

# MEKONG EXPRESS MAIL



The newsletter of the Thailand-Laos-Cambodia Brotherhood, Inc. Volume 23, issue 1

WWW.TLC-Brotherhood.com

## Editor's Notebook

# The MEM—The Members' Newsletter

Every now and then I get a question, something like, “So you’re the editor of *The Mekong Express Mail*. How do you decide what goes in each issue?”

Well, the answer is I don’t! It’s members of the Thailand Laos Cambodia Brotherhood who make those decisions.

Take a look at this issue. Two features are profiles of members, written by the members themselves. One, by Ralph Womack, a new member, was submitted in response to a request I try to make to newbies to write up their story and send it in with some photos if available. The other, from Ralph Burton, a member for some time, just arrived one day. Maybe he had read some previous profiles and decided, “Hey, I can do that.”

Two other articles, from two long-time and high profile

members, just showed up one day. One, “My Life and Times at NKP,” is from a former TLCB president, John Sweet, who in fact has held just about every office the Brotherhood has to offer, except secretary and chaplain, and was the founder and initial chairman of the Assistance Committee. John looks back in his unique fashion on his Nakhon Phanom experiences. To some extent, he may be revisiting some stories he has written about before. However, that does not really matter. Good stories are worth retelling, and oft times, the perspective of a longer distance from the events provides a different view of the past.

The other article is from none other than our current president, Gary Beatty. And Gary’s story is unique in that it’s not about his adventures in Southeast Asia back in the day (Oh, he’s written a good deal about that), it tells of his recent experience as a heart attack victim and the people, particularly a nurse, who was crucial to his recovery, which we’re glad to report is complete.

Readers should note something about these four member contributions; they are not just the writers’ SEA adventures. In at least one instance, it is equally, perhaps more, about his post-military career, and in one, it is not about Thailand at all, but a recent event. My point is that for those of you who have not yet told your story to the *MEM*, we are interested in your whole life, what you did back in the day, what you have done since then, and what you are doing today. Everyone’s life is unique and interesting, so tell it to us.

So what do I do as the editor? Well, I read through them for typos and placing an occasional comma, although Thelma Tilton does the bulk of that. And I decide what order the articles should be in, and how they should be laid out, although Bill Tilton does most of that. Some tough job, hey?

John Harrington  
Editor, MEM

Jharrington, @nscopy.com

### *What's Inside:*

<b>October: The Reunion .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Official Election Notice .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>TLC Brotherhood Information .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>My Life and Times at NKP.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Reunion 2022; The Army Museum at Last.....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>At The Exchange .....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Profile: VO-67 Survivor; Ralph Womack.....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>In Praise of Nurses .....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Newest Members in the TLC Brotherhood .....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Profile: Representing the Army: Richard Burton.....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Bring Back Fellowship.....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>2021 Donors to TLCB Assistance .....</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>Assistance Motions in Motion.....</b>	<b>16</b>

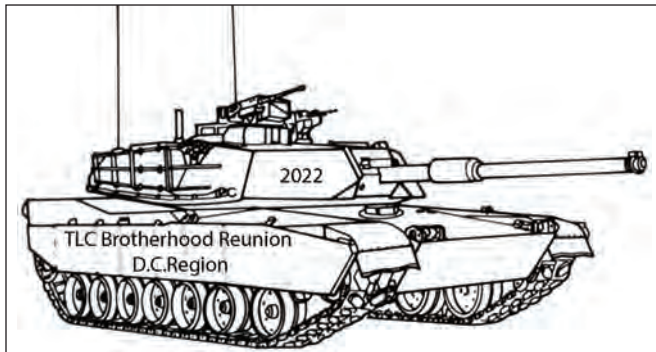
# October: The Reunion

## Army Museum at Last



Some of the life-like displays at the museum, which covers military events from our founding up through desert fighting in the Middle East and Afghanistan.

We've been waiting for many years, and finally it is built and open for visitors—the National Museum of the U.S. Army, at Ft. Belvoir, Virginia. This amazing display and of course the Vietnam War Memorial—The Wall—will be the featured activities during the TLC Brotherhood Annual Meeting and Reunion, **October 12 through 15**. See page 8 for more information, and look for more details in the June issue of The Mekong Express Mail, and at [www.TLC-Brotherhood.com](http://www.TLC-Brotherhood.com).



## TLC Brotherhood, Inc. Official Notice

### Nominations for 2022 Board of Directors Election

Nominations for Election of Officers and Board Members-at-Large, open **April 1 thru May 15, 2022**.  
Positions up for election are:

**President**  
**Treasurer**  
**two Members-at-Large.**

### Submit nominations to the Nominating Committee:

Gary Beatty: [beattygd@yahoo.com](mailto:beattygd@yahoo.com)  
Ken Schmidt: [Kschmidt\\_97@yahoo.com](mailto:Kschmidt_97@yahoo.com) or,  
Mike Vale: [mevale762@gmail.com](mailto:mevale762@gmail.com)



"The Wall" in D.C.

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## TLC Brotherhood, Inc.

**Tax ID #54-1932649**

### Board of Directors and Committee Chairmen 2021-2022, showing year of term end

President: Gary Beatty, 2022 (final term)  
Vice President: Gerry Frazier, (Reunion Committee) 2023 (2nd term)  
Secretary: Tom Ungleich, 2023 (1st term)  
Treasurer: Thelma Tilton, 2022 (1st term)  
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Al Dozal 2023 (1st term)  
Roger Durant, 2022 (2nd term)  
John Sweet, 2023 (final term)

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Communications Committee: John Harrington  
Exchange Shopkeeper: Bill Tilton  
History Committee: John Lorenzen  
Membership Committee: John Duffin  
Public Relations Committee: (vacant)

### The Mekong Express Mail

David MacDonald (1939-2019), Founding Editor

Editor: John Harrington ([jharrington@nscopy.com](mailto:jharrington@nscopy.com))  
Asst. Editor: Thelma Tilton ([thelmatilton@gmail.com](mailto:thelmatilton@gmail.com))  
Distribution: John Duffin ([jduffin29@gmail.com](mailto:jduffin29@gmail.com))  
Composition: Bill Tilton ([billtilton@gmail.com](mailto:billtilton@gmail.com))

### TLCB Facebook Page

Ray Boas, Monitor  
([raymar711@gmail.com](mailto:raymar711@gmail.com))

### TLC Brotherhood Website

Jerry Karnes, Webmaster  
([JKarnes@tlc-brotherhood.com](mailto:JKarnes@tlc-brotherhood.com))

### Payments to the TLCB

Via website—uses PayPal system to accept credit card payments.  
By check—make checks payable to "TLC Brotherhood, Inc."  
Write payment purpose and member number on check.

