

MEKONG EXPRESS MAIL



THE NEWSLETTER OF THE THAILAND LAOS CAMBODIA BROTHERHOOD, INC. VOLUME 14, ISSUE 3

One of the Last Vietnam Veterans on Active Duty

By Nick Cressy (COL, MS, USA Ret.)

Editor's Note: Nick Cressy, who has been a TLCB member since around 2001, has an unusual history. He is one of probably only a handful of veterans who served in both the Vietnam and Afghanistan Wars. In the early 70's, he was an Air Force enlisted man in Vietnam and Thailand; after 9/11, he was in Afghanistan as an Army full colonel, a rank in which he retired. He came across the TLCB on the Internet. Today, he lives in Colorado Springs, Colorado with his wife, Lynn.

At age 18, I enlisted in the U.S. Air Force in May 1971, hoping to get ahead of being drafted, seeking the military experience, and serving my country. I also wanted access to the G.I. Bill for education and homeowner benefits. Since I had a good score on the mechanical portion of the entry test, I was selected for the aircraft weapons/loading career field.

After basic training at Lackland AFB, Texas, I was sent to Lowry AFB in Colorado to begin my technical school training for aircraft weapons and loading on tactical aircraft. I trained on F-100s, F-111s, and F4-C/D/Es and their associated weapons systems, standard loading operations, and troubleshooting. While in training at Lowry AFB, there was an opportunity for me, approved by the first sergeant and squadron commander, to work in downtown Denver as a stock boy at the May D&F Department store. This was a good opportunity for me to earn extra money since I was getting married in October, and the job did not interfere with my studies and examinations. I filled my weekends and some weekday nights at this part-time job.

During my time at Lowry AFB we all had the opportunity to fill out our "dream sheets" for our follow-on

See Cressy, continued on page 5.

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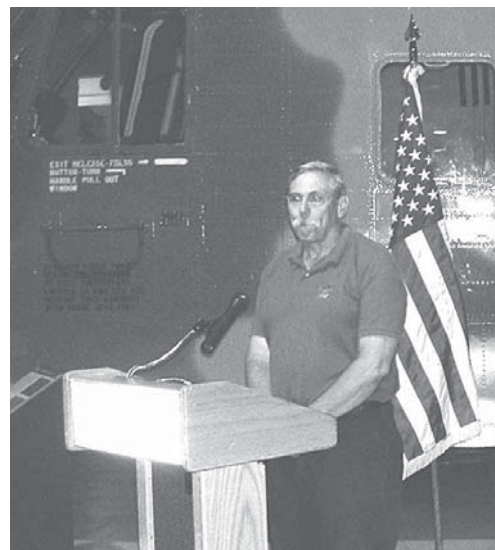
Airman Nick Cressy in his jungle fatigues on the Danang Air Base flightline, Vietnam, in 1972.

President Appoints New History Committee Chairman

John Lorenzen has been appointed as the TLCB Historian. A profile of John appeared in the June 2013 MEM. He replaces long-serving chairman, Jim “Dusty” Henthorn, who unfortunately is unable to continue due to medical reasons. We all wish Dusty a full, ultimate recovery to health and we appreciate John’s stepping forward to take over as leader of the TLC Brotherhood History Committee.

The mission of the History Committee is to collect and preserve the history of the service of veterans, both military and civilian, of United States involvement in the armed conflicts in Southeast Asia, primarily outside of Vietnam and to promote knowledge and understanding of this service to the public through educational activities.

An integral role of the History Committee is maintaining liaison with the *Texas Tech University Vietnam Archive*. The History Committee provides information to all new members and periodically posts the TTU information online, working with the Communications Chairman selecting material from TLCB Web Archives for submission to Texas Tech University.



Jim (Dusty) Henthorn, then TLCB secretary, at dedication of restored CH-3E 67-14703 at the Robbins AFB Aviation Museum, near Macon, Georgia. Once known as “Dusty’s Pride,” this was the helicopter Dusty once flew in as a gunner. Dusty retired after many years as a fire company captain in Baltimore, Maryland and now lives in Defuniak Springs, Florida. Photo courtesy of Jim Henthorn.

Other duties and responsibilities include assisting members with their memoirs, documents, and records of SEA service, to preserve historical data to all members, relatives, descendants, and researchers.

Editor’s Message: History, Stories, More Stories

As I’ve mentioned before, I’m relatively new to TLCB, having joined in early 2011. Judging from the rate the Brotherhood is adding new members, see page 9, I may soon be one of the old timers. Still, there is a lot of history to digest here, and that thought is why I’m introducing a new feature, “From the Archives:....” Since joining, and even more intensely since being roped into being the editor, I’ve spent some time going through old issues of the *Mekong Express Mail*. Believe me, I’ve still got a long ways to go, but one I came across was a December 2005 interview with our new president, John Sweet. It touches on two topics I am sure are of great interest to all of our newer members, the founding of the Brotherhood, and its most noteworthy activity, the Assistance Program. On top of that, the interview was conducted by Bill Tilton, who along with his wife, Thelma, still does most of the heavy lifting for the MEM, meaning the layout, which is especially difficult when you are dealing with a high-strung editor.

“From the Archives....” is a feature I plan on running occasionally, once or twice a year. If any of you have special memories of something from an older issue of the MEM, please bring it to my attention. If it’s interesting to you, it probably will be to most of us.

Bob Wheatley is a long-time member of TLCB, and his wife Rosie is the artist who creates the beautiful quilt raffled off each year at the reunion, truly one of the highlights of a memorable event. In this issue, Bob makes his own contribution to the Brotherhood with “My Trip Over the Big Pond.” I can’t imagine that many of us will read it without recalling memories of our own voyage to the mysterious East, back when we were all so young. There have been many articles with themes similar to Bob’s in the MEM over the years, but I don’t get tired of them. And there of many of us out there who could add theirs to the anthology. Remember, all of our stories are the same in some ways, but different in many more. *Don’t be shy, write them down and share them.*

A great example of that sharing is “One of the Last Vietnam Veterans on Active Duty,” a memoir by Nick Cressy. Starting out as young enlisted man in the early 1970s in Vietnam and Thailand, he retired only recently as a full colonel, his last duty station being Afghanistan. Nick has been a member for nearly ten years. I’m not sure what inspired him to tell his story, but I am very grateful that he finally did. Just another example of my conviction that there are no dull stories, only dull story tellers.

And never be shy about letting us know about what you like and don’t like. I’ve got a pretty thick skin.

John Harrington
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From the Archives: A New Feature

Editor's Note: As one of the new kids on the block in terms of the Thailand Laos Cambodia Brotherhood, and especially as the relatively new editor of the "Mekong Express Mail" (MEM), I am fascinated by the history of this remarkable group. Consequently, I have spent a bit of time wandering through the back issues of the MEM. However, not all the other relatively new members may have that time or inclination. Therefore, I am introducing a new feature "From the Archives," which will on an irregular schedule reprint articles, usually with an introduction and an update. What better way to start with the following piece from the MEM December 2005. Not only does it provide a look at the origins of the TLCB, but it offers history about one of our signature programs, the Assistance Program. And as a bonus, it features our new president, John Sweet.

Early Days of the TLCB and of Assistance

John Sweet's name has been associated with the TLC Brotherhood from the earliest days. He found many charter members, but he is best known for his connection to our Assistance program. What better time to have a MEM chat with John than the December issue, which always emphasizes Assistance.

