



# Mekong Express Mail

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THE THAILAND LAOS CAMBODIA BROTHERHOOD, INC.

www.TLC-Brotherhood.org

## Fighters and B-52s pulverized Ban Loboy

by Gerry Frazier

Today, Ban Loboy Ford remains one of the most hard-fought air-to-ground battlegrounds in history, even though, when we look at a picture of the area, there is little remaining evidence of that attention. Let's look at this peculiar spot in more detail, and try to discover why it was once so important.

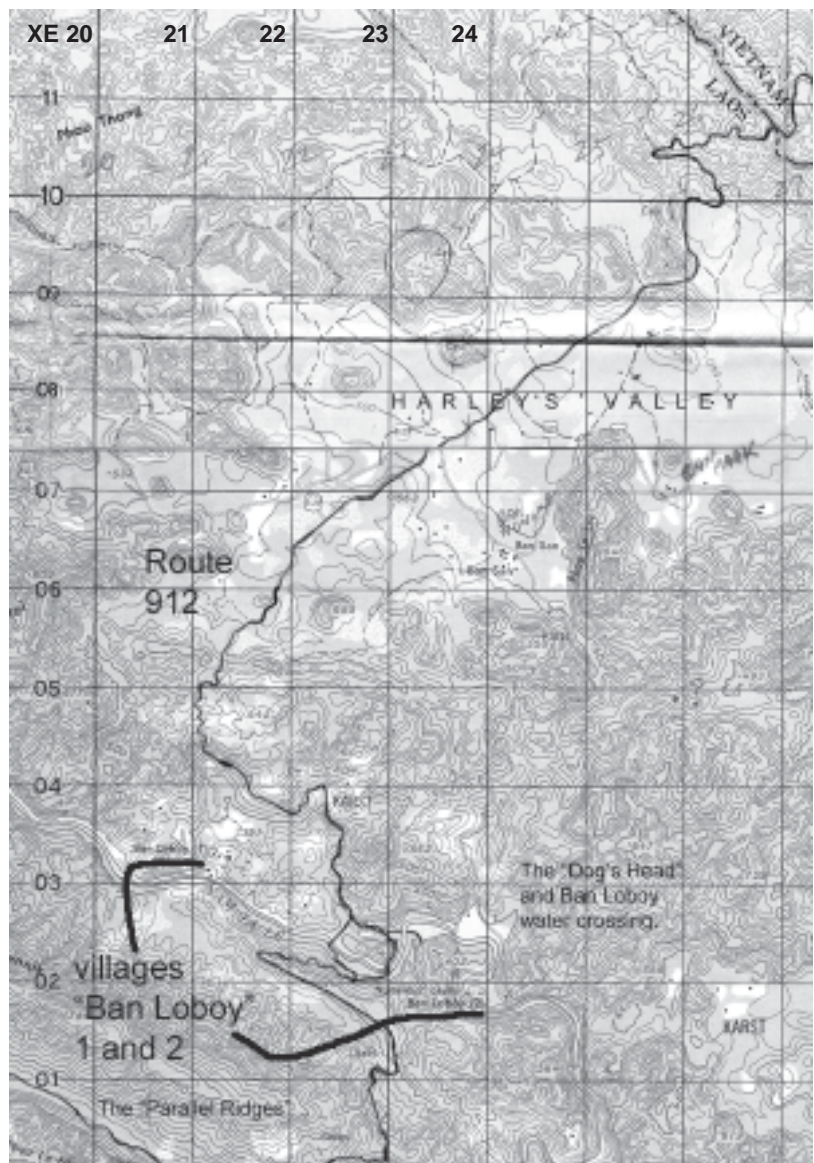
First, take a look at the map. It shows a small section of the former Ho Chi Minh Trail. You see the name Ban Loboy in two locations. Both places were once villages named Ban Loboy. Maybe the original village moved, but it is equally likely that someone moved out of the original village to get closer to the plot they were farming, and simply called the new location by the same name.

On the map, we see an "improved" road near the two Ban Loboy sites. The road, which enters Laos from North Vietnam a few kilometers to the north, descends a hillside, then turns west along the north bank of a stream, crosses to the south bank, and runs east again before continuing south. On the map, the road takes a "switchback" turn. The main ford was at the west end of the switchback. As you go north, (up hill) you can see that the road is designated 912, and it crosses the border between North Vietnam and Laos. Although this map does not show it, the place the road crosses the border was called Ban Karai Pass.

Ban Karai was one of two heavily used crossing points from North Vietnam into Laos and the Trail system. The other was Mu Gia, several miles to the northwest. Ban Karai, being the southern of the two, had the advantage of reducing the time of exposure to US bombing in Laos, especially during periods when bombing halts were in effect in North Vietnam. If the trucks entering Laos could escape detection during their run into the main Trail network, they could hide under the dense tree cover that concealed the web of roads and truck parks that made up the bulk of the Ho Chi Minh Trail (HCMT).

Since World War One, military aviators had envisioned air attacks that could stop enemy logis-

see **Frazier**, continued on page 6



MEM map scanned and marked by Bill Tilton on DoD transverse mercator chart at 1:50000 scale, on the sheet named "Ban Karai." The grid squares are one kilometer each.

**If your 2007 Dues are delinquent this is your last issue of MEM (see page 5 for details and mailing address). And please send us your new address if you move or change email.**

# Crossing the Mekong into Laos 32 years later

by Les Weatherford

Peaceful — and quiet. That is January 2007 in Laos, at least in the border towns of Thakhek and Savannakhet.

