

# MEKONG EXPRESS MAIL



*The newsletter of the Thailand-Laos-Cambodia Brotherhood, Inc. Volume 23, issue 3*

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## My Story

*By Gary Pruitt*

Since I joined the TLC Brotherhood in March 2002, the *Mekong Express Mail* is something I look forward to every quarter. The individual stories written by members are interesting and special. For some time, I have been considering writing about my experiences in SEA and my Air Force career.

I don't remember how I found the TLC Brotherhood, probably surfing the internet one night. What got my attention was that the membership was open to military, civilians, family members, and friends of those who had served or been involved in Southeast Asia. I guess I could say that membership is open to almost anyone. Over the years I had been approached by several veterans' organizations inviting me to join. I was told that my time in South Vietnam counted and qualified me for membership, but the time in Thailand didn't. I questioned that policy saying that most of the POWs being held in North Vietnam were either Air Force flying from Thailand or Navy flying from carriers. And, I asked about those who spent time in Laos involved in the Secret War. I was told that membership required boots on the ground in South Vietnam. My response is not printable here.

First, I want to dedicate this to all who served or supported our involvement in Southeast Asia. Second, I am grateful to God for my wife, Maxine, who supported me during my career and took care of the home front while I was in far off, distant places. Without her, I doubt I would be here today.

And, I give credit to God for being able to write this. To all, who gave the ultimate sacrifice in Southeast Asia, since our first KIA in 1945, I say "You are not forgotten."

I was born and raised in Grants Pass, Oregon, May 25, 1943. My early years were spent with my father hunting and fishing, gardening, and being involved in church. My father owned a small neighborhood grocery store, and I often took funny books from the store home to read. One day, in 1948 or 49, I noticed a new magazine on the rack, titled "Hot Rod." I picked it up and after looking through it, I was hooked. I was 5 or 6 years old. By the time I joined the Air Force, I had every copy of "Hot Rod" and "Car Craft Magazine" that had been published. Hunting and fishing took a back seat to my interest in cars and motorsports. My father supported me while many of my relatives did not. By the time I was 17 years old I had worked in several service stations, and had attended midget and jalopy racing, drag races, and motorcycle hill climbs. I had

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Airman Gary Pruitt, November 1960..



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## Editor's Notebook: The 2022 TLCB Reunion

It's nearly five years since I've been able to attend a Thailand Laos Cambodia Brotherhood Reunion. I've had several family conflicts, and as several of you may know, my wife Eileen, following several medical issues is restricted to a walker and a wheelchair, which kept us away from last year's Gettysburg event, a particular grievance for her, a retired history teacher. And of course, the 2020 Reunion was cancelled due to the Covid pandemic. That was another particular frustration since it was to be held in Newport, Rhode Island, not all that far from our home.

But all that is in the past. Although Eileen is still walker and wheelchair limited, her strength has improved and we are able to do some travelling and we will be attending this October's gathering in Springfield, Virginia, in the Washington, D.C. area. Missing so many reunions has been particularly frustrating for me because they are where I have established my connections with the membership and developed ideas for *Mekong Express Mail* (MEM) editorials.

### Search Your Old Duffel Bag of Memories

So, fellow TLCB members, take this as a warning, I will be pressuring many of you to contribute to future issues with your personal stories. Time is short. If I don't get to you at the reunion, please tap me on the shoulder or contact me after the reunion with your story. And here's the sort of things I'll be looking for:



**Why I Joined TLCB.** The MEM has had an on-again/off-again series of articles on this theme. In fact, I wrote one myself a while back. While you may think that most of the members joined for essentially

the same reason, you're wrong. For some it was the feeling that as Thailand, Laos, or Cambodia veterans, they were not acknowledged as "full scale" Vietnam War veterans. And that was probably a good part of the reason for many of us; however, there was also the conviction that service in the other countries of Southeast Asia provided unique experiences, both in terms of the war effort and the culture as well. For others, it might be the present-day operations of the TLCB, notably the education assistance and scholarship programs in Thailand and Laos. I know for me, that was the most important driver to my joining. Incredibly, the Brotherhood has spent close to \$800,000 in the neediest areas of SEA. On top of that, it has been accompanied by the active participation of many of our colleagues. If you share any of these motives, or have your own reasons, put them down on paper and get them to me.

**New Member Profiles.** I try to contact new members, although I've been a little slack about that recently, and invite them to let us know something about themselves, which may be about their experiences back in the day, their broader military time, or about what they and their families are up to today—Or about all of that. I think these profiles are extremely interesting, certainly to me, but also to the entire membership. About five years ago, some of us examined the question of the future of TLCB, given that most of us served in SEA around 50 years ago. There was a sense that maybe TLCB was a "sunset" organization; however, we continue to attract new, if older members, in no small part due to our unusual and attractive characteristics. The continuation of "New Member Profiles" is a testament to the on-going dynamism of our mission.

**The History of the War.** Many of us had unique experiences

**Editor's Notebook is continued next page**

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**Reunion 2022: Springfield, Virginia**

back in the day and were directly involved in some historically crucial events, or have, through their own research, gathered in-depth knowledge of those events and have written about them for the *MEM*.

**Coming Home.** This is a topic I find particularly interesting because it demonstrates that there is a wealth of different experiences among the members. It is not a secret that the Vietnam War was not a universally popular subject among our fellow Americans. As the war wore on, particularly after the Tet Offensive of 1968, the anti-war movement back home grew in intensity. Everyone's coming home experience was not always a warm one. Some members reported that they were advised to get into their civvies as soon as possible to avoid being targeted

by protestors. For some, it was more hostile and they were harassed and even spit upon. Yet honestly, some, and this was my experience in late August 1968, met with no anger. I was hardly treated as the conquering hero, but of course, I had not done any conquering. I would find it particularly interesting to hear, from as many members as possible, about what their "coming home" was like.

**Looking for Stories at the Reunion.** So, that's my warning to those attending the 2022 Reunion. I'm coming looking for you and will be asking for your contributions, or I may even harass you for them.

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## *I Love Nurses*

*By Gary Beatty*

**O**n Saturday, May 29, 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.

*When this was written, Gary was 8 weeks post op. The surgeon and the rehab nurses told him that he was well ahead of the usual recovery schedule, and the doctor said that he was the "poster boy" for recovery from a coronary artery bypass graft. Gary reports complete recovery, despite having had a serious bout with COVID in the meantime.*



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*The Official Thailand-Laos-Cambodia  
Brotherhood page*

## **Pruitt** *continued from page 1*

a 1937 Chevy that I was preparing for drag racing and a 1949 Mercury that was customized, ready for the top to be chopped. I loved working on engines, hot rodding, and many forms of motorsports in the 1950s. I was encouraged to go to college to get a degree in mechanical engineering, which would prepare me for a career with one of the companies involved in high performance engines and motorsports.

In 1959 at age 16, I was hired to be the assistant manager of a gas station where full service was offered. At the end of the 11<sup>th</sup> grade, I was called into the dean's office. For three years of high school, I had only nine credits. Most of the credits came from shop classes, mechanical drawing, and U.S. history. I passed P.E. classes, barely. I had passed algebra somehow. As I recall, I would need 19 credits to graduate. During the summer of 1960, I was doing well as the assistant manager of the gas station and wondering about how to get enough credits to graduate.