MEM talks with John Sweet (JS)

[MEM] We are eager to learn about Assistance and how you got started with it, John, but first, tell us about your service at Nakhon Phanom, or "NKP." What were you doing before you went over there?

[JS] Before I went to Nakhon Phanom, I was assigned to HQ Western GEEIA, Ground Electronics Engineering Installation Agency, stationed at McClellan AFB in Sacramento, California. I was a 70250, administration, having cross-trained from a 23430 (Precision Photographic Processing Specialist) and had the top-secret clearance required for that field.

[MEM] Tell us what your first impressions were on arrival in Thailand.

[JS] When we were on the C-130 heading up country we overflew the base and I could see it out one of the few round windows as a brown patch in what otherwise looked like a sea of green. I distinctly remember the smell when standing in the door of the contract Continental Airlines plane upon arrival at Don Muang, and it smelled real bad.

[MEM] Do you remember your first trip to town in Nakhon Phanom?

[JS] My first trip into town was on the baht bus, which had metal mesh over the windows. I understand the mesh was to prevent hand grenades being lobbed through them, but I never heard of any serious incidents on the bus. One guy in my hooch was killed in a taxi crash on his first trip to town a week after his arrival. The taxi plunged into a ditch crossing a small bridge.

When I arrived at NKP, I was given the job of handling the classified message traffic focused on the Arc Light Strike Frags. ["Frag" refers to a unit's portion, or fragment, of the daily strike orders issued by Headquarters 7th Air Force in Saigon. Arc Light refers to the B-52 bombing mission in Southeast Asia.] They suspected the frag orders were being compromised and locations provided to the enemy in advance, so I was told. This is why two of us with top secret clearances were assigned eighteen-hour shifts back-to-back with the computer-generated frag orders and the other mission traffic. Over the course of the year, thousands of classified messages passed through my hands.

[MEM] John, many of us first learned about the TLC Brotherhood when you called us out of the blue and asked if we wanted to get emails from a group of guys who served in Thailand. Apparently you found quite a few charter members that way.

Why were you doing that?

[JS] In 1997, just prior to my initial return visit to Nakhon Phanom, I located Father Khai who ran the orphanage at Thare, pronounced Tie Ray. We had assisted the orphanage in a big way at Christmas time in 1969; a day I will always vividly remember fondly. I knew the children still needed help and I wanted to do something in memory of our departed brothers. I raised and donated a thousand dollars. I brought, and the children planted, a large bag of American wild flower seeds in the field where Santa arrived so many years ago. While standing on the runway at NKP, and thinking of those who did not return from their missions over Laos, and how they had helped organize that special Christmas, I told Father Khai that I would try to do more for the children. Then it dawned on me. Why not find all the guys who served? We could have a great outfit, help the kids, and remember our Brothers in the best way possible by helping the kids just as we all did before. I started hunting all over the Internet, using search engines and finding ways to contact those who had served in Thailand and Laos. For example, it was another charter member of the TLC Brotherhood, Bob Arnau, who brought Santa in a 21st SOS helicopter that day in 1969. Bob and I were reunited last year at the California reunion after 34 years!

[MEM] So how did this tie in with the Brotherhood? We know there was a group of four veterans who had met with Jimmie Butler after he wrote the book, "A Certain Brotherhood." How did you come to work with them?

[JS] I left a posting on PACAF 50th Anniversary web site, and said that I was returning to Nakhon Phanom, had found Father Khai, and was raising a donation to leave at the orphanage. Dick Anderson contacted me after reading the posting and said it was something that some guys from the 23rd TASS would like to participate in. I was then invited to meet with them in June at the Wall in Washington, D.C. but had to decline because my vacation time was allocated for the trip to Thailand a few weeks later.

[MEM] We know you were responsible for much of the early expansion of the Brotherhood, before it was even formally organized. How did that come about?

[JS] I brought back stones from the runway at NKP for the guys who had contacted me. We maintained contact, via e-mail, and I started searching the internet for other guys. The list

See Sweet 2005, continued on page 4.

Sweet 2005, continued from page 3.

became cumbersome once we had 30 or so names within a couple of months, as guys were constantly changing their email addresses. I then contacted my ISP provider at NetWorx to obtain a list server. The owner had never set one up for private use—only for business and college use—but set one up at his cost because he supported our efforts.

Due to the input and hands-on work of Joe Wilson, we were able to put up a web site and list ourselves on search engines. Joe wrote the story and placed it on the TLCB Web Site: http://www.tlc-brotherhood.org/website_history.htm. After that, we had new contacts every week until finally we decided to have a group meeting at Wright-Patterson AFB, Dayton OH. It was there the TLC Brotherhood was born as an organization. Rodney Bell and I asked Bill Tilton if he would be interested in running for president. After that, candidates were nominated and a board was elected. I was elected treasurer on the first board, and Bill appointed me to vice president when that office became vacant.

[MEM] You have knowledge about that time that nobody else has, so it is good for us to nail it down. Tell us about what the TLCB is doing now for the kids in Thailand.

[JS] Every child and school we assist brings opportunities none of us will ever know. It's not simply the new desks, chairs, or other improvements we physically provide, but we erase impoverishment of spirit and provide hope to those in need so they can achieve a better future.

John Middlewood maintains contact with approximately ten schools in the Nakhon Phanom area. The number and location of the schools we aid varies depending on the needs at each location. At each visit, monthly discussions with the principal and teachers establish which items the TLC Brotherhood could provide to benefit students most for each dollar expended. These requests are sent to the Assistance Committee Chairman who assigns a motion number (1-06 would be the first motion made in 2006 for example). The request is then forwarded immediately to the entire Assistance Committee, via a list server maintained explicitly for this purpose, for consideration and funding approval. Once the motion is approved, funds are made available for withdrawal, with purchase and delivery by John Middlewood. All approved motions are posted quarterly on the TLC Brotherhood Assistance Web Page to provide members with details of all TLCB Assistance projects. John does not give the funds to the schools, but he purchases approved items and provides them directly to the schools, and sometimes directly to particular children.

Schools that the TLC Brotherhood has assisted have changed radically from the perspective of the entire community they service. Local people become directly involved by providing labor for projects to replace mud floors with cement, electricity, and better health conditions. Other direct enhancements have included discounted prices from merchants and other community leaders who become actively involved. All over Isan, Northeast Thailand and adjacent parts of Laos, the TLC Brotherhood is held in high esteem in gratitude for the assistance our members have provided through their donations and support. There is no other organization I know of where so few have made such wonderful accomplishments. Truly the TLCB stands alone as ambassadors of good will everywhere that we

have provided projects, both in Thailand and Laos.

[MEM] John, after Thare you got started helping some schools around Udorn. How did that come about?

[JS] We needed someone local to purchase and deliver items to Thare. Tommy Thompson, who lived in Udorn, took on the task and drove 300 miles round trip to make several large deliveries to Thare. In 1999 Tommy commenced aid in Udorn and later to khon Kaen, and NongKhai. Tommy suffered a tragic stroke and his assistant Vichit Mingrachata, employed for many years at the American Embassy in Thailand, was appointed TLCB Udorn Assistance Representative in 2000 and conducted our program in the Udorn area. There is a complete listing of our activities by year on the TLC-Brotherhood Web Site Assistance Pages.

[MEM] Tell us some of the things TLCB Assistance has done in Laos.

