

RAAF SABRES TO UBON – PART 2



Sabre A94-962 with the 79 Squadron cobra tail, Ubon 1962/63. Photo by Cliff Viertell.

CONTINUING THE LITTLE-KNOWN STORY OF THE RAAF'S ROLE IN THE LEAD-UP TO THE WAR IN VIETNAM, AS RECOUNTED BY BOB RICHARDSON.

My first Operational Deployment to 79 Squadron at RAAF Base Ubon was in September 1963. It was for the standard eight weeks, and I travelled on the fortnightly RAAF C130A courier that operated from Richmond NSW via Darwin to Butterworth and Ubon before returning the same way.

The 79 Squadron operational fighter detachment of 10 armed Sabres was mounted under government direction in 1962. Its task was to provide for the air defence of Eastern Thailand against the possibility of Communist incursion from the North, under authority of the South East Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO), of which Australia, New Zealand, UK, Thailand and the Philippines were signatories – but notably not the just independent Malaya.

Malaya, whose PM was informed of the critical necessity for RAAF Butterworth to support the deployment, had reluctantly agreed, provided knowledge of that support did not leak! Thus, all aspects of Ubon being supported from Butterworth was classified secret and no one apart from immediate family was supposed to know about it.

Of course, many locally employed civilians were employed at Butterworth; all RAAF families had local servants. Thus, despite valiant efforts, individual deployments were invariably known quite widely, and occasionally our servants would ask, “Master gone to Ubon?”



Air raid shelter.

We had quarters with rattan wall partitioning. There were no sealed windows, so air conditioning was entirely natural. A basic ablution block was nearby.

Outside the rooms was the Base air raid shelter, a dugout several feet deep surrounded by sandbags which also covered the roof. Whenever I occasionally peered into the gloomy interior it was full of water, and as snakes were also prevalent, a dire emergency would need to be declared to encourage us to use it.

79 SQUADRON COBRA

On arrival at Ubon, aircraft livery comprised a simple black rectangle on the fin, offensive to our very proud ex-77 Squadron members – difficult to be inspired by a black patch on your rear end. J.L. (Jim) McGowan, Sergeant Instrument Fitter was contemplating some sort of emblem when a large cobra was found in one of the

recently dug slit trenches. Instrument Fitter L.A.C. Dick Boldery had artistic talents and was commissioned to draw up a cobra, ready to strike. The result looked good, a stencil was cut, left over black paint, a few touches, such as eyes and tongue and the 79 Squadron black cobra was born. It rapidly spread to the tails of the other nine Sabres.



Base facilities.

A very convenient 30 yards from our quarters were the Officers', Sergeants' and Airmen's messes so that all three shared a common catering facility. That turned out to be a most cost-effective arrangement that was later adopted widely across the three Services throughout Australia.

BAR GAMES

The comfortable bar area, bamboo furnished and decorated from the local jail, was of course where we spent a lot of our off-duty time.

All sorts of games were played in the bar, many of which involved alcohol in its various forms. A popular game was Liar Dice, played with five poker dice. The first player rolled the dice but kept them covered while announcing the result, such as 'a pair of jacks', before sliding the dice hidden by the cup along to the second player, whose choice was to accept or reject the offering by calling 'liar'. If accepted, the receiver would peer under the cup and then decide what to do: he could announce that he was rolling any number of the dice again, do so and then pass the always

hidden dice to the third player, making a claim of the contents that had always to increase in poker value. E.g. No.2 might then say to No.3: there's now a 'full house' under there!

The third player might either accept that claim, knowing that he had to be able to convince the fourth player that he could improve on the full house – or he could say 'liar!' and reveal what was actually there. The losing 'liar' then normally had to pay for and imbibe a drink specified by the winning claimant.

We played a lot of real poker too, of course, usually simple draw poker under pre-agreed betting limits. Although there were no official sanctions about gambling, with occasional exceptions the unwritten rule was that while we always gambled for real money, the agreed limits generally ensured that nobody became financially embarrassed.



Off duty at the bar.