### ***Ultimatum or Opportunity***

When the 12<sup>th</sup> grade started up, I got in a little trouble over some items that were considered "hot," since they had been stolen from the county airport. Between the county sheriff and the high school dean, it was suggested that I might want to consider dropping out of school, joining one of the military branches, and finishing high school by taking the GED Test.

I visited all of the military recruiters in town. The Air Force could sign me up the soonest. Because I was 17, I would need my parents to sign my enlistment paperwork. It took some convincing before my father agreed to sign.

November 1, 1960, I enlisted in the Air Force at the military induction center in Portland, Oregon. I had five weeks of basic training at Lackland AFB, Texas, and three more weeks of basic training while attending firefighting technical training at Greenville AFB, Mississippi. While at Greenville, I had heard something on the news about South Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand. I asked my training instructor what was going on in those countries, to which he replied, "Just a bunch diplomatic stuff, nothing to worry about."

Next came 36 months at Hahn AB, Germany, where I was assigned as a firefighter on Mace missile sites for 18 months. The rest of my tour was at the base fire department on Hahn AB. I liked Hahn and Germany and the German people; however, the weather left a lot to be desired.

April 1964, I arrived at Williams AFB, Arizona. Wow, loved the weather compared to Germany's. October 1964 I was introduced to a young lady, who would become my wife on November 29, 1964. In case you are wondering, no she was not pregnant. I was just not into long term planning, so why wait? We were in love, so let's get married, and we did.

A few months later, I was asked if I would be interested in a flying position on the HH-43 Helicopter. I said that I would, and a few months later, I was on flying status, trained and qualified as an airborne firefighter/rescue specialist and attached to Detachment 16, Western Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Center (WARRC) for duty. I still belonged to the base fire department, attached to Detachment 16 for duty. Loved the job.

Many of you will remember the HH-43, nicknamed the Huskie. It had counter rotating blades, no tail rotor, and often would be seen flying with the red Fire Suppression Kit (FSK). Primary mission was local base rescue and recovery of aircrew in the event of a bailout or crash. The daytime alert crew was a pilot, a flight mechanic, and two firemen/rescue specialists. Night time, a co-pilot was added to the crew. Flight surgeons and their enlisted staff were qualified to fly with us, and did, to log time or on rescue missions in support of the sheriff's department.

### ***Southeast Asia***

After arriving at Williams AFB in 1964, I became aware of people going TDY to Thailand and South Vietnam. Some would talk about their experience, some would not. After I joined the rescue detachment, a helicopter mechanic returned from his TDY to Thailand, saying that where he had been and what they had done was classified. On September 19, 1965, I was notified to prepare for a TDY to Udorn RTAFB, Thailand. It looked like my wife and I would not be together on our first wedding anniversary, November 29, 1965.

TDY orders instructed me to report to Hamilton AFB, CA, for combat arms training. The orders also instructed me upon arrival at Travis AFB, to report to Base Supply to be issued combat gear: an M-16 rifle and a .38 revolver, plus ammunition, all to be turned in at my destination. So, with a B-4 Bag of civilian clothes, another bag containing flight gear and firefighting gear, I now also had a duffel bag full of combat gear, weapons, and ammunition. While I was at Hamilton, I met six other airborne firemen, three medics, and a whole bunch of helicopter mechanics and pilots. We were all going to the same location; I recall there were around 65 people all together.

We left Travis AFB on a C-135. After stops at Hickam AFB, Wake Island, and Clark, we landed at Don Muang AB, Bangkok, Thailand early one morning. We were taken to the Viengtai Hotel, downtown Bangkok. Then the fun started around an hour after we got settled into our rooms. One of the officers called the ten of us together, seven firemen and three medics, asking if we had weapons in our gear. Our NCOIC, TSgt Willis, replied yes, that we were issued M-16s and .38 revolvers at Travis AFB to be turned in at the final destination. The officer said to get them, keep them covered, and get on the USAF bus outside the hotel, which would take us to the armory at Don Muang AB where we could store the weapons until we had transportation to our base "Up Country." He added, U.S. personnel are not allowed to openly carry weapons in Thailand, and he emphasized keeping them covered.

We had no idea how long we would be in Bangkok. Our NCOIC had found out the ten of us were replacing folks who had been in country for almost six months. He also told us that everyone else going "Up Country" with us were in PCS status. Some were replacing TDY pilots and helicopter mechanics on the HH-43s, the rest would be there waiting for the new HH-3C helicopters, estimated to arrive in October. The HH-3C people would be split between Udorn and a classified location. A few weeks later we found out that the classified base was Nakhon

**Pruitt** *continues next page*



Gary Pruitt, 1965 at Detachment 16, WARRC at Williams AFB, AZ

Phanom RTAFB, also known as NKP or “Naked Fanny.”

While we were at Hamilton AFB, I visited a friend at Western Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Center. He introduced me to the commander who was interested in my TDY. I was briefed on the September 20 shoot down of an HH-43 during the attempted rescue on the North Vietnam/Laos border of a downed F-105 pilot. Not much was known yet about the HH-43 pilot, copilot, helicopter mechanic, pararescue man, and the F-105 pilot. The HH-43 was stationed at the classified location we kept hearing about, which was NKP. Some things were starting to make sense. Late in 1965 HH-43s call sign “Pedro” followed by two numerals was standardized Air Force wide, same as the CH/HH-3’s “Jolly Green” call sign.

## Udorn

Six or seven days after arriving in Bangkok we were all bused out to Don Muang AB; the ten of us to the armory to pick up our weapons, then to load onto several C-130s. Arriving at Udorn, the ten of us were met by some of the folks we were to replace. TSgt West, one of the guys we were replacing, took us to a temporary “hootch,” and got us sort of settled in. Some of us went with him as he showed us around the base, took us to the Detachment 5, 38 ARRS alert area, and briefed us on what our mission was. Basically, we would be providing local base rescue coverage mostly for aircraft coming off missions in North Vietnam or Laos. Many would be short on fuel, may have battle damage, or an in-flight emergency. We airborne firemen and medics probably would not go on aircrew recovery missions into Laos or North Vietnam. Those missions were covered by CH-3Cs or HH-43s at NKP and HH-43s on standby at forward locations in Laos called Lima Sites. Also, we could probably fly on the HC-54, call sign Crown, on their six-hour orbits over Laos.

Tony Desmond and I volunteered for alert duty the next day. The following morning, we met the alert pilot, who was TDY and leaving the next day, as well as the helicopter mechanic who was in a PCS status. Met a lot of people, had one scramble for an F-105 with an in-flight emergency, and we also met the detachment mascot, a honey bear cub who was later donated to the local Udorn City Zoo because as he aged, he had become more aggressive.

A few days after arriving at Udorn we moved into a new hootch with the HC-54 enlisted aircrew members, airborne radio operators, and flight engineers. Bathroom facilities were in a different building, which was always

flooded. No hot water for showers, and it took a few days to get used to taking cool-to-cold showers.