[JS] Fortunately, MEM articles have covered these pretty well. Jim Michener, Representative in Laos, had 70 tons of rice delivered to flooded villages North of Vientiane, and Assistance Committee member Jeff Hudgens has taken TLCB support to a village his church helps near Mugia Pass. John Middlewood also provided aid in Laos to the school at Thakhek across the Mekong from Nakhon Phanom.

UPDATE: by John Sweet

Since this article was written in 2005, both Father Khai at Thare and Vichit have passed away. Archbishop Khai is buried in the cemetery across the street from St. Joseph's School where he devoted his life's work. Mac Thompson has taken on the reins of TLCB Assistance within northern Laos and has accomplished more than we dreamed possible, extending our network into the remote locations of legend during the war. He conveys each journey through his exceptional trip reports as published in the *MEM*.

John Middlewood has enhanced our programs in the surrounding area of Nakhon Phanom Province; further developing our medical aid program outreach which provides assistance to ensure that children with medical issues are transported to regional hospitals for treatment and are accompanied by a family member. Under John's guidance, our Student Aid Program has increased the number of students sponsored, implemented our TLC Brotherhood Memorial Project installing 32 libraries at schools in the province, and installed water treatment systems and toilet facilities at schools.

Jeff Hudgens has also delivered numerous TLCB Assistance projects while traveling at his own expense to central Laos. From 27 August through 17 September 2013, five TLCB members will be doing likewise: John Sweet, TLCB President; Les Thompson, TLCB Vice President & Assistance Chairman, and long time members George Shenberger, Montie Dubs, and Roger Durant. There will be a follow-up article of their journey and reflections in the December issue of the *MEM*.

The key factor in all of the accomplishments and growth of the TLC Brotherhood is our members, without whom none of this would have been possible. Our organization today can be amply proud of the accomplishments achieved through the dedicated service of so many fine members who have stepped forward and devoted their time, talent, and resources.

To those members who have joined since this original article was written: WELCOME HOME!



Cressy, continued from page 1.

assignments after graduation. Putting two and two together, I figured that I might end up in Thailand or Vietnam, so I put down both of those locations. Much to my surprise I received orders several weeks later for Clark AB in the Philippines. I immediately thought that I was headed for a tour where there would be nothing but training missions, at a location I did not ask for, and above all, it was a fifteen-month tour versus a twelve-month tour that I would have received for Thailand or Vietnam. Also in consideration of all of this was my pending wedding and long period of absence for a fifteen-month tour. I could not have afforded an accompanied tour on an E-3's pay. During one of my classes, I was discussing my orders and my disagreement, when one of my instructors interjected his thoughts. He was a three-tour veteran in both Thailand and Vietnam and proceeded to enlighten me. He told me that Clark AB was a sort of manning pool for extra weapons loading teams and that I might be TDY to several locations during my tour. He was right! I went on 30 days leave after graduation, got married to Dianne, and turned 19 years old.

I left for Clark AB at the end of November 1971 out of Travis AFB, California, following the route through Anchorage, Alaska, Yokota AB, Japan and then Clark AB in the Philippines. As we landed at Clark AB and were taxiing to a stop at the entry location, I still remember when the door was opened on the aircraft. The heat and the humidity were more than I had ever experienced; it felt like an oven door opening in my face. I grew up in Michigan, the Detroit area, which had some hot summers, but never heat and humidity like this. I arrived on 1 December and proceeded to process in and get acquainted with the weapons loading shop and leadership at the 405th Munitions Maintenance Squadron (MMS). About two weeks later I was on orders for Nakon Phanom RTAFB, Thailand, supporting the 456th MMS.

Arriving at NKP, I was assigned to the weapons release shop, working on A-1 Skyraider and OV-10 Bronco weapons release systems. I worked night shift mostly and enjoyed the friendship of those who trained me on the aircraft, which I did not train for in technical school. These were prop planes and I hated being next to them when they were running. The prop noise and sensation were mesmerizing, and stepping into one of course would be fatal. I got to see the movie *Kelly's Heroes* at the outdoor theater while C-119 gunships flew overhead scanning the perimeter. I left NKP at the end of February back to Clark AB.

At Clark, I was trained and certified to load F4-Ds with training munitions and learned to troubleshoot electrical problems. This included getting to know the crew chiefs and other maintenance personnel. After about three weeks I was notified of a TDY assignment to Da Nang AB, South Vietnam, supporting the 366th MMS for the Tactical Fighter Squadron (TFS), "The Gunfighters," and other TFSs. I arrived before the Easter Invasion, which started 30 March 1972 and initiated the Linebacker I air campaign against North Vietnamese targets.

I witnessed a B-52 landing after surviving a missile hit over North Vietnam. I watched it approach over Da Nang bay and land on the runway. I do not recall the date or if there were any casualties onboard. Increased small arms fire around the perimeter, and many days of Army howitzers firing from positions on the outskirts of our area, supporting operations throughout the Military Region I, made sleeping hard. I was also nervous about the noise and was not sure if it was from our activity or VC rockets inbound.

Eventually, a consolidation of our loading crews and associated aircraft and supporting personnel was ordered, and all of us



Nick with his elbow in the afterburner of an F4-D at Udorn RTAFB. Expensive armrest!

from Clark's 405th TFS flew by several C-130s to Udorn Royal Thai Air Force Base, the headquarters for Air America and other friendly forces working along the trail and in places unknown. We supported the 432nd MMS. During my tour there through November 1972, the Air Force celebrated its first ace, Captain Ritchie. He was a pilot with the 555th TFS "Triple Nickel." He, along with his flight, on the day he shot down his fifth MIG, put on a fabulous air show upon their return to Udorn. Also on 3 October, 1972 Udorn RTAFB experienced a sapper attack, pinning us down in the flight line area and in our shop building in crossfire. There was also a dramatic explosion of a sapper's satchel charge next to a revetment wall, about 150

See Cressy, continued on page 6.

Cressy, continued from page 5.

meters from our shop building. The sapper team managed to plant some booby trap explosives on some aircraft, but I do not recall how many. According to what I have been reading on the Internet about the attack, ten sappers penetrated the base and nine were killed and one severely injured; the attack



Finishing up a bomb loading operation on an F4-D at Udorn RTAFB, Thailand.

lasting at least twelve hours.

On November 4th I turned 20 years old. A few days earlier I had returned to Clark from Udorn and was back to training loads and routine maintenance activities. On 10 December I was summoned by the orderly room airman and told to report to the squadron commander, a major whose name I cannot remember. The major told me that the American Red Cross had sent a message to the command, and that he was sorry to report that my father had suffered a heart attack. He was recovering, but my presence was requested at home and I would be on a plane the next day as an emergency PCS. Only a few days earlier I had received my stateside orders for the 5th MMS at Minot AFB, North Dakota, so I was processed out very quickly. My father recovered and is alive today in his mid-eighties. I was going home after one year and nine days, short of a fifteen-month tour and under different circumstances than I expected.

After a leave that went past the Christmas season, I proceeded to Minot AFB with my wife. I loaded B-52s with nuclear weapons till the end of my enlistment in 1975.