Peace and quiet, of course, would have been impossible to find in January 1975, had I crossed the Mekong River at the corresponding Thai border towns of Nakhon Phanom or Mukdahan. Those were the final days of the Southeast Asian wars, when the communist Pathet Lao and the Viet Cong were steamrolling to victory.

Back then, I was a 20-year-old airman first class assigned to the U.S. Air Force's 6908<sup>th</sup> Security Squadron at Nakhon Phanom Royal Thai Air Force Base, just a few miles west of Nakhon Phanom city. Official job: As it rather cryptically said on my APRs, "RT [radio telephone] operator." Real job: Vietnamese linguist, primarily monitoring Viet Cong radio traffic from the Ho Chi Minh Trail along the Laos-Vietnam border.

Nakhon Phanom is in northeast Thailand. As the raven flies, the city is only 60 or so miles from Vietnam, and even closer to the trail. The Mekong River separates Nakhon Phanom from Thakhek, and passenger and vehicle ferries cross regularly now. Toward the east, limestone mountains covered with lush forestry rise in the distance. A certain mystery seems to beckon one to the country.

But for this American airman in 1975, that river might as well have been a million miles wide. Laos was off-limits. GIs keep out. Something to do with a 1962 treaty establishing Laos as a neutral nation, and also the fact that despite the neutrality, a hot war was still going on there. Thakhek was controlled by the communist Pathet Lao and full of Viet Cong sympathizers. Warning from the brass: DO NOT go to Laos. Warning from the locals: DO NOT go to Laos. And when the locals shudder at the suggestion, you know things are bad.

So, all I could do was imagine what things were like on the other side. Many evenings I'd sit in the P.S. Beer bar in Nakhon Phanom, drinking Singha and gazing across the river. Laos looked quiet and peaceful, but I knew that a revolution was going on, and that things were bloody. One Bangkok Post headline from those days, on a story out of Thakhek: "Pathet Lao Gun Down Students."

Laos was a mystery, and for me, it would remain so for 32 years until January 2007, when, accompanied by my wife, Donna, I was finally able to board a ferry at Nakhon Phanom and cross over to Thakhek in what is now the Lao People's Democratic Republic.



Toughest obstacle entering Thakhek: The concrete steps from the pier to the immigration office. It's a long, steep climb, and we've four bags of luggage and two backpacks. No problem, though - boys and young men are waiting at the bottom and carry our bags up, for a fee, of course. About a dollar a bag, and when we get to the top, we know it would have been cheap at twice the price.

First step at im-

see **Laos Visit**,  
continued on page 9.



# Final Salute to 1st Lt Richard M. Welch

By William D. Bever

During the Vietnam War, the United States constructed airfields throughout Thailand to support war efforts in Southeast Asia. One such airfield was U-Tapao Thai Navy Airfield. U-Tapao, located on the Gulf of Thailand, was approximately 100 miles south of Bangkok, the capital city of Thailand.

Located at U-Tapao was the 4258th Strategic Wing. U-Tapao's aircraft consisted of KC-135 refueling tankers and B-52 long range bombers. In 1966 the first KC-135 tankers arrived and in 1967 B-52s landed to start operations.

The responsibilities of the 4258<sup>th</sup> Wing were to support mid-air refueling of Air Force, Navy and Marine aircraft. The KC-135 tanker group at U-Tapao was assigned to the 310th Wing, 3rd Air Division. Air Force units from the United States were sent TDY (temporary duty) to support operations at U-Tapao. One group performing temporary duty at U-Tapao was the 904th AREF Squadron from Mather AFB, California. I was soon to come in contact with one of the 904th KC-135 tanker crews, which would have an impact on my life.

Security at U-Tapao was of high concern with the large number of B-52s, which filled the vast revetments. The 635th Security Police Squadron was assigned to provide security for the entire airfield. Thai guards were also used to perform security duties. I was assigned to the 635th SPS, performing various job responsibilities as tower duty, entry control point and roving security patrol.

On one particular sunny and hot day, October 2, 1968 I was assigned to a roving security patrol in the flight line area. I had with me in the truck one other American and one Thai guard. We drove around the flight line keeping a watchful eye out for any situation that might have been out of the ordinary. I can remember the heat bearing down on us just past noon as we traveled the flight line.

While the security team and I were driving out and away from parked rows of KC-135 tankers, I decided to park in a safe location where we could watch KC-135s taking off on operational missions. The security truck was parked close to the taxiway, which turned into the active runway. I got out of



135 rolled up parallel to my position, the co-pilot opened his side window and saluted me. I thought at the time it was quite unique for an officer to salute an enlisted airman first. I automatically saluted him back. The co-pilot gave me a sincere smile, which I have never forgotten. He then closed his window to get ready for take-off.

The call sign for this crew was Peach Anchor 53. As Peach Anchor 53 was cleared for take-off from the U-Tapao tower, it appeared to have a normal take-off as we had witnessed many clean and safe take-offs

daily. Peach Anchor 53 was loaded with 144,000 pounds of JP4 jet aviation fuel. Its crew consisted of Pilot, Major Dean L. Beach, Co-Pilot, 1st Lt Richard M. Welch, Navigator, 1st Lt Robert C. Profilet and Boom Operator, TSgt Earl B. Estep, as the brakes were released, making its commitment for take-off.

From where I was standing, to the right side of the aircraft, I watched it pick up

speed as it continued down the runway. All of a sudden I noticed what appeared to be smoke coming from the area of the front tires. My first thought was that the pilot would reduce speed in enough time before lift-off to bring it back for repairs.