TSgt Willis organized us into three crews of two firemen and a medic. The team member names that I recall include Tony Desmond, SSgt Dixon, SSgt Alvey, SSgt Baldwin, A1C Rounds, SSGT Jeff ??, in addition to me. We would stand alert during daylight and on standby in the hootch after sundown; next day would be second alert for lunch relief or if anyone on alert needed relief, and the third day would be a free day or availability to fly on the HC-54 Crown mission. TSgt Willis would rotate on the crew as needed, and eventually, he was offered the opportunity to move off base, and he volunteered to change his TDY status to a year tour.

Our new hootch was built about four feet off the ground, and was screened in with awnings that you could open to keep rain out, make the hootch open air, and there were ceiling fans to keep the air circulating. We each had a place to hang clothes and a lockable footlocker, which was handy. We all had gone to Base Supply to turn in the combat gear and weapons as we were instructed. Base Supply took the combat gear, but refused the weapons. The Air Police Squadron refused the weapons and the detachment didn’t want them. TSgt Willis told us to lock them in our footlockers until he could figure something out. The only time I removed the weapons from my footlocker was when I would fly near Laos or on the HC-54 over Laos.

We had a house girl named Dang who cleaned the hootch, washed our clothes, shined our boots, etc. She was married to a Thai Air Force T-28 pilot, and she had us come to her home a few times for dinner during our time at Udorn. It only took me a week to decide that I liked Thai food—and I still do.

**Pruitt continues on page 6**

**Pruitt** *continued from page 5*

In 1965, I could get a large order of fried rice or beef and peppers for one or two baht—5 or 10 cents. In fact, I ate quite often at places outside the gate along the highway. Somehow, I became friends with a local tailor and his family from India, who often would feed me some very delicious meals with lots of meat, curry, and veggies. Sometimes a few of us would go downtown to the Udorn Hotel for a steak dinner. Other places I remember as having great meals were the Wolverine and the many good food stands and carts everywhere.



HC-54 Call Sign "Crown"

### **Alerts**

When we were on duty, we flew local area training flights, scrambled to cover aircraft with in-flight emergencies, and did the usual things one does when on alert. We deployed the fire suppression kit to extinguish a Thai Air Force T-33 that had crashed. The pilot had bailed out after experiencing an engine failure and was picked up by another HH-43. Also, we attempted to smother parts of the burning aircraft with dirt. On another alert shift, we recovered the remains of a pilot whose F-105 had exploded after he disconnected from a KC-135 during refueling. We had pilots, flight engineers, and mechanics all over the place because the new HH-3Cs had not arrived yet. Some were getting their flying time on the HC-54 Crown flights, or they would fly around the local area in one of the HH-43s not on alert. A-1E Sky Raider pilots, callsign Sandy, stood alert in our area. They were TDY from Pleiku AB or Bien Hoa AB in South Vietnam. They scrambled to fly cover for our helicopters on rescue missions in Laos or North Vietnam. I and one of the A-1E Pilots, Major Bolstad, played a lot of solitaire. A couple of other A-1E pilots I remember are Major Lou Gang and a Captain Ruff.

Udorn RTAFB was kind of a laid-back place in 1965—relaxed, I guess. I am not sure how many permanent party Air Force people were at Udorn in 1965. Det 5, 38th ARRS, was a fair-sized unit. There were pilots and mechanics assigned as advisors with the T-28s flown by several nations, a radar outfit, a command center, and the usual support functions any base would have. We had RF-101s, WB-57Fs, and other aircraft TDY at Udorn. Daily aircraft coming back from missions up

north with in-flight emergencies would land at Udorn. Air America probably had the largest number of people and aircraft at Udorn, and I was amazed at how many different types of aircraft they flew. I enjoyed watching the flying activity, most during daylight since Udorn had no runway lights. A couple times we saw T-28s off the runway when a pilot attempted to land at night and either missed or ran off the runway. No one seemed excited about it.

One day while I was on alert, a guy walked in our alert building saying that he had heard there was someone from Det 16 at Williams AFB. I said I was. He introduced himself as Ed,

then ask me questions about Williams, the area, and the detachment. I asked him why he wanted to know, and he said that he would be coming to Williams in 1966. He was currently on a classified assignment in Thailand and could not tell me more. I didn't see any harm in answering his questions. Later, one of the older HH-3C pilots came to ask me who the guy was. I said that his name was Ed and he was going to be assigned to my detachment

at Williams in 1966. The HH-3C pilot said he thought so, and he was pretty sure they had flown H-21 helicopters some years ago. More to this story later.

October 1965 saw the HH-3Cs begin arriving on C-133s. Everyone was really excited, especially the HH-3C folks who were ready for their helicopters. Very quickly they got busy getting them assembled and ready to fly. I think there were six HH-3Cs. Eventually all were ready to take over the alert duties at NKP and at the Lima Sites in Laos. Before the new HH-3Cs were ready to take over alert at NKP, one of the borrowed CH-3Cs was shot down in North Vietnam on November 6, 1965. Three of the crew, pilot, co-pilot, and the pararescueman were captured and became POWs. The flight engineer was separated from the others, climbed to higher ground, and was rescued by a Navy helicopter. Additionally, two of the A-1E Sandy pilots were shot down and captured on the same day, one being my solitaire player. Was a sad day for Det 5 and the detachment at NKP. As the new HH-3Cs took over the rescue missions up north, all of a sudden, we had quite a collection of HH-43s at Udorn. Eventually, most were distributed to other bases throughout SEA. I think we kept three HH-43s and a couple of the new HH-3Cs at Udorn once the shuffle of helicopters was completed.

### **Paycheck Crisis**

I have to mention the Commander of Det 5, 38th ARRS at Udorn, Major Baylor Haynes. He was the finest example of what a commander and leader is, a true warrior. While he was our commander, he was also one of us. He had flown many

**Pruitt** *continues next page*

different types of aircraft, retired as a colonel years later, and sadly passed away in 2020.

Before I left Williams AFB, I had set up an allotment to my wife. The Finance Office would forward my pay checks to Udorn AB. No checks arrived in October. Udorn Finance sent inquiries to the Finance Office at Don Muang. I believe they were the main Finance Center for Air Force personnel in Thailand. Udorn Finance Office issued me casual payments as needed. In letters to my wife and my mother, I had mentioned that I was not getting pay checks, and by the end of November, I still wasn't.

Early in December, I was told that I had a phone call over in the Det 5 Operations Office. Soon as I walked in the office, a captain, Det 5 Operations Officer I think, immediately started chewing me out about writing to a congressman regarding my pay. I answered the phone and was now being yelled at by a MSgt at Don Muang AB Finance Office. He said that he had four of my pay checks and wanted to know what he should do with them. I said, "Please send them to me at Udorn." He mentioned that he ought to throw them in the garbage since a congressional inquiry had gotten him in trouble. While the MSgt was arguing with me, the captain continued yelling at me.

Major Haynes came out of his office saying, "What the hell is going on out here?" The captain started telling him about me writing my congressman, which caused a congressional inquiry that got a MSgt at Don Muang AB Finance in trouble. Major Haynes turned to me asking me what was going on. I told him that I had not been getting paid, Udorn Finance was helping me out, and that I knew nothing about any letter to a congressman regarding my pay. I also mentioned that the MSgt at Don Muang had told me what he wanted to do with my October and November pay checks. Major Haynes took the phone from me.