During October 1973, my load crews, as well as other crews, were recalled for an Emergency War Order (EWO) at an early hour of the morning, 1:00 am/0100. This EWO, so we thought, was not for real but an exercise. I called a fellow crewmember who lived down the street and whose turn it was to drive to the base. In October 1973, Israelis were attacked by Syria and Egypt squeezing them defensively and

At right, Nick on a Chinook flight to Bagram AF from Forward Operating Base Ghazni, Afghanistan in 2010.

backing them in a corner. According to a book that was written in the late 1990s or early 2000s, Israel made some very serious threats. Those threats turned out to be toward the then Soviet Union, where they would attack Soviet missile and bomber assets in the Caucasus Region of Central Asia if their allies, Syria and Egypt, did not back off. This caused the U.S.

defense posture to increase the alert status for our nuclear triad. When we arrived at the south gate at Minot AFB, we noticed that the bombers were not on the alert pad as they would be during a practice EWO. The gate guard told us that the Middle East was hot and this was no drill. We loaded all capable aircraft and were told to go home with rotating load crews on site to handle any maintenance problems. Henry Kissinger did his magic, and we stood down a few days later.

I did serve in the Michigan Air National Guard for a short time in 1977 and 1978; the extra work on drill weekends sort of wore me out since I was already working full time and attending part-time college courses at night. I decided I would hold off until I had my college degree to re-enter the military reserves.

From 1978 to my re-entering the military in the U.S. Army Reserve in 1991, I finished my undergraduate and graduate degrees in business, had two kids, Nicole and Alan, and had a good job working in downtown Detroit and North Dakota in the oil and gas industry. In 1982 my wife was diagnosed with stage four breast cancer. She and all of us suffered and endured chemotherapy and radiation treatments with no success, until she passed away in 1988. In early 1992, I met Lynne and we were married on January 1, 1996 in Castle Rock, Colorado.

I received a direct commission as a First Lieutenant in the Medical Service Corps on 22 October 1991; I had five years of healthcare administration experience that was taken into

Cressy is continued on next page.



account with the Army Medical Department Board. I started with a U.S. Army Reserve Combat Support Hospital, then a medical logistics battalion, and on to a U.S. Army hospital. I twice served as a company commander and also as an operations officer. When I pinned on major's leaves, I wanted more upper echelon experience, so I found a reserve billet at the U.S. Joint Forces Command just after 9/11, as a medical operations officer. I was on extended man-day orders and was a part of a team that planned the evacuation, to the United States, for wounded soldiers for Operation Iraqi Freedom I (OIF I) in March of 2003.

When U.S. Northern Command was established, I was able to get man-day and mobilization orders supporting the Global War on Terror (GWOT) and participated in the Hurricane Katrina/Rita response and recovery. I served at U.S. Northern Command from 2003 to 2006, and needed to move on to a reserve billet that would facilitate a promotion to lieutenant colonel. I was recruited to go on tour orders at the U.S. Army Medical Command, where I pinned on the rank of lieutenant colonel and was in charge of developing the Homeland Defense and Defense Support of Civil Authorities' operational plans for the medical command throughout the United States. My tour there ended up being two years and I went back home in January 2009.

Since 9/11, I had turned down tours to Iraq and Afghanistan from 2003 to 2008 because I was on orders that I could not cancel. I tried to get the message across to the Human Resources Command that I would need some lead time to accept tours. After getting back home in January 2009 I attended my drill weekends, and I searched for Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) or Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) tours and found an opening with the 82nd Airborne Division in Afghanistan. I left in June 2009 for Bagram AF. The 82nd was the Combined Joint Task Force (CJTF) for Regional Command-East as CJTF-82 where the 82nd was the lead military command for the region. I was assigned as the chief of medical plans and future operations in the division surgeons' office and celebrated my 57th birthday in Afghanistan. I was teased occasionally, in fun of course, about my age and always shot back with how Gettysburg was the toughest assignment, which got a laugh; a sense of humor pays off.

My responsibilities included medical plans for combat current operations, mass casualty planning for Bagram AF, and organizing exercises for response to attacks with all medical task forces on Bagram. This program paid off, when in February 2010 an avalanche occurred in the Salang Pass just north of Bagram AF. This pass, a major logistics road for the region, was the only open roadway to the capital of Afghanistan, Kabul, and through the Hindu Kush mountains to the north. We evacuated over 400 people, providing medical care and humanitarian assistance. My program confirmed our ability to coordinate a mass casualty situation and function properly. Only one person died at Bagram's Role III hospital. The rest of the evacuees were treated and returned to their families and communities.

I was also tasked with assisting the Polish forces at Forward Operating Base (FOB) Ghazni in Ghazni Province in Southern Regional Command-East. I made weekly trips via UH-60 or Chinook helicopters to work with the base operations office and with my liaison officer on site. I had the purse strings and

spent what I needed to get their hospital in country built and certified for electrical and structural standards. It eventually opened with great fanfare from the Polish leadership; it was an accomplishment for which I was very proud.

I came home on a Friday, just before Memorial Day 2010. I headed off to bed around 9:30 p.m. and just getting off to sleep when I heard what I thought were rockets. They were fireworks from a ball game at a stadium near our home, but I thought I was still in Afghanistan. My wife had to get me settled down and make me realize that I was home. I waited until the fireworks stopped to go back to bed. In Afghanistan, we would get rocket attacks about two to three times a month. Sometimes the attacks were when I was about to go to sleep and I would get pissed off. One time I slept through an attack and was awakened for accountability checks. That too pissed me off. I did not want to be asleep during an attack. I wanted to be aware.

After some respite leave, I got back into another tour as the U.S. Army Medical Command Liaison Officer at U.S. Northern Command Surgeons Office, representing Army medical for Homeland Defense and Defense Support of Civil Authorities missions. I had pinned on Colonel eagles when I returned and retired effective 1 December 2012 because of a mandatory retirement for age, having served 25 years, 1 month, and 27 days.

I am proud to have served and I have no regrets. God Bless our servicemen and women throughout the uniformed services.



Lt Col Cressy preparing for takeoff on a UH-60 helicopter from Bagram AF on a hospital mission to Ghazni FOB, Afghanistan.



Mekong Express Mail ...is an official publication of The TLC Brotherhood, Inc. This newsletter is furnished to all active member households in support of the Brotherhood's objectives. The views expressed in articles published in this newsletter are those of the authors and do not reflect official TLC Brotherhood policy unless explicitly stated, nor is the TLC Brotherhood, Inc. responsible for the veracity of information furnished by our authors. All rights reserved by The TLC Brotherhood, Inc. in 2013. The TLC Brotherhood, Inc. is a tax exempt, non-profit charitable organization under IRC Section 501(c)3, and was incorporated in the Commonwealth of Virginia in 1999.

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2012-2013, showing year of term-end

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Reunion 2013: Fort Walton Beach FL, Oct 3-6

NOTICE of Proposed Bylaws Change

The Board of Directors has proposed an amendment to the TLCB bylaws regarding time from election to assumption of office, specifically for secretary and treasurer.

Rationale: Every time we have a change in the position of secretary or treasurer, there are official documents that must be filed with the Commonwealth of Virginia as well as with our bank.

In the case of the treasurer, signature cards must be completed along with a certificate signed by the secretary before the newly elected treasurer can effectively assume those assigned duties. The Board of Directors proposes that we amend the bylaws to reflect the reality that for the offices of secretary and treasurer, the time should extend to 90 days from the election.

To comply with the provisions of our Articles of Incorporation, unless more than 1/3 of our active membership objects to this proposed change, it will take effect. **IF YOU OPPOSE THIS AMENDMENT, you must send your written opposition to the official TLCB address:** TLCB, PO Box 343, Locust Grove, GA 30248. Votes in opposition must be received by December 1, 2013 to be counted. If sufficient votes to defeat this proposed amendment are not received by that date, the amendment will be deemed adopted.