Too many seconds elapsed, as I could see the tanker trying to lift off as it had used most of the runway. The left wing dipped down and looked like it struck some type of obstruction at the end of the runway. The tanker upon hitting the obstruction crashed on impact creating a fireball. The four crew members received fatal injuries.

My security patrol and I stood in disbelief as we were in a helpless situation to do anything to save the men's lives. The co-pilot's smile will always be embedded in my mind as I was most likely the last person to see him before his fatal injuries.

Eighteen days after the tanker crash, I finished my Air Force commitment at U-Tapao. I arrived back home in Iowa to get on with my future life. One day I was reading in the Des Moines Tribune about an American Airman, 1st Lt Richard M. Welch, co-pilot of an KC-135 Tanker from Maxwell, Iowa who was killed when his plane crashed at U-Tapao Airfield on October 2, 1968. I had an empty feeling in my stomach, as this was the co-pilot who had saluted and gave me a most sincere smile. I more or less shook this incident out of my mind as I had finished four years in the Air Force and was attending college.

Sometimes fate has a way of springing up in one's life. In 2005 I had been retired from my job for three years. I had spent my retirement writing articles about my Dad, a bombardier on B-24s in the Southwest Pacific during World



William Bever in 1968. Photos furnished by the author.

see Welch, continued next page

Welch continued



1st Lt Richard Welch, USAF

War II. I was researching information on my Dad's plane, which had crashed into the South China Sea in 1945. Dad was not on this specific mission when his plane went down. As fate would have

it, the crash of KC-135A, serial number SN 55-3138 popped back into my life some thirty seven years later. I wanted to know everything about the KC crash in addition to what I had witnessed on October 2, 1968. I started checking to see if I could find 1st Lt Welch's family. My chances of finding his wife were slim to none if she had remarried. As luck would have it, 1st Lt Welch's wife never remarried. I found Janice Welch in Knoxville, Iowa. I was nervous as I talked with her, not knowing how she would receive me, as a total stranger, reopening a tragic chapter in her life. Janice Welch warmly received me as we communicated by phone. I told her I wanted to write an article to pay tribute to her husband who gave his life for his country. I explained to Janice the last moments of her husband's life as he saluted and gave me his life-remembering smile. 1st Lt Welch and Janice have a son, Bryan, who was not quite one year old when his Dad died.

After phone conversations with Janice, I was finding out new information on her husband's crash. What I had witnessed was fairly accurate, but more information became available as details were released by the government.

The mission plan for KC-135A, serial number 55-3138, call sign Peach Anchor 53 on October 2nd, 1968 was to refuel fighter planes which were engaged in combat missions in support of Southeast Asia military operations. The cleared take-off departure time was 1239 hours. At 1241 hours Peach Anchor 53 radioed the U-Tapao tower that they had lost power to number four engine. The tower acknowledged fire was seen coming out of number four engine. At 4,775 feet from take-off the right nose wheel completely deflated and tore apart at 5,625 feet. The left nose wheel blew at 6,250 feet. Planned rotation speed of 161 knots was calculated at 7,650 feet. Actual take-off distance was planned at 8,250 feet. At this distance the aircraft was at a point of no return from take-off, based on gross weight of 250,000 pounds. The aircraft could not be stopped at this weight and speed. The nose gear was raised at 9,450 feet. Rotation was in progress at approximately 10,500 feet. Traveling at 151 knots, take-off was attempted at 11,200 feet. As the aircraft reached an estimated height of 10 to 20 feet above ground, the left wing dropped and number one engine and wing struck approach light stanchions causing the plane to hit the ground, which resulted in a spontaneous explosion. The aircraft was totally destroyed with the four crew members receiving fatal injuries.

The fatal crash of Peach Anchor 53 was a sad reminder during the Southeast Asia War; members of the Armed Forces gave their lives in the service of their country. I was compelled and humbled to be able to pay tribute to 1st Lt Richard M. Welch and crew. I now feel closer to the events that happened on October 2, 1968. My tribute is in appreciation to the family of 1st Lt Welch. 1st Lt Welch's final salute and smile was his dedication to family and country.

In memory of her late husband, Janice Welch wanted to pay tribute in some way honoring her husband and veterans of Vietnam who gave their lives for their country. Janice sent a letter to the American Legion asking for a memo from a previous American Legion ceremony, which honored Vietnam War dead. The American Legion was so impressed with her letter that they mailed her letter to 2.6 million Legion members throughout the United States asking for donations for the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, DC. Janice's inspiring letter helped raise \$1 million of the monument's total cost of \$7 million. The Vietnam Memorial has had a healing effect on Janice's life. Her dedication in paying tribute to her late husband and Vietnam Veterans through donations for the Vietnam Memorial will be a permanent reminder for future generations to never forget what these Vietnam Veterans stood for: Duty, Honor and Country.



U.S. Air Force photo by Staff Sgt. Scott T. Sturkol; Fairchild AFB

## Lima Sites Added to "MapScan"

"Project MapScan", a program by Jim "Dusty" Henthorn, to scan and post maps of Southeast Asia on the Internet, has added a new capability: Lima Sites. Lima Sites, located Laos, were used by Ravens, Air America, the CIA, the RLAf and the Laotian Army to resupply both military units, and villages throughout the War.

Two new lists, one listing the Lima Sites by Site Number and the other by Site Name, have been linked to the main map page at [www.nexus.net/~911gfx/sea-ao.html](http://www.nexus.net/~911gfx/sea-ao.html) at the top of the page. Clicking on the link takes you to a set of instructions for each list. There are links to each of the lists on that page.