A few minutes later, he told the MSgt at Don Muang that my pay checks had better be in my hands within the week or he was personally coming down to Don Muang to get them after he had a chat with the Don Muang Finance Officer. Major Haynes hung up the phone, turned to the captain saying, "Pruitt did nothing wrong." The captain tried to say something when Major Haynes said, "Pruitt's mother wrote to a congressman who sent an inquiry through 13th AF to Don Muang Finance Office." He further said, "If Pruitt had written his congressman, he would have been well within his right to do so." The captain continued trying to make me look bad when Major Haynes asked him if he was getting his pay every month. The captain



HH-43 Huskie, callsign "Pedro" of Det 5, 38th Air Rescue and Recovery Squadron on the PSP parking ramp at Udorn RTAFB, Thailand.

said that he was. Major Haynes said, "Well Pruitt wasn't." Major Haynes turned to me saying, "Let me know when you receive your pay checks." Two days later I had all four checks, let Major Haynes know, and thanked him for his help. A day later the captain came by the HH-43 alert room to see if I got my checks and apologized for yelling at me. I thanked him.

### *Everyday Life*

Overall, duty at Udorn and with Det 5 was pretty relaxed and laid back, and at times, exciting and really interesting. Some of the guys had tailor-made clothes and shoes made—not me. Once my pay got straightened out, I had a few things made for my wife, several pairs of tailormade fatigues for me, and I bought odds and ends to send home. I have since wished that I had purchased some star sapphire stones or rings.

Udorn had airman, NCO, and officer's clubs. No one seemed to care much which club anyone went to. Several of us rented Honda Motorcycles a couple of times. As we rode to other small villages around the area, we found the people pleasant and friendly. And, the food was great! During the Bob Hope Show in December 1965, one of the new HH-3Cs, Jolly Green crew, made their first rescue of a downed Air Force pilot in North Vietnam. The pilot was brought to Udorn after being rescued and was welcomed back by Bob Hope.

Monthly, we were available on our day off, to log flight time on the HC-54 during their orbit mission over Laos. They would fly in an orbit over the Lima Sites, our helicopters standing alert. Several times we flew in low over a Lima Site so we could kick out mail, magazines, or "*Stars and Stripes*" for the Air America folks and our crews to enjoy.

In December, TSgt Willis started working on getting replacements to relieve us. My replacement came from another base in Thailand at the end of January. Remember that I mentioned that the combat gear and weapons we had been issued at Travis AFB and were to turn over to supply?

**Pruitt continues on page 8**

**Pruitt** *continued from page 7*

Well, Udorn Supply Squadron had accepted the combat gear, but refused the weapons. We had the weapons locked in our footlockers until the day before I left, when I turned them into the Air Police Armory who finally agreed to take them. Before we leave Udorn, there are a couple of stories I want to share:

**“Reserved” Lunch**

One story happened on Thanksgiving Day 1965 in the mess hall. I and a couple of others were eating Thanksgiving dinner when four or five Air Police entered the mess hall. They went around to each table telling everyone to stay seated or leave immediately. When I asked what was going on, I was told to sit tight. Soon more Air Police and Thai Police entered the mess hall with a man who was handcuffed and wearing leg chains. His handcuffs were removed, he went through the serving line, and was seated at a table having a “Reserved” sign on it. The Thai Police stayed beside him as the Air Police roamed the mess hall, reminding everyone to stay seated. After a few times refilling his serving tray, he finally stood up, was handcuffed, smiled at us, and was marched out. A few minutes

Below: Training pit fire at Williams AFB, 1966.  
Photos furnished by the author.

later we were allowed to move around or leave. Couple days later, I saw one of the Air Police who had been involved, so I asked him what was the deal. The prisoner was a U.S. Marine who had been convicted of killing a Thai around 1962. Our late TLC Brotherhood member, MacAlan Thompson, knew all about the guy’s case and trial. I believe he has since served his sentence and been released.

**Motorcycle Mishaps**

Another story involves one of our motorcycle rides. One evening as we were coming back into Udorn City, the guy in front of me all of a sudden jumped off his motorcycle while still moving. He landed in the street and the motorcycle ran off the street. I stopped, asking him what was going on? He said that he saw a snake in the middle of the street and he tried to run over it. He then saw the snake crawling up the front wheel fork, and—he jumped. A Thai man walked out to the motorcycle, saw the snake heading for the side of the street, and said, “Bad snake. One bite you die.” My friend picked up his motorcycle, got on it, and we continued on to the rental place. Just as I turned onto the street where the rental place was, a Thai man walked in front of me. Before I could get

**Pruitt** *continues next page*





stopped or avoid him, he was all of sudden riding on my front fender. I got the motorcycle stopped, and he kind of fell to the street and was laughing. The owner of the Motorcycle place saw the whole thing and he was laughing too. Soon we were all laughing. I bought everyone a Singha, and all was well.

I flew out of Udorn a couple days later for Don Muang to catch a flight. Two days in Bangkok and I was on my way back to “The World;” arrived at Travis AFB on a contract airline, and took the bus to San Francisco International to catch a flight to Phoenix. I ignored some antiwar protesters. My wife met me at Sky Harbor Airport. I had a week off, so we celebrated our first-year wedding anniversary, February 1966 instead of November 1965.

### ***Return to “The World”***

Back at Williams AFB I resumed my duties with Detachment 16, WARRC. After a flight check, I was qualified to stand alert duty.

A few months later, the guy named “Ed” who had visited me at Udorn reported in to Det 16. He was Capt Ed Gilliam. It would be many years before he finally could talk about what

he was doing at Udorn. He had been flying U-10s from the Air America area on daily flights over Laos, dropping leaflets. He was assigned to a USAF Air Commando unit, the same thing he had been involved with in South Vietnam in the early 1960s.

Back to normal stuff at Williams, numerous scrambles for aircraft with in-flight emergencies, training flights most every alert shift, and an occasional mission in support of the Maricopa County Sheriff’s Office.

A month or so after returning, my wife and I found that we were going to be parents in October 1966. A month later, I was notified that I had a one-year assignment to SEA, reporting in August. I requested that the reporting date be extended until after my wife gave birth. The assignment was cancelled and I was deferred until 90 days after the birth, January 1967. Our daughter was born October 19, 1966. I notified the Personnel Assignment Section, and a couple weeks later I was notified of an assignment to Bien Hoa AB, South Vietnam. *Wow, that didn’t take long!*



*Editor’s Note: Gary Pruitt’s story will be continued in the next issue of the Mekong Express Mail.*

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## ***Last Call for the 2022 Reunion and Annual Meeting.***

### **Planned Reunion Agenda**

(Still subject to change)

#### **Thursday, 13 October**

**3PM** – Arrival, hotel check in, and reunion registration. **Nipa Hut** is open. Social time. Evening meals available at any of several excellent local restaurants.

#### **Friday, 14 October**

**Morning:** Chartered bus group visit to the **Vietnam Wall** in DC. Nearby attractions are **Lincoln Memorial, WWII Memorial, Korean War Memorial, Smithsonian museums, Holocaust Museum, Freer Gallery, etc.**

**Afternoon:** Sandwiches and drinks in Nipa Hut. **Free time.** Local shopping, sight-seeing. (Possible presentations in Nipa Hut). Optional visit to Army Museum.