Here is the wording proposed for the bylaws, with the changes italicized:

ARTICLE III BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Section 8 Election of The Board of Directors

c. Assumption of Office

The new board of directors shall commence their term of office within 30 days of an election, ***with the secretary and treasurer assuming their offices within 90 days to accommodate completion of all appropriate legal documentation.*** The first order of business shall be appointment of committee chairpersons by the president.

Official Election Slate

At right are the candidates for election at the Annual Meeting of the TLC Brotherhood, Inc., on October 5, 2013, at Fort Walton Beach Florida.

| Offices | Candidates |
|-----------------|--------------------------|
| Vice President | Les Thompson (incumbent) |
| Secretary | Jim Closs (incumbent) |
| Chaplain | Deb Stein (incumbent) |
| Member-at-large | Gary Beatty (incumbent) |
| Member-at-large | Mike Potaski (incumbent) |
| Member-at-large | Jim Green |
| Member-at-large | George Shenberger |

Don't miss all the great member news. Join us at the TLCB Forum. Go to www.tlc-brotherhood.com/Forum

Newest Members in TLC Brotherhood

Since the new TLCB Forum was inaugurated over a year ago, we have grown by approximately double the rate of new members. The members listed below joined between the last issue of the MEM and the 15th of August. We have listed their locations, dates they joined, branches of service, and email addresses. You can find more information on our Website database. The MEM wishes you all a hearty "Welcome Home."

| No. | Last | First | Address | | | Branch | eMail Address |
|------|-----------|----------|----------------|----|----------|--------|----------------------------------|
| 1520 | Bierman | Jim | Samut Prakan | | Thailand | USAF | jim@retirevision.com |
| 1522 | Bloching | Dennis | Houston | TX | USA | USA | BlochingD@aol.com |
| 1531 | Closs | Paula | Porterdale | GA | USA | Other | P_Venz@Yahoo.com |
| 1521 | Collins | Gerald | Amelia Island | FL | USA | USAF | GSundunes@Bellsouth.Net |
| 1519 | Cooley | John | DeFuniak Spngs | FL | USA | USAF | johncooley@goblinmarket.com |
| 1523 | Fink | Logan | Pensacola | FL | USA | USA | Logan.Fink@COX.Net |
| 1524 | Glass | Bob | Tampa | FL | USA | USA | Bobglass5@aol.com |
| 1518 | Goncalves | Cesar | Lilburn | GA | USA | USAF | cesarecw@comcast.net |
| 1540 | Harmon | Thomas | Morehead City | NC | USA | USAF | afsarge8@yahoo.com |
| 1529 | Harrison | Chuck | Downers Grove | IL | USA | USMC | UAL777AP@Yahoo.com |
| 1525 | Knudtson | Ronald | Breckenridge | MN | USA | USAF | knudtsons_rd@hotmail.com |
| 1535 | Lancy | Thom | Aurora | CO | USA | USAF | Beethoven49@MSN.com |
| 1533 | Larson | Dean | Munster | IN | USA | USN | deanlarson@larsonperformance.com |
| 1537 | Leavitt | Douglas | Lynchburg | VA | USA | USAF | dllkcl@Comcast.Net |
| 1527 | McCarty | Edward | New Vienna | OH | USA | USAF | emccarty4025@hotmail.com |
| 1530 | McConnell | Michael | Lunenburg | NS | Canada | USAF | MMConnell@Eastlink.CA |
| 1538 | McGurk | Stewart | Monterey | CA | USA | USA | Stewart.Mcgurk@gmail.com |
| 1534 | Miskowski | Nicholas | Brazil | IN | USA | USAF | Heavy00565@Yahoo.com |
| 1528 | Oubre | George | Broussard | LA | USA | USAF | lynward@cox.net |
| 1532 | Petersen | Dennis | Davenport | IA | USA | USAF | Judy2048@MSN.com |
| 1539 | Porter | Jim | Vancouver | WA | USA | USAF | JPorter5408@Gmail.com |
| 1542 | Pyne | Al | Maiden | NC | USA | USAF | ampyne34@aol.com |
| 1526 | Ramshaw | Ed | Bedford | MA | USA | USAF | MRed21@Comcast.net |
| 1536 | Sanchez | David | Luling | TX | USA | USAF | SanchezD5018@Yahoo.com |
| 1541 | Yova | Tim | Warren | OH | USA | USAF | tyova@eastgatecog.org |

MEMBERSHIP NUMBERS CONTINUE TO INCREASE

As you can see by the list of new members above, our Brotherhood continues to grow – an encouraging sign, and the current trends are positive. In 1999, we totaled just over 200 members, and a year later, we were just under 300. By 2005 we had reached a total of 475, but the totals slipped over the next couple of years, to 422 by the end of 2006. We regained traction in 2007, and by 2009, we had climbed to 482 members. We passed 500 in 2011, and now stand 530 strong. It is good to see not only new members, but also several former members have returned recently, another trend we hope will continue. A hearty welcome to all the new and rejoining members!

All of us can help the TLCB grow. First, tell your friends about the TLC Brotherhood. In many ways, we are unique among Veteran-oriented organizations, and our uniqueness just might appeal to others if they hear about us. Second, steer them to our web site so they can see what we do and see how

easy it is to join on line. Third, show them a copy of the MEM. Fourth, be sure to tell them about the reunions we have every year with people we often never knew before, whose experiences and memories are like our own. Also, don't forget to tell them about our Assistance projects in Thailand and Laos. We still make a difference in Southeast Asia! Lastly, tell them why you joined, and let them know there is room for them here too. Let's shoot for 600 members in 2014 (or sooner!).

It is important that you understand that this is your organization. In addition to being a recruiter, consider volunteering to help one or more of the committees. Through experience in helping make the TLCB function, you might consider heading a committee, running for one of the elective offices, or even writing an article about your SEA experiences for the MEM. As I said, this is YOUR organization. Welcome Home!

Gerry Frazier, Membership Committee

Remembrance at the Beach

Will you be there?

There's Still Time:

Come visit old and new friends, talk about old times, and make new memories! You still have time to get your registration to us to attend this year's reunion for the Thailand-Laos-Cambodia Brotherhood. This year's location is Fort Walton Beach, Florida, at the Quality Inn Bayside Hotel. You also still have time to order a reunion T shirt and buy some raffle tickets for the traditional, beautiful, hand-made, TLCB commemorative quilt.

Reservations:

If you haven't made your hotel reservation, I just want to remind you to do so. September 3, 2013, was our special rate closing time, but I believe you can still call 1-850-275-0300 and ask for the TLCB Group rate, \$73plus tax. This same great rate is close to the regular seasonal rate frame.

Dress:

Dress is casual for the reunion, except please **NO SHORTS** at our Reunion Banquet Dinner on Saturday night. We encourage a dressier look for the banquet, at least business casual. Many

Hurlburt Air Force Base has an excellent Air Commando air park just inside the main gate. Shown here is an A1-E on display there. Photo copied from an Internet site.



Rosie's Quilt will be raffled off at the banquet on October 5th. This is her stunning design for 2013. All quilt chance donations go into the Assistance Fund. Send in your raffle ticket order!

You need not be present to win.



Thai ladies like to dress in their formal heritage attire for this occasion, and we all enjoy seeing them.

Hurlburt Field tour:

We have been given the OK to go over our 40 person limit. There are security procedures for applying for your pass; a driver's license with photo is the necessary minimum. There will be no additional requirements for all DOD ID card holders. I will contact you again by email to inform you of any additional, necessary document copies, if necessary, to apply for your base pass.

