Nakhon Phanom Royal Thai Air Force Base
1963 ~ 1975
“The Secret War”

Nakhon Phanom city, Thailand, is on the western bank of the Mekong River, right across from Laos. During the war, the nearby Nakhon Phanom Royal Thai Air Force Base was better known as NKP, Nakhon Phantom, or Naked Fanny, and officially labeled T-55 on the navigation charts. NKP was carved out of the jungle by the Navy’s Mobil Construction Battalion Three “Sea Bee’s” in 1963. At first a dirt landing strip, soon covered with PSP (pierced steel planking), this airfield quickly became a hot spot for covert operations and combat search and rescue, and NKP started making its mark in the history of the Vietnam War.

From its beginnings as just a cluster of tents and a small airstrip, NKP was the closest U.S. Air Force base to North Vietnam, only about 75 air miles away from that aggressive communist country and actually somewhat north of Vietnam’s DMZ. (No, I’m not forgetting the CIA’s many small but highly successful Lima Site bases in Laos, but they weren’t USAF, and officially they “didn’t exist.”) A short 230-mile flight would take you from NKP to downtown Hanoi, the capital of North Vietnam.

This proximity to Vietnam and Laos was more than a time-and-fuel-saving convenience for the strike, forward-air-control, covert-ops and rescue aircraft based at NKP. It was more than a lifesaver for aircraft that had been shot up and needed to get on the ground fast. It was also a source of heartburn for the guys and dogs that guarded the remote air base.
Although Laos wasn’t “Vietnam,” and the war in Laos didn’t officially exist, there was plenty going on. There were 35,000 North Vietnamese regular army (NVA) troops in Laos by 1968. There were 80,000 by 1970. That’s a lot of well-trained and equipped enemy combat troops in a country about the size of Idaho. Some of these NVA regulars were fighting the Royal Laotian Government, and the CIA’s Hmong and Thai mercenary Special Guerrilla Units on the Plain of Jars in northern Laos; most of them were supporting and defending the Ho Chi Minh Trail where it went south - right past NKP. All the troops and supplies to support the communist’s aggression in South Vietnam went down that trail network, so they had to defend it at all costs.

The Vietnamese communists also viewed Laos itself as crucial to their own security and as a steppingstone to an eventual takeover of Thailand. The Thai government viewed the whole Nakhon Phanom province of northeastern Thailand as being infested with communists and NVA, because of the large numbers of North Vietnamese Viet Minh refugees living there who remained loyal to Ho Chi Minh.

The U.S. Air Force’s Operation Barrel Role sent bombers and tactical strike aircraft into northern and southwestern Laos, while Operation Steel Tiger focused on bombing eastern Laos, along the Vietnamese border. Operation Arc Light’s B-52 raids included targets in Laos, too. In fact, the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos was the primary focus of U.S. air power after President Johnson terminated Operation Rolling Thunder over North Vietnam in 1968. Operation Barrel Role alone resulted in something like 3.4 billion pounds of bombs being dropped on Laos between 1968 and 1973. That’s right, 3.4 billion with a “b.” Shot-down Air Force and CIA fliers were picked up in Vietnam and Laos by Combat Search and Rescue units from the 40th ARRS at NKP, sometimes within sight of NKP itself. Some nights guys on base or in town reported watching Laotian Air Force AC-47 gun ships or NKP’s own AC-119K gun ships “hosing” enemy traffic on The Trail.

The point of all this is, there was a reason for our heartburn, and for the heavy security at Nakhon Phanom RTAFB. Many believe that the only reason the base wasn’t attacked more often than it was, was its very obvious defense system, which included:

- a deep, totally cleared perimeter with barbed wire fence, multiple concertina razor wire, tangle foot, electronic sensors, mines and bright, directional perimeter lighting
- a series of guard towers all around the perimeter
- machine-gun bunkers backing up the towers
- numerous security posts manned by the 300-man combat-trained Security Police Squadron
- nighttime K-9 patrols by 65 sentry dogs and handlers (call sign “Night fighter”), each carrying a fully automatic CAR-15 and 10 full magazines of 5.56 ammo
- six to eight patrol dogs and handlers
- 81 mm mortar teams, with pre-registered coordinates all over the base for flare missions
- roving armed “Gun” truck patrols
- APC M-113 and Heavy Weapons Quick Reaction Forces pre positioned and on call
- As well as the M-706/v-100 Armored car as a Quick Reaction Team.
- an H-3 “Knife” (21st SOS) helicopter patrol, all night every night, shining a very bright searchlight into the jungle around the base
- AC-119 gunship flare missions around the perimeter whenever the intelligence guys had heard that communists insurgents might be in the area and up to no good, or in response to an alert by one of the security or K-9 posts
- and the well-armed A-1 Skyraiders, AC-119 Stingers, OV-10 Broncos and CH-53 Super Jolly Green Giant hellos that we could get into the air quickly if needed.