### Mail to:

**TLC Brotherhood**  
**P.O. Box 60**  
**Aspers, PA 17304**

**Reunion 2022: Springfield, Virginia**

# My Life and Times at NKP

by John Sweet

*Editor's Note:* A founding member, the author has served as treasurer, vice president, president, and Assistance Committee founder and chairman, and is currently a member of the TLC Brotherhood Board of Directors.

## Part 1: *Sitting Out My Time*

I was sitting out my time in the Air Force in California at McClellan AFB working in "Splinter City" for HQ Western Ground Electronics Engineering Installation Agency (G.E.E.I.A), shuffling classified mail documents. I was as they say "Fat Dumb & Happy" when TSgt Tucker handed me my orders to APO 96310, which did not exist in the Army Post Office (APO) book. TSgt Tucker said, "You're going out there!" as he grabbed another book—this one stamped "CONFIDENTIAL" on the cover, found the APO and said, "You're off to Nakhon Phanom." I said, "Where's that?" Tucker replied, "I don't know, but I know you can't tell anyone."

I'd like to say that it was an uneventful trip when I headed out on my birthday, but that was hardly the case. We flew out of Travis AFB on Continental Airlines around 10:30 PM on August 24, 1969, when an hour or so later an engine failed and the pilot informed us that we were aborting and returning to Travis. A two-striper jumped up from his seat and yelled out, "Is there a Catholic Chaplain on the plane?" He had only rushed a few rows down the aisle when a beefy lifer grabbed him in a bear hug and yelled, "Sit Down!" Must have been the guy's first plane flight.

Back at Travis, they gave us free sandwiches and a later flight, informing us that we had lost a day's credit on our tour. Took off again and everything went fine until we were two hours out of Clark and hit severe turbulence. Two stewardesses on board were seriously hurt, one had a broken back and was lying against the rear bathroom doors, and the other had a slash, bone deep, diagonally across her face. The ambulance met us on the tarmac to rush them to the hospital. There were two guys in 1505s in the crappers when the turbulence hit. One got out and sat next to me, apologizing all the way to Bangkok. The toilet prisoner was not so lucky and couldn't get out because the injured "stew," with the broken back, could not be moved. It must have been an unforgettable flight in there covered with everything from the spewing toilet. An Air Traffic Controller (ATC) informed me that the guy was also an ATC and had told him the story after he got to NKP. Nice to know I had verifiable proof to my story and that I wasn't the one full of crap!

Arriving at Bangkok I was told to "Hurry up, you're catching

the Klong Hopper; it's just getting ready to leave." So much for my introduction and overnighter in Bangkok. Flying over NKP once before landing, I had peered out one of the round windows in the C-130 just long enough to see a brown spot in the green sea of jungle and wondered what the hell I had managed to get myself into this time.

When I landed and headed to "In Processing," I found out that NKP was the home base of the 56<sup>th</sup> Special Operations Wing when I was tossed a way-too-big pair of fatigues and an Air Commando hat. I told them that I wasn't an Air Commando; they laughed and said, "You are now," ignoring my orders to the 1987<sup>th</sup> Communications Squadron, which was one of the few tenant outfits on the base.

Upon meeting the Commander, and possessing a Top-Secret Crypto security clearance, I was informed that I would be handling all the classified and unclassified message traffic within the Message Distribution Center (MDC) located within

the Tactical Units Operations Center Compound (TUOC). Two senior NCOs had the day shift and two of us rotated a weird sort of night shift from 2:30 PM until 7 AM every other day.

After my first letter home and feeling settled in, I reported to the commander's office. There he sat angrily glaring at me, holding my first letter home, demanding that I explain the weird script in the letter. I informed him that it was a code I had created from characters of the Phoenician alphabet while bored in high school study hall. It reads, "I'm writing this to see if they are reading our mail." So, as you can imagine, the colonel was not pleased to be caught red handed, and he demanded that I write out the entire code so he could decipher it himself. He then demanded, in no uncertain terms to, "Never do it again!"

The MDC was about 15 square feet with one red-painted, steel door to the outside, which had a sliding steel window. The opposite side of the room also had a steel door with a sliding window through which, every few minutes, stacks of incoming message traffic was passed to whoever was on duty for distribution. Everyone, including Task Force Alpha came to the MDC to pick up all their classified and unclassified message traffic. For me, it was long hours on the night shift working alone, processing traffic, which consisted of everything from Flash Traffic, Eyes Only, down to Bitch Notes over the lack of eggs or milk.

Of course, all the daily mission reports, operation summaries, and intelligence reports were more than enough to hold my



John Sweet and Air Force Commendation Medal.  
Photos furnished by the author.

**Sweet continues on page 4.**



*Sweet continued from page 3.*

attention during the shifts. The four of us assigned to the MDC must have known just about everything going on in Thailand and Laos concerning how the war was going and ongoing issues with the Thai government concerning American GIs held for various crimes etc.—even complaints, back and forth, over which command was in charge; who was running the show in Laos, where the missions were restricted, by whom, and when, which occurred not infrequently.

We never knew what would be next in the stacks and stacks of message traffic, but the hardest part of all was not being able to discuss it with anyone during, or even after, the war for twenty-five years, according to the disclosure documents we signed before reassignment. Each of us was awarded The Air Force Commendation Medal for our efforts—not telling what we didn't know.

## ***Part 2: End of The Line at The Edge of The World***

Ra-Win was my hooch boy, and at fifteen was only half a dozen years younger than I, but a whole world away. Ra-Win believed America was a mystical place where the streets were paved with gold and it was impossible to convince him otherwise. He said that his father called America the land of desires because whatever you wished for came true there. Ra-Win shined my shoes, made my bed, and took the laundry out in exchange for a small, weekly fee for looking after everything. He had no shoes, so I gave him the brand-new, second pair of combat boots I had been issued. There was no way in hell I'd wear out the first pair in a year and they hurt my feet like hell while breaking them in. Ra-Win's English was about as good as my Thai.

Thing is, little did we know that the whole of northeastern Thailand, called Issan, to which we were sent at Nakhon Phanom, was historically part of Laos and the ethnic people who lived there strongly defined their culture, customs, music, and language as Lao. Most of them were not even strictly Buddhist but followed an even older Anamist spiritual belief system, so they combined them together. We were actually learning words from our hooch boys who spoke a dialect of Issan Pu Thai



Relaxing on the porch of his hooch.