Auction:

Remember to bring something special for donation to our Assistance Auction on Friday evening, which is always a lot of

fun for everyone!

Check our TLCB Reunion web page for additional information, photos, reunion agenda, and any last minute updates.

<http://tlc-brotherhood.net/reunion>

Ed Miller

Fort Walton Beach Reunion Chairman

Doolittle's Raid. In April of 1942, just months after Japan struck our base at Pearl Harbor, Col Jimmy Doolittle led a daring B-25 raid from the tiny deck of the aircraft carrier Hornet to the Japanese homeland. The top secret training for the 16 crews took place at Hurlburt AFB, then an auxiliary field of Eglin AFB, nearby. Below, two photos copied from the "Official" website of the Doolittle raiders.



My Trip Over the Big Pond

by Bob Wheatley

My first overseas tour had been a year on Okinawa. When I was assigned a second overseas tour in Southeast Asia, all I really knew of the war was what I had seen in photos and video and the news reports coming out of Vietnam. Having been initially assigned duty in RVN, my orders were changed at the last minute to someplace in northeastern Thailand. It was an Air Force Detachment collocated with the Army's 7th Radio Research Field Station, at a place they called Ramasun. Certainly, I was ready to go wherever I was assigned, but I have to admit, I breathed a little sigh of relief when my orders were suddenly changed. Still, Thailand was a big unknown to me - even more unknown than Vietnam, and I had no real idea what might await me there. The following from my memoir describes my thoughts and impressions on the trip over the Big Pond from Travis to my new duty assignment. The date was December 1, 1967.

The thirty days of my leave passed all too quickly, and I wished it could have lasted longer. However, duty called, and on December 1st, I took the 21-hour flight from San Francisco across the Pacific to Southeast Asia. Along the way, we made one-hour refueling stops at Honolulu and again later in Manila, P.I., and Guam. There was no time to see anything more than the terminal at the airports, but we were thankful to at least have the opportunity to get off the plane and stretch our legs a bit.

For most of the flight, there was precious little conversation in the cabin. Many either sat staring at the bulkhead, or the back of the seat in front of them, or with eyes closed, deep in thought. Most of us just slept. Now that I was on my way, I was in a hurry to just have the trip over with and get into my new assignment. At first, I tried reading to pass the time, but I found it impossible to concentrate on the "Outdoor Life Magazine" I'd bought in San Francisco. My mind kept wandering to what my destination would be like and what perils might await me there.

Like most of the others, a couple of hours into it, I gave up and slept through the biggest part of that seemingly interminable flight. I figured it might at least minimize the effect of jet lag. Periodically, I would awaken just long enough to eat a meal or use the lavatory. During those brief times I was awake, I couldn't help but notice how the stewards took care to approach sleeping GI's with caution - much more so than on the domestic flights I'd been on. It needed no explanation.

I remember thinking to myself, how easy their jobs must be on these trans-Pacific flights in comparison to flights in the US. Normally somewhat rowdy and boisterous, this group of GI's was pretty subdued. I'm sure the expressions on our faces

must have betrayed our thoughts - thoughts that wandered to home and family and to the uncertainty of what lay ahead for each of us.

When we'd boarded at Travis, I had been fortunate enough to stake claim to one of the window seats, and I was able to look out from time to time to check our progress. Far below, the scattered patches of clouds took on the appearance of puffy white cotton balls, laid out in regular patterns on a carpet of deepest blue - one that stretched as far as the eye could see.

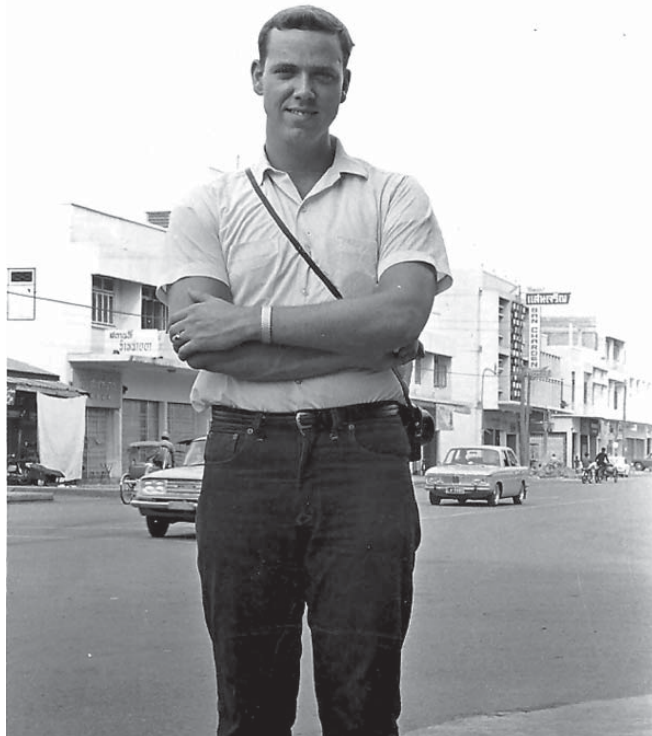
From this altitude, the swirls of the ocean's major currents and eddies could be discerned in the waters covering the big blue sphere below us. Were it not for those changing patterns of clouds and sea, it wouldn't have been obvious we were making progress at all

Off on the horizon, the curvature of the earth was distinctly apparent, and it felt as if we were detached from the rest of the world, suspended there, seemingly motionless at the edge of space. In the otherwise silent cabin, the only indication we were moving was the comforting steady low rumble of the 707's four jet engines, which thankfully, never stumbled.

In headlong pursuit of the sun, as it raced from East to West across the Pacific, the day for us lasted much longer than normal. Inevitably though, the

sun won the race and retreated beyond the horizon ahead, leaving us behind - an island of humanity in a slender silver tube, suspended in an inky black night sky, punctured by myriad pinpricks of light. They were hundreds of thousands of gleaming white diamonds, strewn across a blanket of black velvet as if by some giant hand. Far removed from any man-made light, the night sky over the open Pacific is absolutely breathtaking!

See **Over the Pond**, continued on page 12.



Bob Wheatley on a street in Udorn, Thailand, in 1968. Photos provided by the author.

Over the Pond, continued from page 11.

As we finally neared our destination, the pilot announced over the intercom, we were entering the air space over South Vietnam. I peered out the window into the darkness below and strained to make out some sign of life. I could faintly discern the shape of a land mass, where the moonlight on the water abruptly ended. Other than that, all that greeted my eyes was more darkness. I tried to imagine the life and death drama that must be going on in the darkened jungle far below. "Glad it's not me down there!" I thought.

It fleetingly crossed my mind that at least I would receive an extra sixty-five dollars "combat pay" this month for simply having flown over the war zone. I felt a little odd at the prospect of getting "combat pay" and hoped I wouldn't have to earn it in the way the name implied. It seemed such an insult in a way, not to me, but to the combat troops who were doing the fighting – sixty-five bucks a month for the prospect of losing your life! Still, I wouldn't be inclined to give it back when I collected my next pay! We would receive the same sixty-five dollar token twelve months hence when our return flight on the "Freedom Bird" would carry us back home.