The pages list the nearly 500 Lima Sites established in Laos throughout the 1960's and early '70's. Each site reference has

MapScan is continued next page

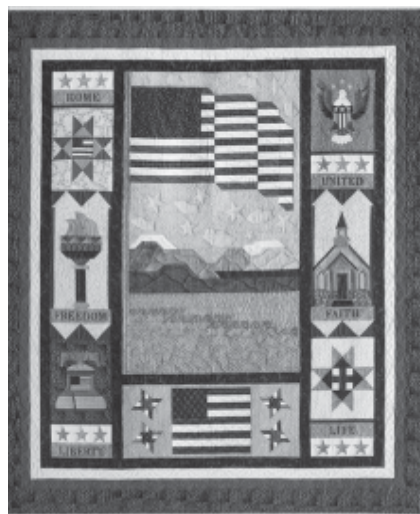
a hyper-link to the correct map. However, this is a work in progress and not every site is marked on the maps. For those not yet marked a certain amount of map reading skill is required. Dusty anticipates completing this part of the project by mid-summer.

The maps, in the 1:250,000 scale, all date from around the Vietnam War and are only suitable for study. They should not be relied upon for travel in Southeast Asia as many details have changed, dams built and areas flooded, villages moved and roads added or abandoned. They will be very useful for researchers looking for maps that show how things were and not how they look today.

The map page has over 700,000 hits since the pages were first posted nearly 7 years ago. Future expansion includes finishing the scanning and posting the maps for Thailand.



Liberty Torch, the Stars and Stripes, a church, and an American Eagle. These blocks form a sampler border around the central "picture" of a larger American flag waving over Purple Mountain Majesty and Amber Waves of Grain. This one will be truly a stunning work of American art to display in your home. Finished size



will be approximately 62" wide by 68" long and will cover a full size bed.

Tickets are priced at \$2 each and are fully tax deductible. A sheet of tickets is included in this issue of the MEM that can be photocopied, and a printable PDF file will be available on the TLCB web site for printing additional sheets of tickets. There is no limit on the number you may purchase. We encourage you to offer them to friends and family as well.

Make your check payable to TLC Brotherhood, Inc. and in the memo section make a note "Quilt Raffle." Mail your filled-in tickets and check to:

TLC Brotherhood, Inc.  
PO Box 343  
Locust Grove, GA 30248

## 2007 Assistance Quilt Raffle

By Bob Wheatley

It's time to begin thinking about the annual reunion and all the great things that go with it. As in previous years the TLC Sisterhood will be sponsoring a raffle for a hand-made quilt. All proceeds will go to the Assistance Fund to benefit the needy children of Thailand. The drawing will be held and the lucky winner announced during the Brotherhood Auction in Dayton, but the winner need not be present to win.

As in past years, this year's quilt is based on a patriotic theme. The quilt pattern "America the Beautiful" includes such unmistakable American icons as The Liberty Bell, Statue of

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**Editor:** Dave MacDonald (Dav16Mac@AOL.com)  
**Distribution:** Ray Hayes **Composition:** Bill Tilton

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### TLC Brotherhood Contacts

Ed Heyliger, Listmaster  
[AmazingDrH@webtv.net or Listmaster@tlc-Brotherhood.com]  
Bob Norway, Webmaster [examiner@cfl.rr.com]

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**TLC Brotherhood** **New TLCB**  
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Always write payment purpose on memo line.  
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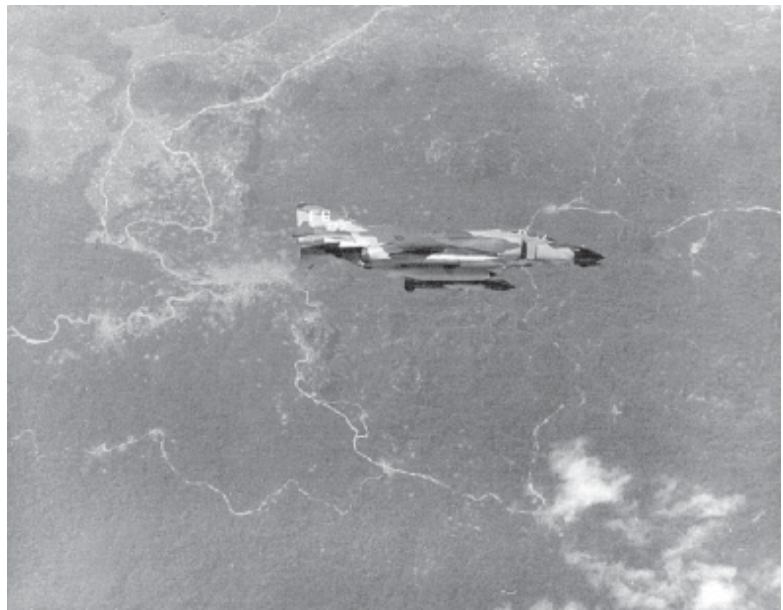
Frazier, continued from page 1

tics, by cutting the roads and railroads used to move enemy supplies. Theory said the craters caused by bombings would simply be too hard to repair, and too extensive to go around, and that while they were stopped in the open, you could bomb the trucks and railcars themselves. Enemy advances on the battlefield would simply have to stop due to a lack of supplies. The strategy for cutting these lines of communication was referred to as “interdiction.” It was not a bad theory. However, interdicting the HCMT posed some special problems. The first of these was that, unlike the well-defined paved roads of western Europe, the HCMT was a cats-cradle of interconnected roads and bypasses. The second was that much of this road network was invisible from the air, concealed by the dense tree cover in the area. If it could not be seen, interdicting it would require luck, or a very large effort. Third, the road was not paved in the conventional sense. It was packed dirt, or in some muddy sections, “corduroy” road, made by laying small trees or branches parallel to each other across the road. Lastly, if there was a source of gravel nearby, gravel could be used both to improve the road surface, and to fill craters.