Lao, a different language from Bangkok Thai altogether. So, our little welcome to Thailand culture booklet was more or less a combination of propaganda and ignorance more than anything else.

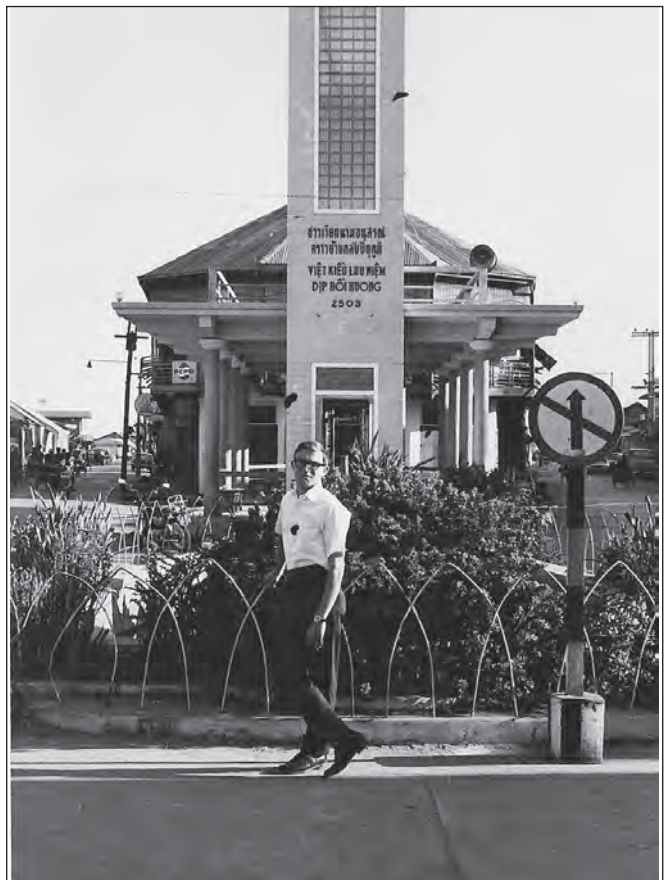
The Anamist priest and



The men of the 1987th Comm Squadron in 1969.

priestesses must never marry, drink, or smoke to maintain their bodies pure in order to communicate with the spirits. For the Baci ceremony, the “Bai-Si” is a centerpiece that must be made to exact specifications from banana leaves and flowers, taking many hours of work by a group of women. The true beauty of the ceremony are the strings attached, which may be either one long string or many, which have been pre-cut and draped on the Bai-Si and passed to all villagers and guests who sit in

*Sweet continues next page.*



John Sweet at the Ho Chi Minh clock, at the Mekong River, on the main road.





A view many TLCB members can recall, whether stationed here or just passing through on the Klong Hopper, the Nakhon Phanom RTAFB flightline, with its FAA standard control tower, numerous propellers, and in the foreground, the PSP runway next to the ramp..

circles surrounding the center piece. At the appropriate moment, the strings were cut and placed around the wrists of all guests many times; as each villager would put a string on each guest to bind their hearts together. Sometimes in more elaborate ceremonies, an egg is used to be held in the left hand of each guest, symbolic to bring them fertility.

We called Nakhon Phanom, “The end of the line at the edge of the world” because the Mekong River was the line and Nakhon Phanom, which means “The City of Hills,” was overshadowed by the rugged limestone karsts on the Lao side of the Mekong River—with the view straight out of “Lost World.”

The Mekong River was historically the unifying “highway” through the center of the Mekong Valley tribal communities rather than a border between countries. Small wonder that the “locals” were sympathetic toward reunification with their heritage and extended family members on the other side of the river, and they might just be interested in what their Pathet Lao relatives had to say. So, of course the little booklet never mentioned the fact that “Thai” tribal communists surrounded the entire area. The only accurate

The Bob Hope Christmas show, Nakhon Phanom RTAFB, 1967. The Harley-Smith-Wolff Amphitheater was built in 1966 in order for the USO to bring Mr. Hope's show here. It was named after three missing forward air controllers in the 23rd TASS at NKP.



The familiar base “hooches,” or barracks, as seen from the back of John Sweet's hooch.



section in the booklet concerned the thirty percent (50 odd thousand) ethnic Vietnamese who had fled there since the first Indochina War. They were not allowed to become Thai citizens nor to own land, so they simply squatted along the banks of the Mekong.

The so-called “Uncle Ho clock tower” in the square was a gift from some returning Vietnamese in 1960, one of whom was probably HCM and it really probably was his idea to have it built.

When Uncle Ho died in November 1969, the locals in town had black drapes surrounding nice pictures of Ho, with little altars beneath filled

*Sweet continues on page 6.*



*Sweet continued from page 5.*

with fruit, incense, and flowers. Hell, the girls who worked passing out beer in the Officer's Club wore black armbands in memory of Ho. Downtown at Monty's Ice Cream Parlor it was the same, large pictures of Uncle Ho had magically appeared with incense, fruit, and altars created under his picture. For three days the 'ol juke box in Monty's had the plug out of the wall socket for the period of mourning. Sitting there during the war on the back porch overhanging the Mekong, while smoking a butt and staring across the river, I wondered how many other warriors had been there over the centuries and had done the same. As the shadows grew deeper in the twilight, the karsts slowly vanished from sight and my beer became warm. We all knew then, it was indeed the Land of Smiles; smiles for strangers in a strange land.

They called us "Farang" which means foreigner. In 2002 a new ultra-modern, two-story museum opened, dedicated to the life of Uncle Ho. It was across the street from his former residence, and was only a short distance off the main road, a mile from our base. A delegation from Hanoi had visited and officially reviewed documentation and conducted interviews of those who had worked for Uncle Ho while he plotted the



Above and right, the village of houseboy Ra-Win.

overthrow of Vietnam while residing at Nakhon Phanom. I'd say right back then that Ho was another warrior at the end of the line, on the edge of the world.

**Part 3, Ra-Win**

Previously, I mentioned the gift of my second pair of combat boots to my hooch boy Ra-Win. For several weeks thereafter he pleaded with me to come to his village, saying that his father wanted to thank me for the gift to his son. It was simply not that easy to venture out into the local villages, but after a few weeks of continued requests I told him I'd go.