**Evening** – Pizza party & social hour in Nipa Hut, followed by **Assistance Fund Auction.**

#### **Saturday, 15 October**

**Morning:** TLC Brotherhood, Inc., **Annual Meeting**

**Noon:** Travel by POV to new **Army Museum** for lunch (on your own) and tour.

**Evening: President’s Banquet** after social hour. Buffet style dinner, ceremony and special guest speaker, Col “Bud” Traynor.

**Sunday, 16 October** Hotel check-out & departures.



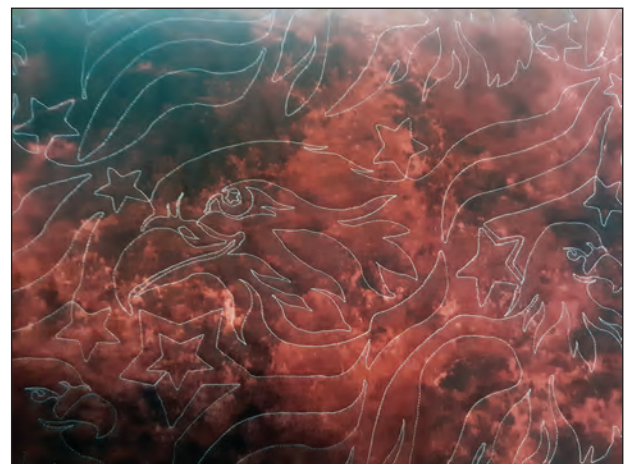
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## ***The 2022 Rosie’s Memorial Quilt Raffle to support TLCB Assistance***

Here is a photo of this year’s beautiful “Rosie Wheatley Memorial Quilt,” which is donated by a TLCB member, Mark Schlieder, and his wife, Becky. This beautiful patriotic design is queen size and has an embroidered patch with an inscription honoring Rosie Wheatley and displaying the TLCB logo. The reverse side is unique, and shows white-stitched stars and eagles, a real innovation for our quilt.

Raffle tickets are included in this issue. Fill in the info, or on just one ticket, and we will copy the info and print all the tickets you order. Send the enclosed sheet of raffle tickets and \$20 check per sheet, to TLC Brotherhood, PO Box 60, Aspers PA 17304, or go to [WWW.TLC-Brotherhood.com](http://WWW.TLC-Brotherhood.com) and purchase them online. **Mailing deadline Octobr 5.**



## ***In Memoriam: Kerwin Stone***

On August 8th, the *Mekong Express Mail* editor received the following message from Andrew Stone:

My father, Kerwin Stone, a member of the TLC Brotherhood, passed away on July 1, 2022 due to Pancreatic Cancer... I know that your organization provided him a valuable link to others who served as did he. Thank you for the work you continue to do, supporting these veterans.

According to his profile published in the June 2016 edition of the *Mekong Express Mail*, Kerwin Stone graduated from Southern Methodist University on an Air Force ROTC scholarship, received his commission in 1969, and extended his education another year to earn a master's degree in mathematics. He then went on active duty with the Air Force in August 1970.

After a tour at Eglin AFB, Kerwin received orders to Ko Kha Air Station, Thailand in August of 1972. There he served a year as a Squadron Surveillance Officer in the 17th Radar Squadron. He then returned to an assignment at Eglin, and after the fall of Saigon on April 30, 1975, was detailed with a group of others who had served in SEA, to establish and operate a Vietnamese Refugee Camp at Eglin, giving him an opportunity to spend the better part of two months living among those special refugees.

In August 1975, Kerwin separated from the Air Force as a Captain and Immediately enrolled in law school at the University of Texas. He began his law practice in Beaumont, Texas in 1978, including corporate law, commercial transactions, banking, and real estate, primarily. At a reduced level, he continued this practice until his death.

Captain Stone was very active in veterans' affairs, serving as president of his local Vietnam Veterans of America, Inc. chapter; vice president of the VVA Texas State Council, and a member of the national board of directors of VVA. One of his two sons is a Methodist minister and the other retired from the Air Force as a highly decorated A-10 pilot, before joining United Airlines as a pilot.

In 2011 Kerwin returned to Southeast Asia and spent a month travelling through Vietnam, Thailand, Laos and Cambodia.

The *MEM* published an entertaining and very interesting article about this experience in the September 2016 issue.



## ***Newest Members in the TLC Brotherhood***

The six members listed below joined between the June, 2022 issue of the *MEM* and September 1st. 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 |
|------|--------|-----------|------------|-----------------|-------|
| 2008 | USAF   | Dresen    | Thomas     | Mt Pleasant     | WI    |
| 2009 | USAF   | Sysko     | David      | Spring City     | PA    |
| 2010 | USAF   | Russell   | Foster     | Pleasant Garden | NC    |
| 2011 | USAF   | McCord    | Thomas     | Tucson          | AZ    |
| 2012 | USAF   | Perry     | Stephen    | Williamstown    | NJ    |
| 2013 | USAF   | Jackson   | Donald     | Philadelphia    | PA    |

# Thailand and My Secret Service and Tales

by Ed Miller (charter member)

## INTRODUCTION.

I finally decided to write about my 5 years of service in Thailand from 1969 through 1976. I'll begin with a little background prior to my first Permanent Change of Station (PCS) assignment to Thailand.

As an airman first class at Westover Air Force Base, MA, I was a 70250 administrative specialist in the 99th Bomb Wing, Deputy Commander for Maintenance (DCM) Administration. After a volunteer job on the O-26 keypunch machine, I decided to take a different path for my career and was recommended for retraining into computer repair, with training at Denver, CO.

Because I was scheduled to go on the 99th Bomb Wing's next ARC light deployment to Guam, September '68—March '69, Strategic Air Command (SAC) upgraded my security clearance to Top Secret; however, I did not want to hang around in this command, with its cycle of long TDYs, indefinitely. So, I completed a new "dream sheet," volunteering for overseas duty in Vietnam and Thailand. This gave me a second possible means of leaving SAC and the cold, snowy Westover AFB.

I did my 6-month TDY in Guam, with short deployments to Kadena Air Base, Okinawa, and U-Tapao Royal Thai AB, Thailand. Upon returning to Westover in early March '69, I learned that I could choose an assignment to Thailand, or I could do the retraining into computer repair. I was no fool—Thailand it was! During my short week of typhoon evacuation to U-Tapao, I had recognized Thailand as a beautiful place and saw many "Smiling Faces," even though we were restricted to base.

My orders were to a "confidential" location at APO San Francisco, 96310, which I learned was for Nakhon Phanom RTAFB, Thailand. The orders included a 7-day Small Arms and Combat Training program enroute to Hamilton AFB, California, where we qualified on the M-16 and got training in the M-40 grenade launcher, 55 caliber machine gun, hand-grenades, and hand-to-hand fighting. It was definitely beyond the usual M-16 qualifications.



