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Air Defence Of Western Thailand



The final 79 Squadron photo in Ubon, Thailand.

IN THE THIRD AND FINAL INSTALMENT OF THE UBON STORY, BOB RICHARDSON AVM (RTD) DESCRIBES THE “INCREDIBLY VALUABLE LIFE AND FLYING EXPERIENCE” HE GAINED DURING HIS FOUR DETACHMENTS FROM BUTTERWORTH TO 79 SQUADRON.

OUR FLYING OPERATIONS were similar to those carried out by the four other RAAF Sabre Squadrons of the 1960s: our primary role was air defence of western Thailand, using Sidewinder heat-seeking missiles that home on the target’s hot engine exhaust, and two powerful Aden 30mm cannons. The guns were aided by a small ranging radar in the nose that adjusted the gun sight reticule for measured target range.

We spent a lot of time at air-air tactical intercept training under the control of the nearby USAF air defence radar, call sign 'Lion'. But its American controllers were primarily occupied in training Thai air defence controllers, whose skills were at that

time very limited. Together with their language difficulties, that made Lion's assistance often haphazard, and all pilots quickly learned to keep a running mental plot of location, especially as two fairly unfriendly foreign borders were nearby. Communist Laos was the most unfriendly at that time, while Cambodia under its hereditary ruler, the mercurial Prince Sihanouk, was simply an unknown quantity we were supposed to avoid antagonising. However, it was common to accidentally stray into Cambodian airspace when operating above cloud due to confusion by Lion controllers.

We also practised simulated air-to-surface bombing, rocketry and gunnery attacks against Thai infrastructure such as bridges, trains, truck convoys, etc. Those 'strike sorties' could range almost all over Thailand when we carried the two larger 167-gallon fuel tanks and used high-altitude transits from and return to Ubon, usually with a 50nm high-speed concealment dash at 200 feet to and from the chosen target. Fuel was often critical on those long-range sorties, and with almost no diversion airfields available and inaccurate meteorological data when flight planning, rather nail-biting returns to Base with less than 5 minutes to fuel exhaustion were not uncommon.

In my later deployments after mid-1964 a full USAF Squadron of the remarkably capable F-4C Phantom fighter-bombers deployed to Ubon for operations over North Vietnam. The F-4C was a truly impressive state-of-the-art aircraft that was routinely tasked for 4-6 hour primarily bombing missions from Ubon, carrying three large external drop-tanks, two Sidewinder missiles, four beyond visual range, radar guided Sparrow missiles, a six-barrel 20mm Vulcan cannon firing at 6,000 rounds per minute and, normally for strike missions into North Vietnam, 10 x 750lb high-explosive bombs! Air refuelling from Boeing tankers continuously deployed over northern Thailand and also in international waters off the Vietnam coast, allowed tremendous flexibility for mission planning.

Typically, after bombing their primary target, the standard flight of four F-4s would loiter off the North Vietnam coast near to refuelling tankers and, under the control of USN radars, undertake attacks against enemy fighter aircraft. Then on the return to Thailand they sometimes conducted low-level ground target strafing before transiting Laos back to Ubon. Occasionally tropical thunderstorms over Ubon might close the airfield for a period, but the refuelling tankers readily permitted holding for the required period. On such occasions I recall seeing pairs of exhausted F-4 crews barely

able to walk after unstrapping from their ejection seats. Operational sorties occasionally extended up to 10 hours when weather at Ubon required extra holding.

Overall, my eight months over four detachments from Butterworth to 79 Squadron provided incredibly valuable life and flying experience for a rather naive youngster, only a little over a year out of flying training school at Pearce. I suspect very few of my predecessors would have had that opportunity while so inexperienced.

After the USAF

Phantoms arrived at Ubon, there was a good deal of interaction between the crews of 79SQN and the 45th Tactical Fighter Squadron. As most of the USAF crews had less than 100 hours on the F-4C, they were acutely aware that the development of tactics for their expected ACM (Air Combat Manoeuvre) engagements with MIG15s and 17s was lacking. FLTLT Mick Feiss (the 77SQN FCI) volunteered to give a briefing to the crews on the tactics and close-in combat manoeuvres used by 79 Squadron with the Sabre. The logic was that the performance of their expected opponents over North Vietnam roughly equated to that of our Sabres. The offer was eagerly accepted and as usual, Mick covered the topic in exceptional detail. While the Phantom had a superb radar and the Sparrow beyond visual range missile, it also carried the AIM-9 (a more capable model than ours) and its use in the visual environment was at the forefront of all concerned.

Over

the next few weeks, we flew several missions with them to allow the USAF guys to work up effective tactics using the enormous power and performance advantages of the Phantom. Their advantage in the vertical plane was soon apparent in combat manoeuvring and this was further developed between Mick Feiss and his counterpart in the 45th.

We soon scheduled a series of

ACM engagements (4v4 and 2v4) on their return leg from strike missions up north. While ACM was probably the last thing on their minds after getting home unscathed, the benefits paid off in June 65 when the 45th achieved the first USAF kills of the war. As a matter of fact, the crews came over to our mess on the night of their return to celebrate. That interaction between the squadrons was given credit in the USAF records both then and later; the activity continuing with the 8th Tactical Fighter Wing Phantoms of Colonel Robin Olds and 'Chappie' James.



A Sabre with an air-to-air refuelling "modification" – which was photographed and sent to Butterworth– with Bob Richardson standing in front to hide the rope attaching it.

The pilots in 79SQN were all rather envious of the Phantom drivers doing their 'stuff' and we used to 'escort' some of them up to the Thai/Lao border (and beyond when unsure of the position!) on their way north. The short range of the Sabre without an air-to-air refuelling (AAR) capability was blindingly obvious compared to our new 'friends'. Just up from the 79SQN crew room was the USAF 'junkyard', where the casualties of war and other incidents were parked.