Somehow, I stumbled across another GI with access to a jeep we could "borrow" for a few hours through some arrangement he had made. So off we went in mid-afternoon with Ra-Win,

traveling a few miles through the jungle to a thousand years in the past. The day has become a lifelong, haunting memory for which I possess absolutely no supporting, credible evidence and thus I am at the reader's mercy for acceptance as fact what is conveyed in the writing below. I have no doubt whatsoever that I would pass a lie detector test.

When we arrived, there was a great celebration and we heard, "The Americans Were Coming!" even though we were simply two enlisted men in a jeep. A water buffalo was slaughtered with throat slit, tied by its feet over a huge tree limb, and beaten with staves to tenderize the meat. I was told that the water buffalo was raised off the ground, so in the minds of the villagers they were not required to pay a tax to the local government.

While the buffalo was cooking, a Thai boxing match had been arranged, complete with a constructed, elevated ring enabling the villagers, seated on benches, to see the match. I'd never seen a real match in the jungle villages before, but knew it was going to be unusual when the pugilants wrapped rags around the upper part of their knees as well as their hands, pouring on wax and broken glass.

After the first round, they were both pretty much of a mess from what we could see sitting in the front row. I had been waiting for a chance to get a light for my butt from a Thai Tiger Soldier standing around smoking, complete with his M-16. When I went over, he told me in broken English, "You brave GI, many Thai communists here!" Looking around closer at the benches, there were a lot of unfriendly faces who we could see were evidently not too happy with us being there. Ra-Win's father turned out to be village chief.

Ventured back to my seat and quietly informed my buddy about the real situation, staying, "Don't look now, but we're surrounded by a hell of a load of Thai Communists. So, of course first thing my buddy does is twist his head around looking at all the frowns behind him.

Well, the second round was about half way through at this

*Sweet continues next page.*



point, and the guy who had been losing drove his opponent into the corner on our immediate right, and pinned him there, driving his knees into his lungs. After a few more well-placed kicks I figured he'd back off as the guy's arms just hung at his sides and his eyes showed a vacant stare "looking" straight at us. Finally, backing away from him, the poor guy fell face first and a huge pool of blood spread across the platform. To our stunned horror they lifted his feet and dragged his body off while still face down. No question he was dead, but why was he killed? For sport? Were they condemned men? The horror came to us that the event was surely timed to the Americans' visit.

We ate in the chief's hut, which as most Lao style houses, was raised about four feet off the jungle floor to keep out the king cobras and various other unwelcome area dwellers. The meal was a bit rough, and no matter how small a piece of the water buffalo I munched, there always seemed to be a bit of broken bone fragment in it. The booze was local, homemade hooch of rice, fermented in handmade clay jars which had been buried in a sunny location in the red soil for a few months, where it turned into pretty strong hooch.

Dessert was provided in little round, woven, covered baskets containing rice. They had also been buried for some length of time, probably a few months from what I could get out of Ra-Win. They were about four inches across and three inches high. Popping off the cover, the consistency looked like a matted grey softball on the outside. The chief dipped his fingers in and ripped off the hard outer shell, so we did likewise. Inside it was white and sticky like wallpaper paste or Elmer's Glue, but tasted sweet enough. Everyone ate it with the first two fingers of their right hand. I remember thinking if I don't get the shits now, I never will. I never did.

Then we got down to the real nitty gritty. Seems the chief liked me for giving his son the boots, well enough to figure I'd take care of one of his daughters, so he announced the present and a cute young girl (looked maybe sixteen but probably older as Asian women look young for their age) stood up, walked directly in front of me, and while staring directly into my eyes, opened her sarong. In that way only I could see her naked body to seal the deal without question. All I was sure of what to do was to stare back into her face—and absolutely not look down! I heard Ra-Win say, "My sister, she yours." The old man was driving the deal home for his daughter to go to the land of desires.

Ok, so now I had two questions to answer, one faster than the other. How do we get out of the village and leave the girl behind without the old man losing face? If he lost face, I felt we might end up as "missing." On the other hand, if I brought Ra-Win's sister out of the village then dropped her off somewhere, she might feel that she couldn't just go back. I would have ruined her life.

Maybe it was the hooch, but I stayed calm even though my



John Sweet at the terminal of Nakhon Phanom Airport in 1997. Note the PSP ramp where John is standing. Today there are scheduled airline connections to other cities of Thailand and very little of the old base is visible.

reply had to be quick. It was a stroke of luck some would say, but it seemed like God helps you when you do the right thing, so I smiled and thanked the chief for such a gift that he cherished so greatly, and told him that I would be back for her when I had prepared a place for her to sleep. This would be a normal response even in the villages, I hoped, since it showed concern and respect for both his daughter and his position.

We departed a few minutes later as night was setting in, thanking all the village elders for their hospitality, smiling and waving as we slowly drove out into the jungle darkness. A hundred yards around the bend, we floored the jeep and beat it back to the base, hardly believing what we knew had just happened. Who knew that the gift of a pair of boots would lead to seeing a man killed? Life is uncertain and surprising.

Every once in a while, for a period of about a month or more, Ra-Win would bring up the subject saying, "My sister, she yours" or "Why you no take my sister?" It was all very confusing to him and he simply could not understand that I could not just keep his sister. Finally, he said no more about it for a week or so and I figured it was over and done with. Big surprise. Phone call from the guard at the gate. Seems the village elders and Ra-Win had brought her for me and the guard wanted to know what I wanted to do. I told him, "Tell them I have left Thailand." Ra-Win never brought up the subject again.

Follow Up: For the past several visits back to Nakhon Phanom, I have tried, without success, to locate Ra-Win. Phomphan Kulapa, our longstanding TLCB member and popular radio personality in Nakhon Phanom, broadcast searches for Ra-Win numerous times over the years, searching without success. Ra-Win is probably dead. He was most likely a Thai Communist or became one as so many did who lived in the area.

NOTE: This is parts 1—3 of a 5-part article. Parts 4 and 5, "Where it All Began," will appear in the next issue of the *Mekong Express Mail*.





# Reunion 2022—The New Army Museum!

By *TLCB Vice President Gerry Frazier*

*National and Local Chairman for 2022*

## Our Past—Our Heritage

Our 2022 Reunion returns to the Washington, D.C. area, **October 13th through 15th**. Activities will include our traditional visit to the Vietnam Memorial Wall and a group visit to the new National Museum of the U.S. Army at Fort Belvoir, Virginia. The trip into D.C. to visit the Wall will be by chartered bus, in order to avoid the parking hassles of the area around the Lincoln Memorial. Transportation to the Army Museum will be by private vehicles because the distance is fairly short and easy to navigate from our hotel in Springfield.

