

# THE UBON STORY – PART 1

SQNLDR Roy Frost, WGCDR John Hubble, FLTLT Hughie Collits, PLTOFF Reg Meissner, PLTOFF Ray Butler.

## THE LITTLE-KNOWN STORY OF THE RAAF'S INVOLVEMENT IN THE LEAD-UP TO THE WAR IN VIETNAM.

AUSTRALIAN MILITARY PARTICIPATION in the prelude to the Vietnam War was and

is barely mentioned in public, largely unknown and unheralded. This is the first of a three-part feature that exposes the RAAF contribution through the words and impressions of the people involved. The contributors are Jake Newham, Pete Scully, Pete La-rard, Bob Richardson, Dave Rogers, Clint Roland, Ray Funnell, Mike Lavercombe, Cliff Viertel and John Clarkson.

The story is sometimes serious and sometimes humorous but most of all it encapsulates the spirit and character of the RAAF at that time in uncertain circumstances. It also contrasts the expectations and acceptance of service conditions at that time as compared with today's standards.

Luxury accommodation.

### RAAF SABRES DEPLOYED TO THAILAND

In May 1962, Australia joined several South-East Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO) partners in rushing forces to north-east Thailand to protect against an anticipated communist invasion from Laos. On 28 May, 10 CA-27 Sabre jet fighters from RAAF units at Butterworth, Malaya, were sent to Singapore, where eight of the aircraft formed into No.79 Squadron. On that day, the new unit flew into a Royal Thai Air Force base at Ubon, 80km from the Laotian border. During the next 10 days, RAAF C-130 Hercules from Richmond, NSW, flew in a base Squadron of 200 men and 450 tonnes of supplies and equipment to establish a tented camp. Although the crisis which prompted the deployment was defused by negotiation, No.79 Squadron remained at Ubon until August 1968, as part of an integrated air defence system protecting American forces engaged in bombing North Vietnam from communist retaliation.

The situation was that the Pathet Lao were flexing their muscles and, heavily supported by the Russians and North Vietnam, were getting very active across the border they shared with Thailand. Those were the first steps in what would, in time, become the Vietnam War and our job was to get up there (to Ubon) and hold the fort.

For the first few weeks we lived in a tented camp by the side of the runway, with messing facilities of similar rudimentary construction. The toiletry facilities were standard holes in the ground and while we'd erected modesty screens from the rest of the camp, we were wide open to the local population as they made their way to

and from the fields, and from our thunder boxes we returned their cheery waves as they passed by.

Security around the base was provided by the Thai army with whom we had very good relations however, about a week into the operation after we've retired to our tents late one evening, we became aware that a couple of the guards were sitting in the mess tent drinking booze.

Cliff, Kev and I, with some trepidation, entered the mess tent to explain to these chappies that they were being very naughty boys, and as well as stealing our booze; they weren't doing a great job of guarding the camp. We were very aware of the fact that as well as a fair amount of beer in their bellies, they both had big old Smith and Wesson shooters hanging off their hips.

As happened, they were well and truly pissed and not really aware of the seriousness of their situation. To indicate how naughty they were, I started walking around pointing at the empty cans on the ground, counting, one, two, three and was joined by the corporal counting, four, five, six gleefully demonstrating that, not only could he count to 10, he could do so in English.

Blissfully unaware of the seriousness of his position, he happily allowed us to move him and his mate out of the mess tent, and in time, we restored the security detail and returned to our cots.

Of course, the incident had to be reported to higher authority and the Colonel, suffering a massive loss of face was mortified. A few days later, I met him casually and asked what he'd done with those naughty chaps. He replied quite calmly, "Oh, I shot them". Retribution comes quickly in this part of the world.

It was summertime but the living was anything but easy. As regular as clockwork, each morning at 0200 hours, a thunderstorm arrived with a torrential rainstorm and we would be, to a man, standing in our tents, all our belongings piled on our cots which we were holding waist high as the water rushed through the camp. Ten minutes later we would be back in the cot, fast asleep, with slightly muddy feet. In time we moved into more permanent accommodation when the rest of the infrastructure had been put into place. Troops' comfort was always very much the last priority.

Just a couple of weeks into our time there, one morning well before dawn the Boss appeared at our tents, "Out of bed lads, and down to the flight line. It's on."

No.79 Squadron at Ubon.

We head down to the flight line. It's a hive of activity as the ground crews are readying the ships for combat. The word is that there are multiple radar targets, believed to be helicopters just across the Laotian border and headed in our direction. Our job; stop 'em. Four Sabres are armed with HE ammo and Sidewinder missiles ready for scramble at first light. This is what we've been training for and as well as milking the lads from Lion control (our fighter control radar site) as to their spin on how the situation is developing, we're mentally going through what we may be faced with and how we're to deal with it. Been waiting for this for years and it would be disastrous to get it wrong. In the early morning twilight we climb in the cockpits. The armament fitter runs a check on the Sidewinder missiles hanging under my wings. They're whirring away, responding to the test and ready to go.

Doug fires up at first light with Cliff on his wing and I'm leading the second pair. This could well be the first engagement in what is, as yet, an undeclared conflict. I'm quite confident that we're equipped to handle anything that may come our way. This is all very enervating and it is essential that I get it right. I'm very anxiously waiting for the reappearance of Johnno as that could be my cue to fire up and leap into the air. At low level, the Sabre has about 30 minutes fuel on board, and I have a feeling Johnno's going to get a sighting just as he runs out of fuel, and it will be up to me to get this embryo conflict into play.

Half an hour later Johnno is back on the ground, still carrying his missiles and he's not fired his guns either. He climbs on my wing to give me a rundown. He'd been vectored onto the targets, "Half a mile; quarter of a mile, two hundred yards... merging with target... now!"— nothing.

They'd steamed around the area, in and out of the early morning mist, trying to make head or tail of the situation, but with no sightings at all and fast running out of fuel, returned to base. Big mystery. Lion control meantime was trying to assess what they were seeing on their screens. After about an hour and a half a decision came down from high level to the effect that the radar targets were either a rare meteorological phenomenon or some very sophisticated ECM work from over the border, the result of which was we could all relax. Bugger. The battle was over and I didn't even get airborne. We tidied up the flight line, and headed back to our camp and opened the bar, to celebrate the cessation of hostilities.

It's a merry life at the front.

To be continued.