## PART 1 – Nakhon Phanom RTAFB

My departure from Travis AFB was on July 1st. We had stops at Hickam AFB, Hawaii; Andersen AFB, Guam; Tan Son Nhut AFB, Vietnam, and then Don Muang RTAFB, Thailand. After arrival in Thailand, we were billeted in a Bangkok hotel, and lucky for me, I got a two-night-stay in Bangkok before my flight up country. In the hotel restaurant, I met up with some other airmen who wanted to go bar hopping, and we got swooped up by a taxi driver who just wanted to show us a "good time," and he guaranteed to stay with us all night.

I don't recall just how much this cost each of us, but he was not in a hurry — with his hand out. All I remember was meeting some young ladies at the first club we visited on Phetchaburi Road, the Strip known for R&Rs. The taxi driver rounded us and our girls up and we proceeded to the Princess Hotel nearby. We all had our own rooms, and before long we wanted to go swimming in the pool. The girls had their own bathing suits and someone brought us a pile of men's shorts, so we had something to wear into the pool. After swimming, the ladies disappeared to go buy some food, and we hung outside beside the pool, drinking beer and debating whether the girls would come back, even though so far we had only paid for the hotel and a little for their food. We were even more concerned whether the taxi would come back to return us before sunrise to our military hotel billet, which was way over in the Chinatown area. But it worked out and we got back to our billets in time. Exhausted by then, I stayed at the hotel the whole next day and night, looking forward to my flight upcountry.

## Klong Hopper flight day, July 4th, 1969

Nakhon Phanom (NKP) was the first stop for the C-130 flight from Don Muang RTAFB. A jeep followed us in and before the engines completely stopped, two senior NCOs, a master sgt and a chief master, hopped up on the ramp and made their way inside the plane, while a bus pulled up to the rear of the aircraft. As soon as it was quiet, the chief hollered out, "Are there any 702s on this aircraft; admin types?" Unsure, I raised my hand. "You come with me in the jeep, not the bus," he said.

The two were the wing sergeant major and the admin supervisor, and they told me that the wing commander had promised them the next 702 administrative specialist assigned to the base. They learned that my classified orders assigned me to Project 404, once known as "Project Water Pump," in Vientiane, Laos. This caused hours of anxiety and discussions, but the 56th Special Operations Wing, and this base CBPO, were responsible for Project 404 staffing and manning. They finally decided to keep me at NKP.

After processing, I met my hooch-mates, who were assigned to Finance. They quickly informed me how lucky I was, because if I ever needed a "partial pay" (you only got paid once a month then), I could get it whenever I wanted. Also, they could always get us steak and hamburgers for cookouts from chow hall personnel.

When I reported for work the next morning, headquarters was in turmoil—a major "Search and Rescue" (SAR) was in progress for Wing Vice Commander Colonel Patrick M. Fallon.

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*Miller continued from page 11*

His A-1 Skyraider aircraft, call sign "Firefly 27," had been shot down in Laos the previous day. The four-day SAR ended when he was believed to have been captured. On Col Fallon's last known radio broadcast to the rescue aircraft, he was heard being over-run. Colonel Fallon was declared dead in August 1979.

### ***The Job and Free Time***

I was assigned to the Flight Records Section as an administrative keypunch operator, and was introduced to my supervisor, Sergeant Ricky Jones. We maintained aircrew members' flying records; the automation of these records had just recently started. The base had a new IBM computer center that processed data records for base supply, aircraft maintenance, flying hours, and other unit mission data, which were typed from the "781" aircrew forms, using the O-26 keypunch machine, to data cards. The data center processed the cards and printed reports, which we placed in each individual's flight records folder. These were very important records, since they were used for individual awards, currency tracking, crew position qualification, and combat experience records.

The completed forms were brought to us by squadron admin and sometimes by pilots. I got to meet many nice Thai workers, mostly female, and almost every pilot and crew member on the base. It made for enjoyable conversations, and I learned a lot about our heroes and their missions. We worked six days a week, and being the new guy, I got Saturday off, and Sergeant Jones took Sunday off.

The wing allowed qualified volunteers to fly either as flare kickers with the 606th SOS Candlesticks (C-123s) on night missions to assist loading flares, or to fly with the 23rd TASS "Crickets," O-1 or O-2, on daytime missions throwing leaflets out the window. They were nicknamed "litter bugs." These missions qualified you for combat pay and tax exemption. My

Below, my hooch-mates (Ed is top row, center)  
Photos furnished by the author.



supervisor agreed to sign the recommendation and release letter after I had worked a couple of months and we got the section caught up. During this time, I could get a flight physical and a short survival course on my own time. The survival course was given by a charter TLCB member, TSgt Ken Griswold, who was assigned to HQ Task Force Alpha. By the time I completed my flight physical in the beginning of September, the program was terminated by 7th Air Force, our operational command in Saigon. I don't recall any specific reason other than that the missions were becoming more and more dangerous.

My workdays were moving along and I did not have any extra activities after work or on my off day. There were no intramural sport programs, though facilities were slowly being built, so my choices were the Airman's Club or downtown. My hooch roommates introduced me to downtown activities and showed me the good places to eat, drink, and be merry. They pointed out the places to avoid, like where the "katoys" hung out, and they gave me many tips about the samlor (pedicab) drivers.

The first exciting event in downtown with the local population was the death of Ho Chi Minh, 2 September 1969. Nakhon Phanom Province had a large presence of Vietnamese refugees, so a ceremonial death march parade travelled north to the Ho Chi Minh Monument on River Road, downtown. Rioting and fighting started with the samlor drivers, so the base commander quickly restricted everyone to base for four days and three nights, causing much unhappiness.

To stretch my money, I found it best to eat dinner at the dining hall, but before long I was enjoying more Thai street food in the evening. Fried rice was easy to get and inexpensive. Then I found "monkey balls" on a stick. Of course, we know that was just a GI slang name given to the meat balls. Not every street vendor sold the best "monkey balls," so you remembered the good ones. Before coming to Thailand, I already liked spicy foods and was a regular Tabasco sauce user, so spice was OK for me.

Flight records came under TSgt Carrol McDaniel, NCOIC of the Records and Report section. TSgt McDaniel was a tall, lean African-American, known as "Mac." He was well known on base among the Thai contractor employees. Mac, who normally walked around with a 35mm camera around his neck was fluent in Thai, and during his lunch hour, conducted an English language class for Thai employees.

Our next in-line supervisor was Major Robert Arnau, assigned as chief of the Operations Administration section. Major Arnau was a Command Pilot on CH-3E helicopters, flying with the 21st SOS "Dust Devils." He also became a charter member of the TLC Brotherhood. He was the endorsing official on my first Airman Performance Report (APR). The major was something of a character who always walked around the headquarters building in his flight suit, armed with a holstered 38 cal. revolver, carrying a 35mm camera too, ignoring the base security warning that cameras were not allowed.

*Miller continues next page*

Col Arnau and I stayed in contact before his passing. He was shot down on a mission in Laos, and took many photographs of their firefight on the ground in Laos and their successful rescue. He sent me many great photos of this mission and of my coworkers at NKP. Unfortunately, all were lost during one of my early computer crashes (Windows 95).