### Guided Tour

The Army Museum welcomes groups such as ours, and will provide a thirty-minute guided tour of the Museum as soon as we arrive, after which individuals can visit any of the historically themed galleries on their own. An inspiring, free ten-minute film showcasing Army history, “The Citizen Soldier,” plays every half-hour, and special high-tech presentations are also available for a small fee.

### Historically Themed Galleries

The state-of-the-art museum building houses a number of densely packed, historically themed galleries, each devoted to a different era of Army and U.S. History, from the American Revolution to the present day. For example, the WWII gallery houses a Sherman tank, soldiers clambering down cargo nets into a pitching Higgins boat, an example of the first U.S. military helicopter deployed with Air Commandos in Burma, a 40mm Bofors anti-aircraft gun, and overhead, a formation of Army Air Force bombers.

Each gallery is like that. Imagine the objects that have accumulated in all the years our country has waited for the Army to build and fill their flagship museum! And here it is, after a brief interruption because of the Covid pandemic. So many artifacts and personal stories of each era of our military history! Our Army Museum visit promises to be a memorable experience, no matter what branch we served in.

Details of hotel accommodations are still being worked out, but will be posted on [www.tlc-brotherhood](http://www.tlc-brotherhood) and in the June *Mekong Express Mail*.

## Fort Belvoir, Virginia

by *Bill Tilton*

This U.S. Army post now has a working population nearly twice as large as that of the Pentagon! Originally the Army’s training ground for engineers, it now hosts numerous major commands of the Army. The engineers moved to Ft. Leonard Wood, MO in 1988.

### Rich History

Visitors to this area of Virginia often don’t realize how much vital history occurred there. The Army base, about six miles from Mount Vernon, is situated on the site of Belvoir Estate, once the colonial home of Thomas, Sixth Lord Fairfax Cameron, who gave 16-year-old George Washington his first job. That job, surveying the Shenandoah Valley boundary area of Fairfax’s nearly five-million-acre land grant, not only led ultimately to George’s military and political service to our country, but to his purchases of vast tracts of cheap frontier land, which saved him financially in later years. The biggest producer of whiskey in the American Colonies in Washington’s Mount Vernon days was his grist mill and distillery. You can visit a reproduction of that distillery and grist mill about halfway to Mt. Vernon, rebuilt (and operating!) on the exact site.

Washington and wife Martha were famously best friends with George William Fairfax and his wife, Sally, who were the last British owners of the Belvoir Estate. After the successful rebellion of the colonies, the estate was abandoned and the manor house, overlooking the Potomac, burned down in 1784. The ruins are on the post.

Just across Route 1 from the main base is a beautiful home that Washington gave to his beloved step-granddaughter, Nelly Custis, as a wedding gift. Woodlawn estate comprised 2000 acres carved out of Washington’s Mount Vernon. Designed by the same architect who designed our Capitol, Woodlawn was the site of many important visits and events, including notables such as The Marquis de Lafayette, John Adams, and Robert E. Lee. It was the first historic mansion purchased by the National Trust for Historic Preservation, which later moved a famous Frank Lloyd Wright home, the Pope-Leighey House, to the grounds to preserve it. Both are well worth touring.

The first purchaser of Woodlawn after the Washington descendants died were Quaker abolitionists whose plain meeting house, at the foot of the hill, along Route 1, is still in use for worship. They created farms on the estate to demonstrate to Virginia plantation owners that farming without slaves was feasible. Other nearby sites of historic importance include Pohick Church and, just a few miles south, Gunston Hall, the plantation house of George Mason, author of the Constitution’s Bill of Rights, among his many accomplishments.

### Not all about history and military stuff

Fewer than ten miles south, by U.S. 1 or I-95, is vast Potomac Mills, the largest outlet mall in Virginia, with over 200 stores, 25 eateries, and even an AMC-18 movie complex! For upscale shopping, visit Tyson’s Galleria Mall, a vast complex featuring a broad range of stores all the way up to names like Gucci and Louis Vuitton, in the Tysons Corner area.





## New Member Profile

# VO-67 Survivor: Ralph Womack

When I was approaching graduation from high school in 1966, I thought about what I would do afterwards. For me, I had little desire to go to college and, like many of my friends at the time, one option was to join the military. I first thought about joining the Air Force since the whole concept of aviation intrigued me and I wanted to fly and to also work on jet engines.

As graduation was now close, I went to the Armed Forces recruitment station (where all branches were represented) and looked for the Air Force recruiter. Fate, or a hungry Air Force recruiter, entered the scene because I found out the recruiter was out to lunch. Yep, a sign on his desk indicated he would be back at 1:00 pm. It was now 1:30. As I sat there, a Navy recruiter from across the hall came over, introduced himself, and asked me why I had decided on the Air Force. I told him that I was inspired by aviation and wanted to both fly and to fix jet engines.

The Navy recruiter just asked me one question, "Son, do you know how many airplanes the Navy has?" Of course, I didn't think about the Navy having planes, so I responded "no" and agreed to let him inform me. We moved across the hall to the Navy recruiter's desk and he ran it down for me. Next thing I knew, I was on my way to the Navy! I always wondered if the two recruiters ever talked about me joining the Navy since I had originally gone in to join the Air Force. I'll never know.

I originally figured that I would probably be on an aircraft carrier, so I pretty much prepared myself to see the world through a porthole! However, fate again intervened. After boot camp, I got my orders to two schools, both in Memphis, Tennessee. I attended fundamentals of aviation and basic jet engine repair. As the school was coming to an end, I became very interested, perhaps anxious about what orders I would receive as I entered the "fleet."

My orders were different from any of my classmates. I was to report to San Diego and attend both deep water survival school and S.E.R.E. school. It was later that someone was able to tell me that S.E.R.E. stood for Survival, Evasion, Resistance, and Escape school before reporting to "Obsron 67."

When I asked the chief at the school what all this meant, he only said that he had never heard of Obsron 67 and couldn't find any reference to it anywhere. I later learned that the squadron and its mission were top secret and such a squadron had never existed before. Obsron 67 was Navy speak for Observation Squadron 67, a new and highly classified unit with a very

specific mission. Of course, most of that was not known to me until after I actually arrived at the squadron.

