

Members hunt for comrades

by Gary Sorenson

American combat and support troops occupied duty stations spread across Southeast Asia during the Vietnam War, battling enemy soldiers from far-flung outposts integral to the total war effort. Bill Tilton flew light planes as a forward air controller, or FAC, referred to by infantry grunts as, “the eye in the sky.” He spotted targets and directed air strikes while piloting his O-1 Cessna “Bird Dog” aircraft. Calls from Tilton’s radio relayed aerial map coordinates to Air Force, Navy and Marine Corps fighter pilots who screamed in and attacked after blasting off from air bases in Thailand like Korat, Udorn, Ubon and Takhli, or aircraft carriers lying in wait beyond the Gulf of Tonkin.

His O-1 carried four rockets tipped with white phosphorus warheads that blew up in a plume of fire and smoke visible at long distance. Fighter pilots tracked Tilton’s target marks, dropping heavy bombs and firing rockets. Most of his missions pinpointed sections of the Ho Chi Minh Trail in the panhandle of Laos. The supply route, a spider web of trails, ran from North Vietnam crisscrossing into Laos and Cambodia before linking back into South Vietnam along the Laotian and Cambodian borders. Entrance points funneled through numerous places as far south as the Mekong River delta that stretches across southern South Vietnam and southern Cambodia.

“There must have been an awful lot of enemy on the ground,” Tilton said, “because you could blow a hole in the road and come back in a few hours and it would be fixed.”

He flew slow at an altitude of 1,500 feet, offering a tempting target for enemy soldiers, but he cruised beyond the range of light infantry weapons like AK-47 assault rifles carried by most North Vietnamese Army, Viet Minh and Viet Cong troops. Enemy rifles presented a minor threat though he often heard the distinctive crack of AKs below his plane.

“I heard firing but I never got hit,” he added. He remembers friends who flew O-1s and returned to base sporting bullet holes in their planes, but his unit never lost a plane to rifle fire. Pilots who got shot down encountered heavy weaponry like .51 caliber machine guns or an occasional 37mm anti-aircraft gun.

“Enemy troops usually waited to fire until they were pretty sure they could hit something,” Tilton added. The penalty for missing carried major consequences delivered by fighter pilots lurking a quick radio call away.

“Unlike duty in South Vietnam, our mission was to do two things—look for targets and direct air strikes along the Ho Chi Minh Trail,” Tilton said. “There were



Bill Tilton displays a 1966 photo of his Cessna O-1 Bird Dog.

no friendlies (in the area).” He followed strict rules of engagement on sorties that remained top secret for years after combat ended. He tempted fate on over 200 missions inside and outside Laos, including 42 missions dipping his wings across North Vietnam’s border about 100 miles north of the demilitarized zone separating North and South Vietnam. His combat tour lasted from April 1966 to January 1967.

“We flew into North Vietnam occasionally but not too far in,” Tilton said. “We called those missions ‘counters’ because your DEROS (date of expected return from overseas) was shortened by one month for every 20 missions into North Vietnam, up to a maximum of two months. I got two more missions than I needed.”

He said the trail came out of Vinh (a city in North Vietnam). A network of paths formed the Ho Chi Minh Trail but most traffic funneled through Mu Gia Pass and Ban Karai Pass. The latter route was known by pilots as the “new road.”

“Just inside the border there’s a water crossing that is likely to be the most bombed spot on earth,” he added. Ban Loboy water crossing forced enemy vehicles and troops out of the jungle and into an exposed, flat area spanning a small river. He has aerial photographs he took at the crossing.

The only armament Tilton carried in his little two-seater Cessna besides four marking rockets was an M-16 assault rifle and a .38 caliber revolver, survival weapons in case he got shot down.

“We always flew out in pairs in Laos,” he said. Sometimes foreign nationals rode in his back seat, or combat photographers from a unit in Korat, Thailand, who flew with him on temporary duty.