Every day seemed to be exciting at in-flight records, with SAR records, aircraft accident reports, and special requests from commanders and higher headquarters. Many pilots shared their combat adventures with us when dropping off records or out-processing. We had to compile their records and sign a validation letter. Of special importance, at least to the pilots, was the number of North Vietnam missions flown.

One evening around October 1969, I found a Las Vegas style crap table at the Airman's Club. As a beginner I played conservatively and watched others lose their money. The next day I got lucky, played smart, and left the table winning \$85, which was a lot of money for an airman not getting flight pay. I took my roommate, Ornie, to a Thai restaurant downtown for steak dinner and then to a massage parlor, my treat. A few days later, they moved the table to the NCO Club because it wasn't making enough money. Only a couple of weeks later, the crap table was removed from the NCO Club too, because it caused too many fights over losses, cheating, and stealing.

### ***Pet***

In November, our building got Thai janitors and we didn't have to clean our building anymore. Two cute young Thai ladies, Wanta and Sulin, were assigned to the building. They were both very shy and didn't speak much English. Mac flirted with all the female janitors, an advantage of knowing their language. When Wanta and Sulin came to clean, my supervisor, Ricky, and I always stopped to talk with them. They were shocked when I first greeted them in the Thai traditional hello, using their names. Wanta corrected me and told me that her name was "Pet," a nickname. Ricky and I were quickly given nicknames by them. Ricky was a little round, well over 200 pounds, and I was a stocky 185 pounds then; they called Ricky "Uuon #1" and me "Uuon #2." "Uuon" means fat! But Thai people considered fat people as good and having a good life, so that didn't bother us. The girls would come to our office for trash pickup twice a day, so I always started looking for Pet and would try conversing in Thai, which I was learning. Pet had to clean the Tactical Units Operations Center (TUOC) a couple of times, and she remembered TLCB charter member John Sweet, who worked there.

There was a scheduled flight once a month for a 3-day round-trip to Chiang Mai in the northern mountains. Most enlisted personnel were allowed to fly on this C-47 flight when awarded a special 3-day pass for outstanding work. Sergeant Wayne Bailey, NCOIC, Base Ops Administration, flew regularly on the flight, and he told me all about his connections with a hotel, samlor drivers, and a "Mamasan" who had many beautiful "daughters." Sergeant Jones agreed that I had made the duty section perform well and recommended me for a 3-day pass, and Wayne put us both on the November flight. Wayne told me to plan on partying with some pretty ladies in Vientiane, and

that I should pack two or three bottles of Jim Beam bourbon and get as many apples as possible from the dining hall. What for? Well, one bottle would pay your samlor driver for the whole period; one bottle would be for Mamasan for dating her daughter; and the third was for us to drink. The apples were for the girls.

Our samlor drivers at Chiang Mai gave us good tours. The weather was cold in comparison to Nakhon Phanom. I didn't take many photographs and I didn't fall in love. My mind was still back at NKP.

In November, I got a classified briefing as an augmentee on Civil Engineering's Hazard Survey Team. The one-day training



Wanta (Pet) cleaning a headquarters office.

was classified because Agent Orange and CS Gas were stored on the base. Agent Orange (AO) was sprayed on the Ho Chi Minh Trail to defoliate the jungles by "Ranch Hand" C-123s. CS Gas is a tear-inducing irritant/sleep-inducing agent that was only used on SAR missions as a last resort, which was very sensitive because it was in violation of the Geneva Convention guidelines. Our training was for using a gas mask and a big silver suit that was used for spills of hazardous materials, much like what firemen wear. The heat in Thailand was so bad that you could only stay in it for ten or fifteen minutes.

On Christmas night, 1969, the base was attacked by sappers. That day, Pet wanted me to go and meet her family after work. I had earlier asked her to go on a date on my day off, the 27th, which happened to be the Bob Hope Tour show day—a big deal! She told me that I had to meet her family first before she could go on a formal date. Pet brought some of her co-workers along for moral support; they lived in her village, Ban Ahun Khom, situated about 3 kilometers from the base gate. The coworkers

**Miller continues on page 14**



Pet's co-worker and neighbor, BoonTit

were a husband and wife named BoonBang and BoonTit. BoonBang was always pushing me to talk with Pet. Upon arriving, I was introduced to Pet's sister, PooYung, and her sister's husband, Nu, but not her mother. A few children gathered around the house, mostly to listen to and see the "farang." Before long, Pet told me to go with BoonBang and wait for her there.

BoonBang and BoonTit's bungalow was deep into the village. There were many onlookers. We sat on the floor, while BoonBang brought out bottles of Mekong Whiskey and soda water.

As it got dark, I became worried and doubted that Pet would show up, so around nine p.m. I started to leave the bungalow. Just then the night sky suddenly lit up. Looking in the direction of the base, I saw flares lighting up. I told BoonBang I had to go back to the base, and made my way past Pet's sister's dark bungalow. I was very nervous, reaching the main highway and waiting for the next bus, which was almost empty when it arrived.

At the main gate, many full taxis were delivering base personnel right there instead of dropping them off at the taxi stand. I was told to report to my barracks area, where I was given an M-16 without ammunition. Anyone not working was celebrating the Christmas holiday on base or downtown, and I recall that most everyone was intoxicated, many of them asking me how to load the weapon and the location of the safety switch, etc. That special weapons class on the way to Thailand was proving beneficial for me. Everyone was asking, "Where's the enemy?"



Pet and Ed in their first photo together.

were told that the base perimeter had been attacked by three or four sappers, and that all had been "eliminated." We needed to return our weapons and clear with our first sergeant before leaving the area. It was time to hit the rack!

The next day was Friday, and since Pet had not come to work that day, I had to go to BoonBang's bungalow to get the details about Saturday's formal date. The date started with a movie, then dinner and a good conversation with the help of a waitress. Pet was worried, having missed several days at work, and I offered to help any way I could. Finally, I asked if she could keep seeing me after work. The romance was on!



View from our bungalow balcony looking down at the main road from the bus stop to the Mekong River in Nakhon Phanom city.

The first week of January 1970, we found a one-bedroom bungalow to rent for only \$30 a month (600 baht). And it had a bathroom and an open area for eating and just sitting. It was on the main road with easy access to everything, especially street food vendors, and we had a nice balcony where we could watch the busy downtown street.

At that time the base had a curfew for all personnel who had to be on base from midnight until eight a.m. There were very few exceptions to this rule, and approved marriages to local Thai women was the primary one. You had to request proper military approval for marrying overseas. We were warned not to simply enter a Thai marriage at the local Thai government office, because it would be binding and official, and you could be prosecuted under the UCMJ unless it was already properly Air Force authorized.

About a week after I paid rent for our bungalow, an elderly Thai woman came to the Flight Records office to talk to me. She brought BoonBang and BoonTit with her. Pet had not worked during this entire week, nor had she gone home. The lady handed me a handwritten note, which read: "You must give me 50,000 baht or marry Wanta (Pet)." Wow, that was

Miller continues next page.

about \$2,500 back then! The money would go to her mother. The custom in Thailand was that the groom paid a dowry to the bride's family, normally mother and father. Twenty-five hundred dollars for an E-4 in 1969 was about 2/3 of a year's pay! I needed to talk to Pet because I was afraid that they would say I kidnapped her.