Although I had certainly suspected that this assignment (my first) was different, I got a real dose of reality upon reporting to survival school. When I arrived and reported to the Officer of the Deck (OOD), he took one look at the orders and said, "Oh, another one for the suicide squadron." What? Now that got my attention! First school, and then what? I would soon find out.

S.E.R.E. school is the Navy's way to expose you to the possibilities of being shot down and trying to survive while evading capture; however, it also exposed us to a pretty realistic experience of being captive. Suffice it to say that it was a week where a young, 18-year-old had to ask himself many times, what on earth got into him to actually volunteer for all this? The experience could be a whole chapter in itself; however, I survived, completed the training, and moved on to my squadron.

After a brief leave, I reported to my squadron, traveling on a C-141 out of Travis Air Force Base. I was traveling in my Navy Class-A dress blues, still not knowing for sure my final destination. One of the Air Force guys would only tell me that it is "somewhere in S.E. Asia." Thanks.

I arrived in Bangkok, Thailand during the day and when they opened the door to let us out, the heat hit me like a furnace blast. I had experienced some heat and humidity for the first time in Memphis, but this? Wow, this was insane and here I was in my dress blues. When I arrived at my final destination, I was told that it was Nakhon Phanom (N.K.P.) Thailand. Nakhon Phanom had been in existence for only a few short years and was still pretty undeveloped. I was directed to the Navy living quarters and assigned to a "hooch" with several other squadron members.

The Navy issued me some fatigues and the Air Force did the same. Both uniforms were more



Ralph Womack at the VO-67 Memorial, Hurlburt AFB  
Photos furnished by the author.



Ralph in Navy dress blues.



**WOMACK** continues page 10

**WOMACK** *continued from page 9*



Our squadron sign at NKP.

comfortable than the dress blues, but nothing really kept you cool, and it took me a long time to get used to the heat and humidity.

The assigned flight crews had already flown in our aircraft and settled in, so I was joining in a bit later and had little to no knowledge of how to get a chance to fly or what our mission even was. I was filled in, and for some reason I still wanted to fly. I did have one immediate observation that I had not expected: Why did the Navy train me on jet engine repair, and then assign me to aircraft that required the majority of attention to the two R-3350 reciprocating radial engines and prop repair? Go figure.

Our squadron was made up of 12 converted P-2V-5F anti-submarine aircraft. They had painted them green, took out the radar dome, expanded the bomb bay, removed the rear boom (stinger), added a whole lot of armor, put mini-guns on the wings, and put M-60s in the two aft stations. We were obviously ready for combat.

I flew several missions, but never got an opportunity to be a permanent member of a crew. We were all pretty tight as a unit, but the crews all had special bonds. I remember writing home and saying that we were in a safe area and not to worry, never telling my mom that there was a great deal of danger since we flew out of Thailand. The majority of our flight hours were spent deploying sensors along the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos. Of course, even if I had wanted to tell my mom the truth, I couldn't, since I had been clearly warned that I could never reveal our mission to anyone since to do so would end up in a prison sentence. I believed them and as a matter of fact, I never talked about it to anyone for 30 years until it was declassified in 1998.

Since I only got to fly on occasion, I spent a lot of time removing and repairing both the 3350s and their fiberglass props. We had two J-34 jets on the wings for boost,

but in all honesty, they required very little maintenance and it was those huge receipts that took our time. I stayed busy, got to go into town. Nakhon Phanom was not much of a town, but that was about the only place to go to get off base.

I was going along fat, dumb, and reasonably happy until January 11, 1968. I was in the maintenance shop when I first got word that one of our planes had gone down. It was unbelievable, something we just couldn't process right away. Each crew consisted of nine men, so it was nine times the tragedy to get this news. On January 11, 1968, 54 years ago on the day I am writing this, Crew 2 and OP-2E Buno 131436 were shot down over Laos while on a mission to implant sensors. No parachutes were located and all crew were KIA.

On February 17, 1968, our Crew 5 was also shot down with the loss of all aboard. To me, the first loss had not really sunk

**WOMACK** *continues next page*



Ralph posing in front of their barracks.



Prepping for a mission, 1968



MR-5 and MR-7, two of the modified P-2V-5F "Neptunes" we lost in combat.





Granddaughter, son, and Ralph; three generations of peace officers.



USAF and Navy team up again; F-35 mechanic Houston and Ralph at graduation..



Lake Tahoe Relay, 2016. In addition to diving, I have been an avid runner for years and ran seven marathons and many, many shorter races. Today at 73, I still run and cycle, but for certain not the distances or speed I had

in when we again lost warriors on The Trail. It was devastating for everyone. We all hoped that we would not lose more, but that just wasn't in the cards.

A mere ten days later on February 27, 1968, VO-67 suffered its third combat loss. It is believed that the aircraft received a direct hit in the underbelly that immediately killed crew member Petty Officer 2nd Class John Hartzheim. Pilot Paul Milius ordered his crew to bail out while he remained at the controls until the remaining seven crew successfully bailed out. Paul Milius, however, was first listed as MIA and later reclassified as KIA. In a span of 47 days we lost three aircraft, but this time we were thankful that seven of the nine crew were able to bail out. Thanks to the Air Force Jolly Green, the seven were rescued. Go to our website, [www.VO-67.org](http://www.VO-67.org), to find much more information about the losses and rescues. In 1995, the U.S. Navy launched the Guided Missile Cruiser U.S.S. Milius, DDG-69, in honor of Captain Paul Milius.

In addition to the sensor-deployment missions, on January 22, 1968, VO-67 was diverted to Vietnam and commenced implanting extensive acoubuoy sensor fields around the Marine combat base at Khe Sanh and its approaches to help lift the siege of the Marine stronghold. In December 2007, decades after the fact and in recognition for the actions at Khe Sanh, the remaining members of VO-67 squadron traveled to Washington, D.C. and received the Presidential Unit Citation.

After being in VO-67, any other assignment seemed simpler. I was assigned to a Patrol Squadron, VP-17, where I was stationed at Barber's Point, Hawaii with deployments to Iwakuni, Japan, and later Sangley Point, Philippines.

My enlistment was up and I left the



New Officer Womack, circa 1973

Navy in December 1970. The highlight, however, is that VP-17 flew the P-3 Orion anti-submarine aircraft, which had four actual jet engines to work on! Actually, they were four T-56 turbo-props, so I finally got to work on jets, although I continued to deal with props. But still, all was good!