I found myself wishing I could "fast-forward" my life to that day when I would be traveling in the opposite direction, and I didn't want to think about the possibility that some of us, perhaps even I, might not make that return flight. "No, I just won't allow that idea to creep into my conscious thought – I simply refuse to acknowledge the possibility!" (As if that would make the apprehension go away!) Still, there it lurked,

ever present in the shadows of my mind, buried somewhere deep in the recesses of the primitive "animal brain" – the part that doesn't reason, only feels.

The flight had totaled twenty-one hours in the air, and it was late evening when we finally touched down in Bangkok. Because we were U.S. military, we were expedited through



1968, Ramasun Station Headquarters. Photos provided by the author.

customs. I took a taxi into town and spent an overnight there at the Victory Hotel. It was a place highly recommended by my taxi driver, and not knowing anything about Bangkok, I was glad to have his eager guidance. I didn't get a chance to see much of Bangkok that day. Early next morning, I had to return to the airport where I boarded a C-130 military transport, a.k.a. the "Klong" flight, northbound to my permanent duty station.

The "Klong Flight" was one that made the rounds of all the Thai air bases twice a day, ferrying men and supplies in and

Over the Pond is continued next page.

Water buffalo on the job along the road to Ramasun Station, near Udorn, Thailand.



out. Most of the other passengers on this outbound leg of today's flight were also new in country, and like me, they weren't quite sure of what to expect. However, unlike me, for many this was their first overseas tour. Having the stripes of a Buck Sergeant, I tried not to let them see that I was nearly as apprehensive as they. Small talk was limited. Though we sat shoulder-to-shoulder, we were effectively alone with our thoughts.

A far cry from the chartered civilian 707 that had carried us here, the cabin interior of the C-130 transport was not furnished with comfort in mind. The seats were simple web canvas slings hung from

the outside walls of the cabin, and there was only a thin skin of sheet metal between the passengers and the outside. The heaters must not have been working well, as the cabin was downright cold when we got to cruising altitude. Once or twice I was sure I saw my breath in the cabin air. I had made the mistake of sitting directly under the wing, and the constant drumming of the engines made conversation impossible. I could feel the sound waves rattling around in my chest, as if someone was hammering me.

Thankfully, it wasn't a terribly long flight, but I remember I had quite a headache by the time we landed again. I wondered how the load master managed to put up with it, flight after flight, day-in and day-out. But he seemed quite impervious to it. At least he was afforded some ear protection by the headphones he wore to communicate with the pilots in the front. He cheerfully went about his business, as if he hadn't a care in the world, and I wondered to myself how much time HE had left in-country before he would be rotating back Stateside. Perhaps he was "SHORT." Maybe that was the explanation for his seemingly carefree attitude and cheerful demeanor, I thought.

We finally arrived over the Udorn Air Base sometime in late morning. I could feel my ears popping, as we began our descent from our 24,000 foot cruising altitude and circled in preparation for landing. Despite the engine noise and the frigid cabin, the flight had been a smooth one, as it was a bright sunny day, and there was not so much as a single cloud in the sky. We continued on a fairly steep descent, and finally, the plane pulled up slightly and flared. I heard the sound of the tires' screech and felt the plane jerk and lurch, as we touched down on the runway. As the aircraft slowed to taxi, I swallowed hard to clear my stuffy ears and thought, "Well, I guess this is it! Day one of 365. Day one, and counting."

As the plane was taxiing in, I craned my neck to look out one



Nothing primitive here! Barracks buildings at Ramasun Station were completed just a few months before Bob Wheatley arrived. "I couldn't believe my eyes," he said, "the place looked like some apartment complex back in the States."

of the small portholes in the fuselage for a glimpse of the base. My first sight was of red earth, banana trees, and the "hooches" that housed most of the troops there. The mild sense of foreboding I'd been feeling in the pit of my stomach immediately increased a notch or two. They were just as I'd seen in the news video coming out of 'Nam. It looked like it would be a step down from the quarters we'd had on Okinawa, which hadn't been all that great. Trying to look on the bright side, I mused, "At least the ventilation ought to be better."

The plane rolled to a halt in front of the terminal and I heard the sounds of the ground crew, as they tended to the plane. Then the load master threw open the cabin doors. It was time to get up and step into the strange, new world we would call home for the next twelve months. Upon disembarking and stepping out onto the tarmac, the tropical heat slammed into my body and took my breath away. "Yes," I thought to myself, "this is not a dream. You really are here!"

We waited around in a group, clustered about the cargo door of the plane and collected our bags, as the load master threw them off. Then, one by one, we filed into the terminal building, where we were directed to our various units. Everyone else on the flight up was assigned to units at the air base. I was the only one going to Ramasun, and there would be a wait of a couple hours before the next troop bus was to leave.

The two-striper behind the desk suggested I check out the town. "It's just a short walk out the gate. Plenty of places to have a beer, if that suits your mood, Sergeant." It was way too early in the day for a beer in my estimation. Still, rather than sitting around waiting in the terminal, I decided to make good use of the time and take a short walking tour of Udorn to kind of get acquainted with my new surroundings.

The air base was right at the edge of town, and one could walk

See **Over the Pond**, continued on page 14.

Over the Pond, continued from page 13.

out the front gate, down a short, dusty red dirt footpath alongside the road and be in town in a couple of minutes. When I reached the main road into town, I made a quick mental note that the Twilight Bathhouse was situated right outside the main gates. “A very handy location for someone with an hour to spare and a need to relax,” I thought. It was just one of many in Udorn. I didn’t take time to go in that day, but being an unattached young man of twenty-one, with all the normal biological drives, I would spend many an hour there later in my tour being entertained by the beautiful young ladies on the staff.

I discovered Udorn was a fair-sized city, and the streets were bustling with sam-lars (three-wheeled pedi-cabs), bicycles, motor scooters, taxis, and garishly decorated buses that zoomed around the corners with passengers clinging to the back and hanging out the doors. One had to take care not to get run over crossing the streets! The vast majority of the Thai people are Buddhist, and the monks, wearing their unmistakable saffron robes, were conspicuous everywhere. I expected to get some strange looks from the local people. I must have stood out like a sore thumb, being a tall, pale-skinned foreigner, walking about in my Class A khaki uniform amongst these dark, tanned people of small stature.

Most of them paid absolutely no attention to me, but those whose eyes greeted mine, smiled warmly. Politely bowing their heads and placing palms together in front of their faces, they muttered something sounding like, “Sah-wah-dee Khap!” I didn’t understand, but it was obviously a greeting and a gesture

Thai crafts shop in Udorn. Large teak elephant in foreground. How much of this stuff do you have around your house to this very day?



How can we reach you?

If we don’t have your current email address you may be missing out on important messages about your Brotherhood. Please send email changes to us, at JKarnes@tlc-brotherhood.com.



Ramasun secure compound. We can’t tell you any more than that!

of politeness. Not yet speaking their language, I simply nodded my head, half-bowing, and smiling back at them responded, “Hello! How are you?” That seemed to satisfy them. They seemed a very friendly people, and in spite of my still considerable misapprehension, I was beginning to have a “not so bad” feeling about being here.

The streets were lined with shops selling souvenir trinkets and knickknacks, undoubtedly catering to the ubiquitous GI’s who were looking to buy a piece of the local culture to send to the folks back home. I stopped briefly to watch a local artisan in front of one of the shops, crafting an otherwise plain silver ring into a beautiful piece of art. His skilled hands seemed to fly, as he carved a beautiful design into the metal with his Dremel tool, collecting the shavings in a handkerchief, which he had spread on the sidewalk. I marveled at the quickness of his hand and the precise symmetry of his work, and I wondered to myself how many of those pieces he must turn out every day.