For interdiction to work in Laos, we had to attack areas that were not as well hidden, and these should also be hard to repair or bypass. Ban Loboy looked like a spot that met these requirements. Furthermore, there were multiple ways to cut the road. We could bomb the road descending the hill to the north, and we could attack the water-crossing point. Either method should, and did cause southbound trucks to be delayed reaching the cover of the main trail system. Traffic jams made good targets, and often, hitting one truck carrying explosives or fuel would cause fires and explosions in other trucks nearby. But, even in the most determined of our bombing campaigns in this area, the NVA engineers repaired the road within hours, and sometimes, within minutes. It was the huge and determined effort of the crews who maintained the roads that kept the HCMT open. Intelligence personnel estimated that a force of between 40,000 and 70,000 people were required to operate and maintain the HCMT from North Vietnam through Laos, Cambodia, and South Vietnam. This number included truck drivers, the people who ran truck parks, storage areas, fuel dumps, AAA batteries, etc., and the engineers who kept the road serviceable and made new branches. That number of personnel, had they been fighting on the battlefield, would have amounted to between three and six infantry divisions.

Route 912 entered the *Nam Ta Le* river (or Xe Bang Fai, in Lao), at a spot where the water was fairly shallow, and the bottom was hard enough to drive on. Trucks could cross the river in a matter of a minute or two, and continue on their way. But the ford was more complicated than that. The North Vietnamese Army (NVA) engineers who maintained the road system expected attacks, and learned to deal with them in ways those WWI (and later) airmen could barely understand.

The ford itself was pretty simple, but our near-constant bombing with Tacair and B-52s probably really did “destroy”



The Dog's Head from ten thousand feet. A copy of this photo was handed to Bill Tilton at a meeting of KIA/MIA families in 2001, source not identified. Ban Loboy is right below the tail of the F-4.

the original ford. But, there were few choices for re-routing the road to better areas. So the engineers contrived a variety of alternate solutions to keep this particular part of their road system open and functioning for several years, despite practically everything we could throw at it.

Among the alternate solutions was a ferry. To the best of my knowledge, we rarely if ever saw the ferry itself, but we saw things necessary to make it work, and we saw the effects - the trucks kept moving. The HCMT basically ran at full capacity during the dry season, but during the rainy season, parts of it were shut down by mud and high water. Ban Loboy ford probably stayed open at reduced capacity, year around, and could do so using a ferry, even when water levels were too high for vehicles to cross on their own. Cables could sometimes be seen at the crossing point that could have been used to guide a ferry boat.

Another trick used by the NVA at water crossings was to build an under-water bridge. A more-or-less conventional concrete bridge could be designed to allow water to flow both through the structure and over the road surface, which would be camouflaged by a few inches of flowing water. Trucks simply “forded” their way across the invisible bridge.

They may also have employed retractable or folding bridges at this or other stream crossings on their route south.

Last, let's not ignore the fact that in our war, many bombs missed their intended targets. And, luckily for those NVA engineers, the limestone hills nearby were being slowly pulverized by bombs intended to close the road. The product? Gravel. Gravel could be loaded into trucks (by hand) and moved to the crater. Better yet, in some sections, the NVA had graders or bulldozers to speed the process. At Task Force Alpha, the control center that monitored the Laotian sensor field, or aboard the EC-121 relay aircraft (callsign Batcat) we could easily distinguish both the sound and the seismic signature of a bull-

Frazier is continued next page

dozer from a truck. But though we tried, it was very hard to kill a bulldozer solely from the sensor indications, especially at night.

There was very likely one other method used by the NVA to cross the Ban Loboy area when necessary. While General Lucius D. Clay, Jr. (son of the general who orchestrated the Berlin Airlift) was Commander of 7<sup>th</sup> Air Force (Sep 1970-August 1971), a system of "interdiction boxes" was developed. There were a total of four boxes, one of which covered the entire Ban Loboy area. The boxes were bombed around the clock, using B-52s and Tacair, with a mix of instantaneous and delayed-action bombs, and mines with anti-magnetic and anti-disturbance features. In other words, bombs exploded in the area at random intervals, even when bombs were not falling. The interdiction boxes were pretty effective, based on truck movements detected by sensors. But over a couple of weeks, we started to see a resumption of the logistics flow. One night, the pilot of a Candlestick FAC (C-123 from NKP) reported that he could see a helicopter on the ground in the light of the flares they dropped. The helicopter appeared to be shuttling supplies between an offload point at the north end of the interdiction box, and the south end, where they were transferred to trucks. 7<sup>th</sup> Air Force Command Post "Blue Chip" denied that any such thing could happen, but this was one of several suspected sightings of enemy helicopters in the Trail network at night.

So, what does the site of this infamous ford look like today? If you have Google Earth installed on your computer, take a look. (If not, a free download is available at Google.com.) The image of this area is old and not very sharp, but it's ad-

equate. You can plainly see the brown trace of Route 912, and the river is very pronounced. The more western of the two villages shown on the map as Ban Loboy, also shows up on Google Earth. The coordinate for the village (shown at the bottom of the screen) is 17 12' 36"N, 106 08' 39"E. Just southwest of the village, you can plainly see what could have been bridge abutments flanking the river. You can also see a number of potential crossing points where the road parallels the river on the north bank but only continues south from the area of those abutments. (The free version of Google Earth does not permit copying the images, so we cannot show the picture here, but you can easily locate it for yourself.) When you look at this area, note the dense foliage that has re-emerged, and remember that from at least 1968 until early 1973, this was one of the most heavily bombed areas spots in the world. It actually looked like the surface of the moon, because every tree and shrub had been blown away. Yet truck tracks were visible on the soft earth, often muddy at the point where the trucks left the water.