“The head of that outfit was a Hollywood producer,” Tilton remembers. “They had handheld movie cam-

eras and were assigned to photograph the war. It wasn't an intelligence function, it was for visual record." One photographer, Airman 1st Class André Guillet, died along with pilot Lee Harley, Tilton's best friend. Harley and Guillet turned up missing May 18, 1966. A crash site has never been found even though the general area has been visited repeatedly by recovery experts. Tilton stays in touch with both men's families.

Today, he volunteers as president of *TLC Brotherhood*, an organization established in 1999 for veterans who served in Thailand, Laos and Cambodia. TLCB has grown to 360 members in three years. About 90 percent are U.S. Air Force veterans who, like Tilton, worked at or flew from bases in Thailand. He entered the war zone in Bien Hoa, Vietnam, like countless American troops, but his duty assignment took him to Nakhon Phanom, Thailand, and the 23rd Tactical Air Support Squadron. Other TLCB members served with Army Special Forces. A few Navy and Marine Corps veterans belong, too, along with one former Coast Guard sailor and a few Australian Army veterans.

The core reason for the existence of *TLC Brotherhood* lies in the shroud of secrecy that enveloped operations originating in Southeast Asian countries neighboring North and South Vietnam. Tagged top secret, the covert operations were known to some and hidden from others.

"It was the kind of secret where the enemy knew about it, we knew and so did the Thai, Chinese and Russian military, but American and Vietnamese civilians didn't know," Tilton said. "We weren't allowed to tell our wives or keep diaries. Enlisted men didn't have a need to know and didn't have any idea what they were involved in—no one could tell them anything."

Troops who serviced his plane and ran the base at Nakhon Phanom never knew if their contributions to the war effort mattered.

"Guys who were in Thailand still think it's classified and they're just now learning about what they were involved in and that their duty was very important," he said. Some *TLC* veterans felt like they weren't in the real war. Others got a cold shoulder from fellow veterans who served within South Vietnam's well-known combat zones.

Tilton reminds his *TLC* peers about the importance of interdiction along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Attacks by units like 23rd Tactical Air Support Squadron reduced the tonnage of supplies reaching enemy troops in South Vietnam. The need to repair and rebuild bombed out sections of the trail tied up combat resources that otherwise would have been directed against American, South Vietnamese and allied troops. Nakhon Phanom air base played a pivotal role after starting as a radar site "with a little pierced-steel plank runway." Rapid growth began in 1966 increasing the size and role of the base.

"They started building it up about mid-year when the air commandos came in and took over the base," Tilton said. "From then on it grew to become a major air base." By 1968, the site became a listening post for McNamara's Wall, a nickname given to electronic sensors being dropped into the jungle, monitoring the sound of enemy troop and vehicle movement. Early testing led to development of modern electronic warfare weaponry used in today's military.

"Nakhon Phanom was the most frequently used

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base for air rescue operations, too," Tilton noted. He returned to Thailand in 1971 during four months of temporary duty when he flew KC-135 refueling tankers supporting fighter jets and reconnaissance planes, a very different sort of mission than his 1966 tour.

Three decades later, in 1997, four veterans who served in the area held an informal get-together in West Virginia. The reunion eventually led to formation of *TLC Brotherhood* in 1999. Internal Revenue Service recognized *TLCB* as a charitable, nonprofit organization in 2000.

TLCB is politically non-partisan and members need not be veterans to join. The only requirements are payment of annual dues (now \$25 per year) and a pledge of support for the organization's four sanctioned objectives: 1) provide an open association for the benefit of Thailand, Laos and Cambodia veterans; 2) provide humanitarian assistance, particularly in the Thailand, Laos and Cambodia region; 3) honor those veterans who did not return from the region; and 4) preserve the region's military history and promote public understanding of Thailand, Laos and Cambodia service.

Tilton and his peers sent brochures describing *TLC Brotherhood* to all Vet Centers in late summer 2001. The brochure's opening line says, "During the Vietnam War thousands of Americans directly supported or par-

continues

ticipated in a secret war in Laos and Cambodia from bases located in Thailand and Laos." Official secrecy banned discussion, the brochure explains, and many veterans were left with little knowledge of what happened to comrades. Sparse information survived about the degree of commitment shared among unit veterans.