That evening I told Pet that first, she needed to go home to her mother immediately and explain her decision to her; and second, that I didn't have that kind of money; and third, we were new sweethearts and time together would take care of our relationship. Pet did not come to work the next day, so I went to the bungalow and found her there with all of her few clothing items. I told her that I would take care of her and provide as much as possible to give to her mom.

## Surprises

March '70 brought major surprises. Pet told me that she was pregnant and confirmed that it was my child. Immediately, I asked if she would marry me and go back to the U.S.A. I explained that we would have to do lots of paperwork and that the military would make it hard for us. She agreed and we started the paperwork for marriage overseas. I told her that I had volunteered for an extension of assignment in Thailand, but might not get it.

Meanwhile I was transferred from the Flight Records Section to the Deputy Commander for Operations Admin section because of staffing and the need to utilize my top-secret clearance. This would be effective April 1, and they expected additional individuals to be assigned during April because of the preparations for the Son Tay raid to rescue POWs in North Vietnam, which at the time was top secret.

The other significant event was that the complete supply, in 55-gallon barrels, of Agent Orange herbicide, was being removed from the NKP flightline area during April, and the last Ranch Hand jungle spraying mission would be flown from NKP on April 17, 1970. Due to "sensitivity," it was being handled like top secret communications, but to me, it was just work—typing, handling, and storing documentation.

More interesting was visiting the base chaplain with my wife-to-be, Pet. They told us in English and Thai how this marriage would not work out and the downfalls of marrying a Buddhist. Then came more bad news: an assignment



Pet four months pregnant.



Ed and rockets on an A-1 "Spad," or Skyraider, which used the callsign "Sandy." Nakhon Phanom had a ramp full of propeller-driven aircraft.

arrived for me at CBPO for a "Consecutive Overseas Tour" (COT). I got a classified PAS code again—yes, once again I got orders for "Project 404." Laos again, clearly because of my TS clearance. As for getting married and taking a Thai national into Laos? Possible, yes, but for only short 15-day periods, which would not help to start a very happy marriage.

After breaking the news and mostly explaining to Pet about the situation, we came up with an idea: First, we would plan a very small and private Buddhist wedding at her home in her village. We would not report it to the district "tumboon" (chief) family register, nor would we register it downtown in the amphur (city hall) headquarters until all of our Air Force paperwork was processed and approved, possibly in 6 months.

As for the assignment to Vientiane, Laos (air attaché office), I really needed it changed so I could stay at NKP. An answer to my problem finally arrived. That's right, "arrived." Steve Urbanetti, a new sergeant admin type with a TS clearance arrived and was assigned to my office. Steve's unit at DaNang AB, Vietnam, was deployed home and he was sent to NKP to finish his assignment. He quickly offered to take the Laos assignment, which would require a short TDY at Danang for me, starting around May 14th. Pet and I planned our marriage for the first weekend of May, after a necessary payday. Pet was apprehensive that I might leave her and never return, and even wondered if I was really going to Vietnam, where I might get killed.

At the bachelor party, I got a little scratched when in the dark I fell into a ditch that had wire in it. The wedding went on as planned on Sunday, with Ornie as best man, the only other American there. I gave Pet's mom \$50 toward the dowry, with a promise of more to come. I made many new Thai friends. Fortunately, we all left the village happy that day.

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### ***Funny Money with Wings***

Soon after I arrived for the short TDY at the 56th SOW at Danang, Vietnam. Everyone was trying to sell me Military Payment Certificates (MPC) or “scrip” that was used instead of U.S. currency within Vietnam. They knew that I had just arrived and had “real” dollars.

At the barracks they introduced me to the mamasan who did our cleaning and laundry for a bottle of whiskey or a carton of cigarettes per week. More seriously, I was issued a helmet, flak vest, and weapons that were stored in the bunker. Our barracks was right on the perimeter road, and across the street was a fence and guard bunker. I could see several hundred meters of marshland.

On the first day, I went around the base to scrounge or trade food, beer, or liquor for a unit party cookout. The unit was known as the “Spuds” and flew A-1s, primarily for SAR, so I didn’t have to worry about typing a daily mission report or a FRAG request. The pilots flew daily and aircraft were in harm’s way once in the air.

On my last night on Danang, I went to the club to celebrate and spend my useless MPC money. I got into a card game and won a large amount of cash. Suddenly, sirens went off and “Big Voice” came on all over the base. “Danang is now under attack, take immediate cover,” was repeated over and over while the siren blared. I heard the first explosion. Drunk and grabbing my money, I went running to my barracks. I was scared. I had promised Pet I that would come back. I didn’t go down to the bunker, but went upstairs, put my helmet on, and lay under my bed rack, using my flak vest as a pillow. I heard the second explosion; it sounded close—somewhere between our barracks and the flightline. And then a third round. I thought it hit the VNAF’s tent-roof barracks area next to us. Then it got quiet and I fell asleep. Next morning was my day to leave. I got picked up and we drove past the area of one rocket strike, in the VNAF tent city, where 27 lives were lost. The other two rockets damaged aircraft on the ramp, right next to our unit aircraft.

I had to leave, and I had lots of MPC with no chance of



Pet Miller’s family house near Nakhon Phanom, with her mother and other family on the porch. Rural Thai homes are typically built off the ground.



Pet, party-planner and landlady MamaSan, and Ed at their Sawadee Party.

going to the base bank to exchange it., Plus, there were limits on how much you could change back to real money, leaving me stuck with scrip that was worthless everywhere but Vietnam. I decided not to just to give it away, as some thought I would. After boarding, I asked if I could throw it out over Laos. The aircraft commander allowed me to come up and throw it out his small side window. I think it was as much as five hundred dollars’ worth of the “funny money.” What a relief I felt landing at NKP. At this time, I was eligible for early-reenlistment and a small reenlistment bonus, and I submitted the paperwork upon returning from Danang. I was not only getting a bonus, but it would also be tax-free!

### ***Sawadee and Re-up***

Next day at work, the DCO, Colonel Ransom, advised that my new assignment was to Udorn RTAFB, a special duty assignment to HQ 7th/13th Air Force, Director of Operations, Special Activities Division, effective July 1st. I was very excited that I would be staying in Thailand another year and would not be separated from my future wife. The base legal office asked me to bring Pet to complete a Form DD-398 for a background investigation because of my upcoming top-secret job.

I proudly reenlisted on May 26th, 1970. My bonus payment check was \$1,500. Things were going well. First thing was shopping for wedding rings at the BX, then looking for a bungalow home in Udorn. A SSgt named John and his Thai wife were sent to the Udorn Thani Hotel to help us. They took Pet and me to a recommended bungalow complex, very near the base, safe, and secure with mostly Air America tenants.

My last happy and exciting event was our going way party, or “Sawadee Party,” at our bungalow. All our new friends who lived around the bungalow showed up. I believe the bungalow owner, “Mama San,” planned most of it. I just told the guys at work to bring their own beer and booze and that they were welcome to bring a date or “teelok.” Pet and I talk often and still laugh about this time of our lives, always trying to remember names, which even causes friendly arguments.



Note: Watch for more of Ed’s story in future issues of the *MEM*.