That was all over thirty years ago. We know how hard we worked to close the HCMT at places like Ban Loboy. But we could also see the effort and dedication of our enemy to keep his supply lines open. We can take satisfaction in having slowed and often stopped the movement of his logistics, but there is no question that the Vietnamese were tough, determined, and effective in matching us, and keeping the flow of material moving to South Vietnam. Like many other battlefields, ours has overgrown, the scars on the land once visible, healed by the years. May there be no more.



## Ban Loboy Today

by Marcus Rhinelander

photos by Nat Stone and Marcus Rhinelander

At first glance, the site of Ban Loboy is today just a shallow, rocky ford across the river called Xe Bang Fai in Lao. A pale dirt road snakes down from the ridge to the south, levels out and then drops quickly to the river. Women wade thigh deep, bent double at the waist, searching the rocks for freshwater mussels that they collect in rattan baskets on their back. Naked boys jump off dugout canoes tied to the bank, men fish with throw nets in the

Original ford as seen in 2006 (Nat Stone photo)



pool downstream. At first glance, it looks timeless and peaceful.

But signs of the war are all around. Bomb craters, some thirty feet across, lie all along the roads, overgrown with jungle. Many have the bright scars of more recent holes at their center, pits dug by locals looking for shrapnel to sell as scrap metal. This part of Laos is still desperately poor, the local people trapped between their traditional slash-and-burn way of life and a modern world that is starting to reach even here. For them, the five cents per pound that they can get digging up scrap metal and defusing unexploded bombs justifies the obvious risks.

And perhaps more than anything else, it's that scrap metal everywhere that constantly reminds the visitor of the war. Half shells of cluster bombs take the place of houseposts, planters for herb gardens, water troughs, even entire fences of CBU

**Ban Loboy Today** is continued next page.





UXO 2006 (Rhineland photo)

**Ban Loboy Today, continued**

“posts” and no rails. Oil drums, too, are everywhere, some of the millions of barrels of oil and fuel that fed the North Vietnamese truck fleet. Some still retain their Chinese markings. Leaf springs of dead trucks are forged into blades for machetes on anvils of 100 mm anti-aircraft artillery shells. Cluster bomblets (called “bombies” in Laos) double as oil lamps. Even the huge transport tubes for SA-2s, still marked in Cyrillic with stenciled martini glasses (for “fragile” or “vodka”?) serve as water tanks at a village nearby. Everywhere there are people with cheap Vietnamese metal detectors, searching the jungle.

On the old Route 912 (Route 20 to the NVA) south of Ban Loboy, a couple of make-shift huts stand at the edge of the jungle—just bamboo platforms and thatched roofs. A group of men sit around piles of scrap metal smoking. One offers to crack open, with his machete, a bombie he just found, to show me the inside. Another lights piles of cordite from 37 mm AA rounds; he’s already opened the shells. Nearby in a pile of discarded junk, I spy a piece of green plastic. Turning it over, there’s a



This man is holding a CBU found in Laos. (Rhineland photo)

peeling white sticker, and a single word—“LIFT”.

That small scrap of plastic, a piece of riveted aluminum, half a ring of cylinders from a radial engine, an entire J-79 engine sitting in a yard, an aviator’s helmet on a shelf. Those are the shards of stories that sit around ev-

erywhere. Mostly they disappear before they can even turn into questions, sold to Vietnamese scrap metal dealers who load them onto old Zil trucks and drive them back over what’s left of the Ho Chi Minh Trail to help fuel “Socialist” Vietnam’s capitalist boom. Occasionally, one of them makes it to the attention of the American MIA searchers that fly over the Trail in helicopters. Our happiest find was a helmet that JTF-FA traced to the wreckage of an OV-10: finding the pilot alive and well in America and sending him a picture of his old helmet was one of the highlights of our work.

Mostly, the remaining signs of the war just disappear, piece by piece, year by year. Already, after three years exploring the region, there’s noticeably less war materiel. Despite the danger, it’s a living, one of the few these people have, and they joke with us “will you ask America to come back and drop more bombs? We need the metal for money!”

The thousands of miles of roads and paths that made up the Ho Chi Minh Trail now range from little-used hunting trails



Ban Loboy water crossing today (Nat Stone photo)

through the forest to newly-paved highways. The road to Ban Loboy is somewhere in the middle. The district center of Boulapha is accessible by good dirt roads from Thakhek (and may well be paved soon). From there, the roads deteriorate, but it’s all accessible with a good 4WD and some time. The worst (and most beautiful) stretch is through the narrow karst valley south of the ford, a place where we thought “that must have been a hell of a place to fly through.” Of the fords shown on the U.S. 1:50000 maps, the only one still in use is downstream of the Dog’s Head on Rte 912 and is fine in the dry season. The main village is Ban Nongma (called Ban San on war era maps), up in “Harley’s Valley.” Our experiences there were uniformly difficult: both on the first visit, without permits, and the second, with permits, we weren’t allowed to travel towards the border from the village. But with the right official escort it might be possible to explore farther.