Downtown, the open-air market was a cacophony of sensory impressions of sights and smells and sounds. The stifling hot air buzzed with the sound of flies. There were all manner of pungent tropical fruits and bunches of bananas hanging about the vendors’ stands, and a variety of meats were on display. Fresh fish, raw plucked chickens and ducks, water buffalo meat, and gobs of entrails hung from hooks in the open air, an opportune feast for the buzzing flies.

On the crowded sidewalks, vendors were cooking some wonderful smelling dish, called “kow-paht.” I later learned kow-paht was kind of the national dish there, as ubiquitous as hamburgers or hot dogs are in the States. It was prepared in charcoal-fired woks, and it sold for about 25 cents for a huge, piled-high plate of it. Its main ingredient was fried rice, but it also had bits of meat, scrambled egg, green onions, cucumber, LOADS of garlic, and God knows what else. It actually smelled heavenly, but as good as it smelled, I wasn’t brave enough to

Over the Pond is continued next page.

try any that day. I would later come to develop quite a taste for it during my stay there.

Although the humidity was low, the late morning sun was searing, blazing hot. And though the people of Udon themselves seemed most amicable, it was becoming apparent that the Thai sun would have no mercy on the pale, uninitiated skin of this “newbie.” I could tell already that I would have a painful sunburn to show for my walk after less than thirty minutes of exposure. Discretion being the better part of valor, I decided to return to the air base and wait in the shade until the bus was to leave for Ramasun Station, my final destination.

On the bus, along the way from Udon to Ramasun, I noticed a number of rural homes that had been built upon stilts. Curious, I had assumed it was for protection from the wildlife. We had been briefed that there were actually some tigers in the area. Also, king cobras up to twenty feet in length were said to be not too uncommon. Then there were the jungle vipers, including the deadliest of all, the Russell’s viper, rumored to kill thousands every year in Southeast Asia. Then too, there were the various sub-species of krait.

The kraits were known to most GI’s as “two steppers.” Rumor had it if bitten by one you wouldn’t have time to take more than two steps before you were dead. I later found the krait’s venom kills by paralyzing its prey’s diaphragm, and in reality, the victim of its bite usually suffocates to death within ten or fifteen minutes; not a particularly nice way to leave this world, but certainly not as swift as the “two stepper” name implied. Indeed, there were few snakes in Thailand that weren’t

poisonous to some degree, and the wise rule was, “If in doubt, assume that it is poisonous. You probably will be right.” Adding this to the hazards presented by the scorpions and spiders and centipedes and other venomous “creepy crawlers” there were a lot of reasons to keep one’s eyes open while walking through the countryside.

For the rural native population, building their homes elevated may actually have offered some measure of protection from the snakes and other wildlife. But I had arrived during the dry season. Only later, when the monsoon rains came, did I come to understand the main reason they built their homes upon stilts. Then it was an odd sight, seeing the residents fishing from their front porches on what had formerly been dry land.

After a short fifteen or twenty minute ride, the bus slowed in preparation to make a turn. Ramasun Station was built at the edge of a small village in the boonies. Perhaps the village had grown up alongside the post; I’m not sure which. Non Soong consisted mostly of a cluster of single-story ramshackle plywood shacks, some with corrugated metal roofing. At the edge of the village, as the bus turned off the road into the drive leading to the post, I caught sight of a couple of the locals, smiling and waving at us as we went by. I took that as a good omen. Apparently, we were on good terms with the population here too.

As the bus entered the main gates and drove into the post, my eyes were drawn to the poinsettias that had been planted all around. They were in full bloom and the splashes of bril-

See **Over the Pond**, continued on page 16.

Heavy traffic on main street in Udon, 1968-style. One samlor, two mopeds, and four or five bicycles. More in the distance. It must have been Friday night!



liant red were a bittersweet reminder that Christmas was near. "Another Christmas away from home," I thought. I consoled myself with the knowledge that it would be the last such one for me, at least if I had anything to say about it. Even so, the Poinsettias did provide a kind of cheery welcome.

Thankfully, at last, my long, arduous journey had reached an end! After the bus dropped us off inside the gates, I slung my

and we'll go over a few things, then we'll get you settled in."

The tone of his voice and his general informal air put me somewhat at ease, and I felt the apprehension that had been building ever since I had first gotten my orders for Southeast Asia, begin to subside, just a bit more. After going over a few short standing rules and a description of what was expected of me, we chatted a bit. Then he turned me back over to his clerk to get me processed in. In-processing didn't amount to much. I was issued my bed sheets and blankets and laundry bag. "What? No M-16? They told us at Goodfellow we'd be issued M-16's! Well, maybe that will come later," I conceded to myself.

With all my gear in hand, the clerk escorted me to the barracks and showed me my living quarters. On the walk over, looking around, I couldn't believe my eyes. The place looked like some apartment complex back in the States. Mine was the first cubicle to the right inside the door on the second floor of the Air Force barracks. So this was to be my living quarters for the next year – an apparently new air conditioned concrete block barracks! We would have killed for AC on Okinawa! I just could not believe my sheer dumb luck in drawing such an assignment! It was a far cry from the miserable hooches I had seen at the air base. Apparently, the Army knew how to treat its troops, thought I. However, unknown to me at the time, they had been living in tents just a few months earlier. As the saying goes, "timing is everything!"

It so happened my flight was on duty, working day shift in the radio compound when I arrived, so it gave me time to grab some lunch in the chow hall, then unpack, settle in, and collect my thoughts before meeting the guys whom I'd be supervising. Taking it all in and feeling pretty darn good about it, I concluded that a tour here was not going to be as bad as I imagined it might be after all.



Udorn fast food shop, circa 1968. Kow-paht available here.

duffel and my two newly issued pairs of jungle boots over my shoulders, picked up my suitcases, and taking a deep breath, I strode into a rather nice HQ building to report for duty.

After presenting my orders to the clerk on duty, he announced my arrival and showed me into the commander's office. Marching to the front of Captain Engler's desk, and standing at attention, I snapped the crispest hand salute I could muster. "SIR! Sergeant Wheatley reporting for duty, SIR!!" I barked. "At ease, Sergeant. We've been expecting you. Pull up a chair,

Rosie's Quilts Wrap You in Memories

by *Thelma Tilton*

In 2004, Bill had hoped to win the commemorative quilt because his wife, Gay, had died the previous year, and her picture was sewn into the design. That year, Rosie crafted special squares to incorporate memories, pictures of soldiers, TLCB members, and loved ones made up the square elements. John Pierre-Benoist won the memorial. Disappointed, Bill asked John if he could buy the quilt, and he agreed to give it to Bill for a donation to TLCB Assistance. Bill did, and gratefully brought it home. We treasure it, not only as a tribute to his Gay, but as a beautiful piece of art on our office wall.

In 2011, I was ecstatic to win Rosie's patriotic eagle quilt, and it too hangs on the wall. Every time I pass them, I am reminded of our wonderful country, how privileged we are to



live here, and how our military has consistently fought to protect values our country believes in. I am very fortunate to belong to a group like the TLCB, a part of our courageous history that continues to give.

How wonderful it is that year after year, Rosie donates her time and talent to raise money to further the projects of the TLCB Assistance program in Laos and Thailand. This is a good time to get out your checkbooks or visit the web site and buy some sheets of tickets. You, too, may win a beautiful quilt for a bed, quilt stand, or wall.