In addition to the base perimeter, K-9 posts included the weapons storage area, flight crew quarters, fuel storage areas, and other sensitive areas of the base depending on what the intelligence guys were picking up about possible threats. We and our dogs were also used as listening posts and were sent to guard downed aircraft in Laos, Thailand, and Cambodia until sensitive equipment and / or documents could be recovered or the aircraft destroyed. We were also used to detect trip wires, booby traps, mines, and tunnels.

By the time I arrived at NKP on April 01 of 1970, it had blossomed from PSP and tents into a full-fledged base with an 8,000-foot paved runway, a 15-bed dispensary, and 4,200 military personnel in 15 major units, including the 56th Special Operations Wing (formerly the 56th Air Commando Wing). Organizationally, my K-9 flight was part of the 56th Security Police Squadron, which in turn was in the 56th Combat Support Group, which was one of the parts of 56th Special Operations Wing.

Throughout NKP’s thirteen-year life span, the base and its units were involved in many major events of the war.
Over the years, the 56th earned campaign streamers for five of the different phases of the Vietnam Air Offensive, and the TET 69/Counteroffensive, the Sanctuary Counteroffensive, Southwest Monsoon, and three of the Commando Hunt campaigns. Strikes from NKP were fragged every day from MACV-SOG, the so-called “Military Assistance Command, Vietnam - Studies and Observation Group,” which was a euphemism for special ops. SOG reconnaissance teams, backed up by NKP’s Mobile Launch Team 3 Heavy Hook, performed road, trail, and river watch missions, prisoner snatches, wire taps, sensor emplacements, and Bright Light missions.

NKP’s Task Force Alpha, through its top-secret, high-tech “Igloo White” program littered Vietnam and Laos with thousands of electronic sensors, and then monitored signals from them at NKP’s Infiltration Surveillance Center on high-powered IBM computers. During the Tet offensive, this system electronically monitored NVA troop movements from the DMZ and down the Ho Chi Minh Trail, and alerted the marines at Khe Sanh South Vietnam. The early warning saved many lives at Khe Sanh in spite of the continuous shelling they took from the NVA over a thirty day period. Resupply of the Marines in this battle, as well as tactical air support, came from NKP as well as other units in Thailand and South Vietnam.

On 21 November, 1970, elements of the 1st and 602nd Special Ops Squadrons as well as the 21st SOS joined forces from other bases in Thailand in an offensive rescue mission into the Son Tay prison camp on the outskirts of Hanoi, North Vietnam. While no prisoners were found, the speed and overwhelming force of this raid helped “encourage” the North Vietnamese to return to the Paris peace talks and in 1972 many of our POW’s were returned. You can read “The Raid - The Son Tay Prison Rescue Mission,” by Benjamin F. Schimmer, for the whole story.

In May 1975 the civilian container ship “Mayaguez” was seized by Cambodians and held at a Koh Tang island and the crew was taken ashore and imprisoned. Once again NKP airmen had a turn at writing history. Seventy-five hand-picked troops for the rescue mission included 56th Security Police Squadron and K-9 volunteers. They were quickly assembled and a rescue attempt was started. Sadly, while en route a CH-53 helicopter, “Knife 13,” carrying a flight crew of five, a linguist, and eighteen Security Police and K-9 troops, staggered out of formation and crashed into the heavy jungle killing all on board.
The names of the Security Police and K-9 who died are on VSPA’s Memorial page http://www.vspa.com/memorial.htm. Days later the bloody rescue mission for the Mayaguez crew was carried out. Although a number of U.S. Navy, Marine and Air Force personnel, and 56th Special Operations aircraft were lost, eventually the unjustly imprisoned civilian crew of the Mayaguez was returned to U.S. soil. For the complete story of this nasty incident, read “The Last Battle,” by Ralph Wetterhahn.

As I look back, some thirty years later, I know that God had his hand on my shoulder, as he did for all of us during those difficult times. Someday I hope to return to Thailand for some closure and to reminisce. As for my dog "Ango", not a day goes by that I don't think of him.*

I am proud to have served with the 56th and the Air Force during those difficult and secretive years. That year I spent over there was quite possibly the most influential year of my life and I most certainly had the time of my life. That’s not to say it was good times, on the contrary, there were times of great sadness, fear, sorrow, and heartache. But, nonetheless... I am proud to have served.

*Ango-0K31 was humanly put down in ‘74 due to complications of soft tissue sarcoma. He died peacefully at his Home/Kennel at Nakhon Phanom RTAFB.
*Col William “Bill” Raven, Commander of the 56th SPS, loved his Dogs (“K-9” Section). Last photo (56th SPS) is with his patrol dog “Duke”. Bill passed away on 17 June of 2002. Raven said he often spoke of his time at NKP most fondly and also spoke very highly of the brave men serving under him.

Welcome home Brothers!......... and Thank You!

George Conklin aka "Woofwalker"
(56th SPS K-9 “Ango-0K31” NKP Thailand ‘70-’71)
(341st SPS K-9 ‘71-’73 Malmstrom AFB, GTF Mt.)
American Legion Post 26 TLCBrotherhood http://www.tlc-brotherhood.org/
"It's not the dark.....It's what hunt's in the dark".
"Fear not the enemy, for he will simply kill you. But fear the media as they will steal your honor"