The trip from Mu Gia to Xepon (Tchepone) would be possible as an overnight, but with a detour to Ban Loboy and time to explore would make a great week. Other accessible spots of interest along the way include the karst around Senphan south

**Ban Loboy Today** is continued next page.



of Mu Gia, the cave that the Xe Bang Fai flows through downstream of Ban Loboy (five miles long and an incredible adventure, but that's another story), an NVA headquarters cave along Route 912, and many others. South of Xepon, a combination of old but passable roads and recent highways continues all the way to the Cambodian border.

If anyone is interested in going back into this area, please let us know. We'd be happy to share everything we know and would seriously consider putting together a trip with some veterans to travel back to the Trail. We can be reached at [mqrhinelander@yahoo.com](mailto:mqrhinelander@yahoo.com) and [nwstone@hotmail.com](mailto:nwstone@hotmail.com).



CBU canister fence, left, and a large bomb crater (Rhinelander photos)

**Laos Visit**, continued from page 2

migration is the paperwork. Quite painless at Thakhek. Fill out a form, hand over \$30 and a mugshot, get your passport stamped, and we're home free. Well, as free as one can be in a communist country, I suppose.

But leave the immigration building, and there's no sign of communism, at least none that we could see. Our first stop, in fact, was at that least-communist of all institutions — a bank, where we changed \$100 in travelers checks to Lao kip. Want to know what it's like to be a millionaire? Change your dollars to kip. The kip was trading at just under 10 thousand to the dollar, and



Les at right, resting by the Mekong River

I left the bank with 932,500 kip in my pocket. The smallest note was for 10,000 kip; most of the currency was 50,000 kip. It quite literally takes a bundle of kip to buy almost *anything* in Laos.

Thakhek, the city, is quite similar to Nakhon Phanom, only smaller. You see the same things – tuk tuks motoring about town, market stalls, food stands, wats, a mixture of the old and the new. The old is represented by the French colonial architecture and the bumpy roads, the new by a modern, multistory riverfront hotel that is painted a light blue. The pace is slow in Thakhek, slower than in Nakhon Phanom.

The hidden attraction, however, is about 20 kilometers east into those limestone mountains that look so inviting from the Thai side of the Mekong. It's Tham Pha Pa, the Buddha Cave, which was discovered only a few years ago. As the story goes, the cave was discovered by a local man who saw bats flying out of the yard-wide entrance about 50 feet off the ground. The man climbed a vine to the entrance, and when he looked inside, he saw a couple of hundred Buddha statues of various sizes. No one has yet found out how old the Buddhas are, how long they have been in the cave or who put them there.

One travel book says that "after a week of silent disbelief," the man announced what he'd found. Our guide puts it bluntly – the guy spent a week trying to figure out how to get those Buddhas out without anyone seeing him. Only after deciding it was impossible did he tell the local villagers.

Today, Tham Pha Pa is a beautiful, mystical shrine that, sorry to say, you have to see for yourself – photography is not allowed inside. But at least you don't have to scamper up a vine to get there. Steep concrete steps lead to the entrance, or, if you're feeling fit and adventurous, you can scale an even-steeper ladder. We took the steps.

Note to women: Custom requires that you be dressed respectfully when inside the cave, and that means wearing a *sin*, a long, wrap-around skirt. Don't worry if you didn't bring one – they're available for rent from a shop in the settlement at the base of the mountain.

Historical note: During the Southeast Asia wars, Thakhek was predominantly Vietnamese. Most of them left after 1975, but some

**Laos Visit** is continued next page

remain. At Tham Pha Pa, we run into a group huddled around an old military truck at the base of the mountain. Our guide points them out and then asks me, with a note of irritation in his voice, “Why are they *still* here?”

After lunch at a nearby restaurant — I’m not sure whether “pondside” was the name of the restaurant or just our guide’s description, but either way, the food was good, and, yes, it was beside a pond — we head to Savannakhet, about 120 km or so south. Again, the scenery is quite similar to that of rural Thailand, except that the Laos drive on the right-hand side of the road. Otherwise, small villages every so often. Roadside food stands here and there. Kilometer markers that look like grave-stones click off the distance to the city of Seno. People work the rice fields, standing in the mud and transplanting the seedlings.



The author in Laos (Les provided all photos)

Water buffaloes still pull the plows in much of this part of Laos, but we see a few farmers along the way using motorized plows that have huge steel wheels. Progress — even if it has been slow — is transforming Laos. Entering Savannakhet, we see for the first time a reminder that Laos is a communist country. The Hammer and Sickle pops up here and there, mostly on red-and-yellow flags outside shops and buildings. I think probably these are government-run shops and offices. These flags are a surprise, though I suppose they shouldn’t be.

Though Laos is communist, one can’t tell it from strolling along the riverfront. This is not your North Korean, Stalinist communism. An easygoing atmosphere prevails. So easygoing that I do believe I see a Hammer and Sickle flag flying upside down! People are relaxing — many are eating and drinking at a riverside food stand, a few are playing what looks like bocce (perhaps it *is* bocce), peddlers are hawking watches, knives and cigarette lighters (Socially, smoking is not yet even a venial sin in Laos). We grab a table at a food stand and order Cokes. It’s late afternoon and serene, and the weather is very pleasant. Hard to believe there was a war here 40 years ago.

From the river, it’s just a short hop to the Nan Hai Hotel. We check in without any problems and are taken to our room. The accommodations are rather spartan, but the room does have a fridge, and it’s stocked with two bottles of Beerlao. We rest for a while and then decide to skip dinner. The day has been long and exciting, we had a big lunch, and we’re exhausted, not hungry. I toss back the two Beerlao and decide to hit the rack. It is, after all, 8 p.m.

