “current politics” posts on the TLC list servers during the 2007 board election, the board of directors makes the following campaign procedure available to all candidates:

- 1) *Any candidate for a TLC office who wishes to post a bio(s) to the membership explaining who they are and their stand on issues, etc, shall contact the Communications Chairman, or any board member who will then forward the request to the Communications Chairman for posting to the membership.*
- 2) *The Communications Chairman will then review the request for content and if acceptable will then post the bio(s) on the official server, twice. Once at 30 days before the election and a second posting 15 days before the election.*

- 3) *The bio(s) shall be posted on the TLC web site in a special election section by the Web Master.*
- 4) *If available by issue deadline, bio(s) shall be included in MEM along with the official ballot which will address the problem of off-line members.*
- 5) *Flaming and derogatory statements toward other candidates shall not be allowed.*
- 6) *Any posts regarding current TLC elections on the Mission and Brotherhood servers will be dealt with as a server regulation violation by the Communications Chairman and the appropriate action will be taken.*
- 7) *These directives (Numbers 1 through 6 above) shall be posted on the Official Server 30 and 15 days prior to the elections and permanently included in the server regulations and in the election section on the web site and will also be given to all nominators and nominees by the Nominations Committee Chairman immediately upon nomination of a candidate.*

TLC Board of Directors

Board of Directors Announcement Regarding Nomination Policy and Procedures.

The Board of Directors has determined the process by which nominations, and election, of Officers and Directors, needs to be changed to increase efficiency, and assure access to all candidates. To accomplish that goal will require a three-step process: Amendment of the Articles of Incorporation to then permit amendment of the By-Laws, to then allow the Board to establish a written protocol to be followed in all future elections. The ultimate goal is to eliminate any confusion, and controversy, by codifying what has been merely custom. The proposed changes will begin to appear in the next issue of the Mekong Express Mail (MEM).

Because amendments of the Articles and By-laws requires a 2/3 vote of the membership, we intend to expedite the process, and alleviate the need for you to each have to mail a vote, by utilizing an “opt-out” voting method. By that we mean you will not be required to mail a vote on the proposed amendments, unless you oppose them. We will then presume the amendments are acceptable if we don’t receive opposition from at least 1/3 of the membership, in which case the amendment will fail. Each of the steps in the amendment process will be published, and voted on separately.

The proposed amendments, along with an explanation for the change, will be published in the MEM, and on the organization website. Discussion will be permitted on the Mission Server.

TLCB taught me the importance of our service in Thailand

by Gary Dooley

Many years ago (December, 1970), a young 19-year-old farm boy from Iowa was delivered to Bangkok, Thailand. In one day I learned about massage parlors, Singha tallboys, humidity, traffic, air pollution, drug dealers, rip off artists and that I was not in Iowa anymore, Todo was no where to be found.

A few days later, I took my first C-130 ride to NKP, Thailand. I wore my blues, they were soaked, I was soaked, I had one stripe on my sleeve, one ribbon and no clout. After we landed, some guy with no shirt was yelling and waving his hand for me to come his way. He brought a truck and a trailer with him. I put my bag in the trailer and sat in the back of the truck. Boy was it hot! Little did I know that, for the next year, I was about to live on this flat metal slab called a flight line. As I jarred across the hot metal PSP, I never gave a thought to going back home. All I could think of was, how as I going to survive this year? I felt very alone and had no clue.

One year later, I left on that "Freedom Bird" a much wiser and very happy person, proud of the work I had done and focused on one thing - home. Home to me meant my young wife and a son who I barely knew. I was ready, my battered and used up short calendar in the bottom of my duffle bag. I thought I had seen and heard everything until I walked into San Francisco International Airport (SFI). I had no more than stepped out of the yellow taxi from Travis when I heard the shout, "baby killer." I walked head down, not wanting to make eye contact with anyone. Again, I felt alone.

I looked around for other GIs, and there were plenty. Most were drunk and most had red clay on their boots. I was not one of them. My pride dropped to confusion, then guilt, as I realized I had not been to "Nam." I was a Zoomie, fresh out of Vietnam's favorite R&R location—Thailand. In the last year, what had I accomplished? Planes in and planes out, uploads, downloads, SARs, frag changes, but what did I do? What could I claim? What did these new Vietnam ribbons represent? I had not been "in country." Like a year before, I had gained nothing. I still had no clue.

What did you do in the war, Daddy? I'm not sure son.

Twenty-three years later I left the Air Force. At my retirement ceremony I now had 16 ribbons, including the Air Force Outstanding Unit award with Valor device, with one oak leaf cluster; Vietnam Service ribbon with three oak leaf clusters; Republic of Vietnam Gallantry Cross with device; Republic of Vietnam Campaign ribbon and an Operation Desert Shield/Storm Campaign ribbon. I never set foot in a combat zone and again had no idea what I had done to earn those ribbons, let alone clusters and valor devices.

The VA medical center officially records that I am a Vietnam "era" vet, never "in country." *What did you do in the war, Daddy? I really don't know son.* I put my ribbons in a drawer, wrapped in several sheets of paper towels. I would have to look for them. I am not sure where they are.

This story is not mine alone. This saga is one shared with the thousands who served in Thailand. But, until one year ago,

I had no one to talk to, no one to share my experiences with, let alone share my still raw emotions, and, yes, anger. I felt guilty attending VFW meetings. I had stooped to saying I served in SEA, hoping people would think Vietnam.

Yet later, somehow, I stumbled onto the TLCB site and took a look around. Hey! These guys are talking about classified stuff! My wife does not even know about these things. I enthusiastically joined in the conversations and found I was not alone anymore. Everything was on the net. I now had found my clue. These guys feel like I do, they are confused like I am and some are angry, just like me. In spite of these emotions, they all loved Thailand and its special people; and look, they are "boots on the ground" in Laos, we came back! I nearly cried.

Today, I spoke with a Laotian T-28 pilot who said we are comrade-in-arms with him. He will never know what that meant to me. His post is on the TLCB Missions site.

We (you and I) have found each other and we are sharing, laughing and learning. I now know what we did in Thailand. We made a difference, we saved lives, we flew SARs, FAC and air combat missions. We stopped trucks on "The Trail." We even flew the rescue mission into Hanoi. We did that, our planes, our helicopters, each with our fingerprints all over them. Our missions (with Thailand tail numbers) were successful, life saving. We did that. We together made that all happen, and the TLCB brought it all into focus.

Now we are older and we are not alone. I have found my clue, and we ARE Vietnam veterans. We were special then, but did not know it. We are special now as we again are "boots on the ground," working with schools and others, helping to make things better. We gave once, now we are giving again. Through the TLCB we are helping to provide quality of life to as many northern Thailanders and Laotians as we are able. We again can feel proud.

Hey Dad, what did you do in the Vietnam war? Well son, how much time do you have?