The USAF 'junkyard', where the casualties of war and other incidents were parked. The sign only lasted two days as USAF Base Commander Col Knutsen "was not amused"

In the area were an RF-101 and an F-105D, both of which had received hits in NVN but struggled back to Ubon. There were also bits of other aircraft, including an AAR probe off an F-100 Super Sabre.

I had a bright idea and enlisted the help of another pilot. We 'borrowed' the AAR probe and bought it down to our lines. The CO 79SQN at the time had a cynical sense of humour so I outlined a 'plan' to fix one of our aircraft with an AAR mod, take a photo of it and send it back to Butterworth saying we had installed a modification on the fuel system to enable us to do some AAR trials with the USAF. We tied the rear end of the probe to the port undercarriage leg with a heavy rope over the Sidewinder rail to hold the probe in the horizontal position, then I stood in front to hide it.

The picture (see above) looked reasonably realistic and we sent it down to 77SQN at Butterworth, with a thinly disguised explanation of our efforts to improve the operational capability of the Sabre. Squadron crews at Butterworth saw the joke right away but one of the techos at Ubon got a nasty message from 478

Maintenance Squadron, asking who had authorised the modification and didn't he know that such changes had to be approved by Support Command in Melbourne etc! I guess there are always some who can't see the wood for the trees. Anyway, we all had a good laugh about the things boggies will get up to!

In September 1964, Don McFarlane, while on a training mission, had an engine failure west of Ubon. He tried to return to Ubon but ejected safely at 700ft and 135kt near a small village about 30nm west. He was rescued by a Royal Thai Air force helo.



The Sabre wreckage.

As there was little recoverable wreckage, the RAAF donated it to the local village and we heard that the bigger remains were taken into the village as 'souvenirs'. The engine was retrieved about 12 months later for investigation and the failure was shown to be foreign object damage induced.

END NOTE:

Many decades later, Don McFarlane's son, Campbell, sought information regarding his father's ejection. He found the village, Ban Phon Mueang, but no one there could remember the accident although he was told about stories handed down from grandparents and the like who had mentioned a crash near the village a long time ago. As the RAAF recovered the engine about a year after the loss courtesy of an operation headed by Bruce Martin in an Iroquois, little else could be found near the local wat or elsewhere in the village. Someone said to try the school and, as the photograph above left indicates, he succeeded in finding positive proof. Determination paid off!



Campbell McFarlane at Wat Ban

Phon Mueang with the souvenired nose wheel of his father's Sabre.

Withdrawal from Ubon

The last OC Ubon, WGCDR Peter

Scully, describes the lead-up to 79 Squadron's withdrawal from Ubon on 26 July 1968.

I'd received a 'secret' message from Canberra ordering the aircraft to withdraw on a certain date. A few days later I and all the other Commanders were summoned to the Governor's residence to be told the King was to visit on a date just after our withdrawal and he directed each of us to undertake certain tasks relating to the visit; oh dear! So, I sought a private audience to break the news of our departure. His immediate reaction was a very sharp "Well, you won't go!". (Some may recall that the Governor pretended not to speak English and so always acted via an interpreter – his very pretty niece Wan Penh.) But on this occasion his English was perfect. So, I sent a message to Canberra explaining the situation and suggesting a later departure date. I received no reply so I promptly told them – acting like the perfect diplomat – that we were not leaving on their determined date. Still absolutely no response. Well, at least I then had the chance to shake hands with the King.

We then had to plan the withdrawal of our heavy equipment which had originally all been flown in. Butterworth directed a large road train. The local security folk advised that we'd be attacked and that we should provide armed protection for the convoy. Our Ambassador was horrified and directed no armed protection much to the horror of the locals (and us). The problem was solved, as we had no import licences the Thais would not grant export licences – so everything was then flown out.

There was also the problem of obtaining Thai export visas for the many airmen who'd married local women. The solution was to send the Padre (who later officiated at my own marriage) to Bangkok by train armed with a case of Johnny Walker Black Label. That did the trick and all the necessary permits were issued.

Our accountant officer advised that all the substantial sum in our Officers' Mess General Reserve account would go to the 'Disbanded Messes Fund' when we left. He suggested a great solution: we just held General Mess Meetings and transferred money from the General Reserve to the Entertainment Account which we then used to have several grand dining-in nights at a local restaurant. I remember the Service Police used to call by to drive my car – and me home.

Our MO, Dr Bill Knox, ran a very effective civil co-operation program, together with a couple of USAF officers. They would help themselves to the USAF supplies and go about repairing local temples and schools. So, the RAAF was able to maintain great respect within the local community. Indeed, at our farewell function, the Governor was present as he was a frequent guest and the USAF Base Commander approached me and said “What have you b...s got on that mo f..., every time I’m in your mess he’s here too; I’ve invited him to our club many times but he’s never once accepted.”

I managed to snag two trips over Laos in target marking aircraft, one an O1 (Cessna O-1 Bird Dog), the other an O2 (Cessna O-2 Skymaster) – also a trip up north in an F-4, piloted by a Capt ‘Wild Bill’ Hickock of the 433rd TFS (he was in ‘Up Tight D Flight’ – some will remember their emblem). The trip was recce only and I was very surprised and pleased to be awarded an ‘Hon. Life Time of the 8th Tactical Fighter Wing’.

The USAF Commander was very genuinely concerned about our leaving, particularly as the Chinese had recently moved IL28 light bombers (NATO code name Beagle) down to the North Vietnam border. The USAF then had to divert some of their strike force to air defence.

It was a very sad departure and I consider my great good fortune at being involved with such an efficient and greatly respected organisation.



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