### *The Beat Goes On*

When I got home, I didn't have a clue about what I wanted to do. After reading an article in my hometown paper seeking volunteer reserve police officers, I applied and became a reserve police officer. Shortly after, I realized that this was the profession I wanted to pursue. I spent the next 32 years in law enforcement, two years with the Manteca, California Police Department and 30 with the Stockton Police Department. One of my favorite assignments was as a K-9 handler. I retired as Police Captain in 2003.

Since that time, I have worked, by choice, a number of jobs, including two programs involving the mentoring of youth, teaching at both community college and university levels, and two separate stints as the interim executive director for the San Joaquin County Bar Association, a non-profit organization. Over the years, I also took my passion for SCUBA diving to the instructor level and combined diving and travel to see and enjoy many sites around the world.



With K-9 Kemo, circa 1980

I remain happily married to my wife Marie, who has traveled the world with me while diving, running, and just enjoying life. I have three children, nine grandchildren, and one great-grandchild. My son was also a police officer at

Stockton P.D.; however, he is now a Police Chief in Oregon while his daughter (my granddaughter) is a police officer on the central coast of California. One of my grandsons is now in the Air Force working on the F-35.



# In Praise of Nurses

By Gary Beatty, TLCB President

On Saturday, May 29, 2021, I was feeling an unusual sensation in my solar plexus, not pain, or pressure, or any of the “classic” signs of a heart attack. It was more like indigestion. I had no cardiac history, ate right, and regularly exercised. In the words of a doctor who subsequently treated me, I’m “the guy this was not supposed to happen to.” But as a former Air Force independent duty medic, I instinctively knew it wasn’t something I should ignore. So, I drove to the nearest hospital emergency room.

Though my EKG in the ER did not raise any concerns, my troponin level was elevated — which can be an early warning sign of a heart attack. I was admitted for overnight observation. That saved my life.

Around 0500 the next morning, I awoke unable to get comfortable in bed, so I got up into the bedside chair. Within minutes two things happened almost simultaneously. The team monitoring my EKG came into the room to check on me — and I felt the first stabbing pain in my chest. The team wanted to check my vital signs, but I told them to get me back onto the bed because I knew I was “going bad.” They did so, and the nurse called a “Rapid Response.”

I was quickly surrounded by what I knew to be a cardiac emergency team. Many times, I’d been on the other side of that scenario, so I suspected that I was having a heart attack. When the doctor confirmed it, I responded that I couldn’t think of a better place to have one.

I remained conscious and the “medic” part of my brain took over. I kept asking what “my numbers” were – meaning my vital signs, etc. Throughout the attack a nurse held my hand, looked in my eyes, and kept telling me my vitals. It helped to distract me from the pain, and reassured me that I wasn’t dying.

After 6 mg of morphine, 4 hits of nitroglycerine, and a dose of atropine, the pain subsided. I was stabilized. I don’t know that nurse’s name, but she was my “angel of mercy” during the ordeal.

The attending physician saved my life, but that nurse talked me through it, which at one point kept me from passing out,

which wouldn’t have been good. She was the first of the incredible nurses who helped me over the next three weeks.


Four days after my heart attack, I underwent open-heart surgery to correct the problem which caused it. The cardiac surgeon gave me, in effect, a new heart that will probably outlast the rest of me. I can’t say enough good things about him and his partner who regularly saw me before and after surgery. As a medic, I was trained by, and worked with, some good doctors. Those guys are two of the best I’ve ever known.

But it was after I was wheeled, still unconscious, out of the operating room to cardiac ICU that my healing really began. *And I owe it to the nurses.*

The day after surgery I was greeted by the nurse I nicknamed “the drill instructor.” One of the most important parts of her job was to get me “up and walking.” With the chest tubes and IVs still attached, it was the hardest thing I’ve ever done. But the drill instructor didn’t want to hear any excuses from me. I was going to walk. End of discussion.

That went on all four days I spent in the ICU, with longer walks each day. You could put her in a Smokey Bear hat, and she’d fit right in at basic training, but she was doing what had to be done to facilitate my recovery. I can’t thank her enough.

As this is written, I’m 8 weeks post-op. The surgeon and the rehab nurses tell me that I’m well ahead of the usual recovery schedule, and the doctor says that I’m the “poster boy” for recovery from a CABG.

**Update, February, 2022:** “A week after this tribute to nurses was written, I contracted Delta Covid that almost killed me. I was hospitalized for 13 days, and again received excellent nursing care. So, yes ... I love nurses. In fact, *I’m married to the best, and most beautiful, one—ever.*” 

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*The Official Thailand-Laos-Cambodia  
Brotherhood page*



## Newest Members in the TLC Brotherhood

The three members listed below joined between the December, 2021 issue of the *MEM* and President’s Day. You can find more information on our website database.

The *Mekong Express Mail* wishes you all a sincere “Welcome Home.”

No.	Branch	Last Name	First Name	City	State
2000	USN	Womack	Ralph	Stockton	CA
2001	USAF	Gurschick	Fritz	Turner	ME
2002	USA	Comroe	Richard	Springfield	PA



## New Member Profile

# Representing the Army : Richard Burton

I was drafted into the U.S. Army in 1968 for the TET Counteroffensive. My basic training was at Fort Campbell, Kentucky, the home of the 101st Airborne Division, and my advance infantry training was at Fort Huachuca, Arizona. My official MOS was in Basic Administration. I deployed to Korat, Thailand and the U.S. Army Camp Friendship, which is located next to the Korat Royal Thai Air Force Base.

My tour of duty lasted 14 months, travelling in and out of the jungle, mountains, and plains in the countries of Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia, all in direct support of South Vietnam. Since American soldiers were considered guests of the Thai government, we could not bear arms and had to rely on the Thai Army for protection in all three countries.

During the first three months in Thailand, I worked with a warrant officer, Mr. Alverado, and Sgt Major Carlson, both career men who were strong in their Catholic faith. We visited Catholic orphanages run by priests and nuns, Buddhist temples run by monks, and we helped secure American supplies to aid war refugees. This mission was abandoned with a new change in command, and the war effort continued to deteriorate in Laos and Cambodia. USARSUPTHAI special operations in the "Secret War" were not officially acknowledged by the U.S. Army until 1992.

I returned to "The World" in December 1969 when I got off the plane in Oakland. We were treated like heroes and all returning soldiers got a cot and a steak dinner. After my discharge, I proudly wore my uniform to the San Francisco Airport. Nobody had mentioned the war protesters at the debriefing and I was spit on and called a baby killer. When I got home to Indiana, I put my uniform in the closet where it is today.