Information about military operations became declassified as time passed, allowing survivors to share stories and reconnect. A year after TLCB got organized, 50 people gathered for the organization's first annual reunion in 1998. TLCB's July 2002 reunion attracted 100 attendees.

The organization publishes its own quarterly newsletter entitled, *Mekong Express Mail*, and supports an active Internet website that includes newsletter back issues in electronic format (PDF), information about reunions, a chat room, related Internet links and more (<http://www.tlc-brotherhood.org>).

Members travel back to Thailand and promote philanthropic projects to support former allies while ensuring the legacy of allied military efforts within the region are not forgotten. Two current projects highlight activity by building upon previous undertakings.

TLCB joined with the *Air Commando Association* and its charity foundation, and the non-profit *Omnimed* organization, to forward medical supplies to Nakhon Phanom Province. A 40-foot container of supplies and medical equipment donated by the Mormon Church arrived in Thailand on July 15, 2002, and is en route to its final destination in Nakhon Phanom.

The group also is helping coordinate an assessment trip, at the invitation of provincial leaders, for two volunteer doctors who will attempt to measure medical need and initiate a medical assistance program. The project targets small, underserved villages within Nakhon Phanom Province.

Another project supported by members extends the legacy of veterans who served in the area. TLCB is designing and building a friendship monument dedicated to the memory of Thai, American and allied military personnel who died during the Vietnam War era.

"The provincial governor has promised 400 square meters of land in a new park, and ongoing maintenance of the monument," Tilton said. "To my knowledge this will be the only such monument in Southeast Asia where veterans can pay homage to those they lost." Dedication and ground breaking for the memorial is tentatively scheduled for the first week of October 2002. "I've been working a long time on it and it's starting to come together now," Tilton said.

TLCB leaders and members are discussing the memorial's design and message in order to develop a

monument meaningful to Thai citizens and veterans who return to visit.

The volunteer work Bill Tilton does today fails to rival the high drama and adrenalin pumping flights he survived in Thailand, Laos and Cambodia during 1966. He places the same level of importance on his civilian mission, contacting more of his fellow veterans and watching TLC Brotherhood grow and prosper. Members re-elected Tilton as the organization's president during the mid-July reunion. He said this year's annual gathering was well received and successful.

"From the sentimental side, the MIAs were with us all three days," he added. Members laid a large wreath at the *Vietnam Veterans Memorial*, in front of a specific granite panel, to honor TLC veterans still missing in action. Members also conducted a formal reading of names for nearly 2,000 veterans who died in Thailand, Laos and Cambodia, or flying on missions originating in those countries. The U.S. government's search for MIAs continues in Southeast Asia and TLCB members remain stalwart in their pursuit of former comrades.

"I'd like to find more people," Tilton said. "There's a whole lot out there who just don't know we exist as an organization."

Above his desk hangs a treasured photo of his old O-1 Bird Dog in flight, searching out enemy positions as he winged his way over the jungle 36 years ago. The crack of aggressors' AK-47s still lingers in

his memory. Sometimes he returned fire, poking his M-16 rifle out the left window, holding the plane's stick and flying with his left hand while firing back with his right.

"Banking left, you could get a pretty good shot," he said. Enemy bullets never reached his altitude, and it's likely his return volley fell short, too. No matter. His radio calls for backup never went unanswered, and enemy troops learned the folly of firing on forward air controllers like Tilton.

In 2002, he hunts for American veterans who served in Thailand, Laos and Cambodia. His search is just as tenacious, his motivation vastly different. The Vietnam War is long past. New relationships with Southeast Asian countries are evolving. Timing is right for the work being pursued by TLC Brotherhood. Tilton is pleased with the past role he and his fellow veterans played while halting aggression spreading across Southeast Asia. Now, his goal is to reconnect with former brothers in arms and continue the group's legacy. A quote from Shakespeare adorns the TLCB Internet website and summarizes the quest.

"We few, we happy few, we band of brothers," says the quote in part, "For he today that sheds his blood with me; Shall be my brother." ■

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