It’s also peaceful — and quiet. And I’m asleep before I know it.



## Ban Loboy Remembered

*Recent message fragments about Ban Loboy ford*

**Mike Vale**, a photo interpreter, says, “The first project upon my arrival at the 548th Recon Tech Squadron in April, 1966 was to do a study and large mosaic picture of Ban Loboy Ford. The mosaic was terrible but I gained a wealth of knowledge.

“We had been trained in intelligence school to target Soviet controlled industry and military targets et cetera. I guess that it was a method of retraining us to jungle and rural photo analysis. In the 67th Recon Tech Squadron in Japan we used U-2 spyplane film to monitor targets in SEA. It was a challenge to look for a target on the computer runout of five POL drums on the side of the road. We saw the cables but never did learn their exact purpose.

“As part of my Laos reporting duties I kept a close eye on Ban Loboy Ford up until December 1968 and ended up with a large drawer of photos and slides.

“When the intelligence briefing officer in PACAF HQ wanted to impress someone, the latest pictures of the ford were used. The ford was targeted on an almost daily basis, day and night. The area was littered with junk trucks and the road snaked around the bomb craters.”

**Galen Ozawa**, who worked at Task Force Alpha, said about the Ban Loboy water crossing, “In 1968 favorite targets for the FNG were the cable bridge and a dead bulldozer. A lot of bombs were expended to knock out these targets. I don’t know if they were ever completely destroyed. I know that some people wished someone would get a direct hit on the dozer so bombs wouldn’t be wasted on it.

“I saw early pictures of Ban Loboy and it was green with a lot of jungle vegetation around it. In the 1968-69 photos, it looked like the moon.

“Bombing such traffic control points (TCP) was continued for a time. However, it really became counter productive after a while. What were big boulders were reduced to smaller rocks, and later into pea gravel which was easy to doze into a gravel road.”

**Remembered** is continued next page



**Bill Tilton**, a FAC with 23<sup>rd</sup> TASS, who frequently flew over the ford, told Ozawa, “We concluded the same thing at Alpha in mid-1966. Alpha was certainly a choke point in the sense of being a narrow passage, but all the stray bombs were making repair material out of the adjacent karst. There were two little pools of water which did no good. The only thing that interested me about them was that even though they were very close together they were always different colors—I’d have to look at my slides, but my recollection is that the little one was green and the larger one mud-red. On the other hand, chokepoint Delta was a moonscape of deep dust and sometimes mud, or at least that’s what we pictured. On several occasions I found overnight restoration of what we thought was really bad damage, and one time the torn-up road through the moonscape of Delta was repaired while a pair of us were away for about an hour in the middle of the day. The repair teams must have sat through the airstrikes very close to the road. If they had known how sloppy some of those B-52 drivers turned into fighter pilots were they would have moved further away.”

**Warren Mewborn** was a C-123 FAC with the callsign, “Candlestick.” Here is what he responded when invited to share his Ban Loboy memories:

“When I think about Ban Loboy, I wish we had finished the job and closed the pass permanently.

“During my time at NKP I guess that my crew went up there at least 50 times. We flew four missions a week and the profile would be to head for the border and work our way back down 912 looking for trucks.

“One particular mission stands out as the way not to attack the traffic. We had trucks moving and had no ordnance to attack them. A call came in from two Navy A-6s that were returning from up North and they needed to get rid of their bombs before going on board the carrier. We said we could work them on the ford at Ban Loboy. We put out three Mark 6 ground markers that pretty much boxed the target area and when they verified that they could see them, we briefed them on the terrain and target. They were cleared in hot.

“Lead said he would hold high and watch the action. Number Two appeared to be on a downwind leg for his approach and we noticed his rotating beacon was on and flashing. I immediately advised that he go in blacked out. Lead said, “No, leave the beacon on so I can follow you down on the target.”

“Well, this was the best display of 37 mm fireworks that we

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ever saw. My navigator, who was using the Starlight scope and looking out of the bottom of the aircraft, counted nine guns firing at the A-6. Number Two delivered his bombs short of the target and pulled off to the north. Lead was concerned about Two being hit as he flew right through several strings of 37 mm and inquired if he was ok. Two said, maybe.

“We cleared Lead in and told him to correct his drop further south. Two called in and said thanks for having him keep the beacon on. He was very excited and suggested that they drop the rest of their bombs in the water on the way back to the carrier. Lead thought that was a good idea and they departed.

“In January 1968 it got almost too hot to work the ford and we took a 37 mm in the right wing before our CO put the ford off limits.”



Warren Mewborn looks at 37mm shell damage to C-123 wing panel after a Route 912 mission. Photo from Mewborn.

## **Back Page: Aerial Views of Ban Loboy and “Dog’s Head”**

Top photo taken by Bill Tilton, Nail FAC, in July, 1966 from an O-1F with Pentax Spotmatic 35mm camera using Kodak Plus-X film. Enlargements from the original negative are still available from the Brotherhood BX. The approximate area of coverage is depicted, upside-down, in a box on the reconnaissance photo at bottom.

Bottom photo is official imagery from 1981, used in searches for missing US airmen. The road at top left leads to Harley’s Valley, immediately off the photo, to the East/Northeast. At bottom are the “Parallel Ridges,” which carry Route 912 to the Southwest toward its junction with Route 911 out of MuGia Pass and Route 23, and then into “the Chokes,” or chokepoints Alpha, Bravo, and Charley. Scanned by Bill Tilton from original prints.





See  
page  
11  
for  
notes.