One memorable evening, with our fortnightly payday the next morning, several of us found that we'd run out of cash; IOUs were generally frowned upon. As it happened Mick, our Accountant Officer, was playing with us, and as midnight passed someone helpfully pointed that it was "now pay-day". The obvious follow-up question was,

“Well I’m the Rostered Pay Officer Mick; I assume you’ve got the pay envelopes made up for the morning, so what are we waiting for?”. After only a brief pause Mick replied that this suggestion did indeed seem legally sound, so we all tramped over to the nearby Accounting Office where Mick opened the safe and we signed for our pay envelopes at 12.30am. The game then happily resumed for another hour or so.

Most Australians rather disparagingly referred to the 2.2% alcohol American beer as “watery piss” and the US servicemen certainly enjoyed visiting our Mess where 5% Fosters was on tap. But the spirit ration was indeed quite deadly. The large bottles of Black Label scotch, Gilbeys gin, Smirnoff vodka and Kentucky bourbon were very popular at parties, especially back at Butterworth and Penang, where alcohol was not duty free. We were all issued US BX ration cards on arrival, entitling holders each month to five cartons of American cigarettes, six cases of several brands of American beer, and six 40fl oz bottles of high-grade spirits. Fortunately, most of us didn’t make any effort to consume our ‘ration’.

A PRIMITIVE REGION

Ubon Ratchathani was the third largest urban area in Thailand, after Bangkok and Chiang Mai. But Ubon in eastern Thailand near the borders of Cambodia and Laos was in the most backward region of the country at that time. There was not a single pane of glass in the town of around 10,000 people and all facilities were very primitive.

Apart from some little paving in the town centre all roads were simply dirt and were often impassable after rain. The many 'buses' that transported the mainly subsistence farmers and their produce to the town markets were simply 4WD, 5 ton Japanese diesel trucks, and it was always interesting to visit the town bus terminus to see the families scrambling with their goods onto these trucks, with squealing pigs and chickens, baskets of fruit and vegetables, all mingled together with much shouting.

Unfortunately, one of the main roads out of town passed across the centre of the single 7,000 feet long Ubon airfield runway. This crossing was guarded during flying operations by a Thai military policeman on one side who held up a red flag saying “Yut!” (stop). The traffic was mostly on foot or pedalled vehicle, with a few larger trucks.

The most common public transport was the samlo, a tricycle pedalled by a wiry-fit driver with one or two passengers seated low behind. Samlo taxis were convenient and very cheap. A couple were always available outside the Ubon guard gate, and the ten minute trip to town cost five baht, then about 25 cents Australian.

I had a very hairy experience with a samlo on my first Ubon tour. Just after touchdown I started aerodynamic braking by holding the nose high to increase drag. But a few seconds later I saw a samlo start to cross the runway some 2,500

feet ahead! It was instantly clear that a collision was inevitable, so I slammed full throttle to try to take off again.

The Sabre's Rolls Royce Avon engine of 7,500 pounds thrust was very reliable, but it had a problem accelerating from low power because of a tendency for the compressor to surge, especially in higher air temperatures. An engine Acceleration Control Unit (ACU) automatically slowed spool-up up to about half power at 6,500 RPM, it could take up to 10 seconds to accelerate from idle power.

So, having made the decision to take off again, all I could do was wait and watch. I had around 13 seconds to impact. The Sabre's wingspan gave very little opportunity on the narrow 125 feet runway to diverge laterally, and exiting to the side would probably have been catastrophic for my aircraft and possibly me.

In the final seconds the samlo driver must have heard the accelerating engine whine, because he suddenly looked at me in terror, and I swear that I saw a small puff of smoke from his tyre as he futilely tried to accelerate from the middle of the runway.

But just then the ACU released and the engine slammed to full power in exactly the rated half a second. I dragged the Sabre off the runway well below recommended take-off speed and less than two seconds before the intercept point.

The tower operator later told me that my wheels were less than ten feet above the driver's head. After completing an uneventful closed circuit, I landed normally a minute or so afterward, and we later celebrated in the bar.