After college I resumed a career in manufacturing at International Harvester as an Industrial Engineer. In 1984 I worked at ITT developing and building the SINCGARS radio for the U.S. Army. In 2000, I pursued a life-long dream of becoming a teacher, and I taught 5th and 6th Grade Science at St. John the Baptist School for five years. After my daughter moved to San Antonio, TX, I began substitute teaching at SWACS until I retired at 71.

I joined the K of C Father Solanus Casey Council 11276 at St. Elizabeth Ann Seton in 2006, and I have held every office including the Grand Knight and Team Leader of the 1st Degree team. In 2008, I joined the 4th Degree Anthony

Wayne Assembly 239 and have worked my way through the offices to Faithful Navigator. I enjoy participating in all Honor Guard activities including confirmations, religious vigils, and Veteran's and Memorial Day parades. There is nothing more satisfying than helping family members commemorate the loss of a fallen brother knight.

My best Army buddy, Bill Gross, married a Thai and spent 23 years in the United States Air Force. We still call one another around the holidays. He has been married three times and has three boys.

I married my high school sweetheart 47 years ago after graduation from the University of Saint Francis. We are blessed with two daughters. Katie Rutan lives in Auburn, Indiana and has two children, Avery (20) and Carter (17). Daughter Karen Riczo lives in Huntertown, Indiana and has two children, Tyler (16) and Brynna (13).



## Bring Back Fellowship

**Announcement:** At the Gettysburg annual meeting, the members voted to form the proposed "Thailand, Laos, Cambodia Brotherhood Fellowship Message Group," using Google Groups. The TLCB Fellowship Message Group is a private group established to allow only current members of the Thailand, Laos, Cambodia Brotherhood to communicate with one another, using email. This email platform allows you to send attachments such as photos, videos, and documents, etc.

**Particulars:** Individuals receiving the emails are responsible to download and store them if they want to do so. There is no storage of attachments by the TLCB. Members need to send ONE email only to the group, and it will be redistributed to all members on the list. You can change your settings to receive all emails, digest form, or no email. The motion adopted at the meeting approved this program for a 6-month trial and it is now active.

**To Join:** Send an email to Ed Miller at:

thinkp69@gmail.com. Include your first name, last name, TLCB membership#, and the email address you want to use. If you have a Google account and gmail address, we recommend that you use it, but it is not required.

*Let's bring back some fellowship and camaraderie to our brotherhood!*



Ed Miller, Administrator

### Changed your address? ...eMail?

If so, please let us know so that we can update the official database and ensure that *MEM* issues and official mail get addressed properly. You can send an email to:

BillTilton@gmail.com, or a note in the mail to:

**TLC Brotherhood**  
PO Box 60  
Aspers, PA 17304.

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## *Giftng RMDs*

The IRS allows you to make tax-free distributions directly from your taxable IRAs to any 501(c)(3) registered charity rather than taking your required minimum distributions (RMDs). It's an opportunity to use RMDs you may not need for income, and instead fund a sizable gift (up to \$100,000 per taxpayer per year) to one or more qualified charities.

This Qualified Charitable Distribution (QCD) provision is only available to taxpayers who are age 70½ or older, and provides a way to accomplish three goals: satisfy your annual taxable RMD; support one or more charities that are important to you; and avoid having to pay income taxes on your RMDs, including the potential that your RMDs might push you into a higher tax bracket and/or prevent phaseouts of other tax deductions



# Assistance Motions in Motion

by Assistance Committee Chairman Les Thompson

You've all seen completed project photos in the past issues of *The Mekong Express Mail*, but you might wonder how they arrive at completion. Here's how the Assistance Committee helps with those jobs.

Motions come from different sources, and our in-country team, working with their local contacts, will respond to a local need. Also, sometimes a TLCB member may hear of a need and submit a motion for consideration, and sends the appeal to the Assistance chair.

Requests will have a description of the issue/problem with a plan to resolve it. There will be a material list for the necessary items accompanied by pictures of the project. The committee chairman then formats the request into a formal motion, assigns a motion number to it, and then presents it to the committee for discussion and voting.

What makes our program so effective is that the locals are very involved and have the manpower to do the labor, but they



The front of Na Kang Koi Village Primary School, as it looks today.. Photos sent to our SEA team by school officials in Laos. As usual, our team plans to visit after the work is completed, Covid restrictions permitting. Laos has been closed during much of the pandemic.

cannot afford the needed materials. This is where the TLCB comes in. Here is an example, a recent request for help in Laos.

**PROPOSED:** That the TLCB grant \$2,202 to buy tin sheets and cement to upgrade roofing and floors after many years of use at the Na Kang Koi Village Primary School, Kham District,



Existing roof. The proposal calls for 420 roofing sheets, 80 pkgs of nails, 6 tons of delivered cement, and 52 cubic yards each of sand and gravel. All labor to be supplied by local villagers.

Xiangkhouang Province, Laos.

**BACKGROUND:** The Provincial Office of Education and Sports, in cooperation with the Kham District Office of Education and Sports, has prepared a request for the Chairman of the Thailand-Laos-Cambodia Brotherhood to request funding to buy tin sheets and cement to upgrade roofing and floors after many years of use at the Na Kang Koi Village Primary School.

This school is located in a remote, hilly area. Village homes are spread

out along a stream and on the slopes of the hills. It is located in Kham District some 86 km to the northeast of Phonsavan town.

The school has one 5-room, semi-permanent building with a tin roof and weather boarding. The floors are not cemented. The school has 7 teachers of whom 2 are women. There are 126 students of whom 58 are girls. The village lies in 2 main areas with 144 families of nearly 90% Hmong ethnicity.

The one semi-permanent school building to be upgraded measures 8m x 38m including the corridor. The funding required is to upgrade:

1. The old rusted and broken roofing tin.
2. Cement, gravel, and sand to lay classroom floors.

As you can see in the photos, this school can use our help. This request was passed by the committee and is currently being funded.

## COMPARE AND CONTRAST

Several years ago, just before a trip over to visit some of our Lao projects, the local high school near me was being criticized by parents because not all of the buildings were air conditioned. I couldn't help compare that complaint to the following. At one of the Lao schools we were helping, I watched as young students swept the dirt floor and picked up trash in rooms just like these. They wanted to learn and were willing to help keep their classrooms as tidy as they could.

Thanks to those serving on the Assistance Committee and thank you for supporting our assistance efforts.



At some schools we have found teachers using the dirt floor as a "blackboard." Having concrete floors will be a real upgrade!, nevertheless!