

# Takhli Royal Thai Air Force Base and the Vietnam War

## *“PACAF’s Pride”*

By Phil Carroll

*Takhli RTAFB, 355th SPS K-9, Charlie 2M45, 1970*

*Nakhon Phanom RTAFB, 56th SPS K-9, Tina X768, 1971*

### **APO SF 96273**

Takhli Royal Thai Air Force Base (RTAFB) is about 150 miles north/northwest of Bangkok – close enough that many of us stationed there were sometimes able to take the local commuter train into Bangkok for a day of sightseeing, shopping or whatever. Leaving first thing in the morning, we could spend a pretty full day and catch an evening train back to arrive before the front gate was closed for the night. Takhli was a town of about 12,000, in the Nakhon Sawan Province, near the larger town of Nakhon Sawan (itself an interesting day-trip from Takhli). Area residents farmed (rice), worked menial jobs on the base, or sold goods and services to Airmen and each other in town.

Although Thailand was by and large a much more hospitable environment for base defense forces than Vietnam, Major General Dewitt Searles, Deputy Commander of the 7/13<sup>th</sup> Air Force wrote: “...a threat to our Thailand bases existed from a communist-inspired insurgency. There were areas in full control of the insurgents, and Royal Thai government forces were not in full control of the situation.”

“There have never been more lucrative targets in all of Southeast Asia than are our Thai bases right now. Our greatest threat is trained sapper and mortar teams infiltrated from Cambodia and Laos, who, with local contacts, can be met, housed, and fed without detection until such time as they are ready to strike.”

### **Operation Sawbuck**

Takhli really was originally a Thai air base, but it was used by the U.S. Air Force as a front-line combat base for the Vietnam War. Political considerations limited America’s willingness to build new bases, but we started upgrading five Thai bases to meet USAF needs in 1961. Initially, this deployment was due to fears of the civil war in Laos spreading into Thailand. Takhli was the first of these bases to support combat-oriented recon missions in the spring of 1961, and that same year got some F-100 Super Sabres from the 524<sup>th</sup> Tactical Fighter Squadron (TFS) of the 27<sup>th</sup> Tactical Fighter Wing (TFW) at Cannon AFB, New Mexico. More F-100s came from the 510<sup>th</sup> TFS of the 405<sup>th</sup> TFW at Clark AFB in the Philippines in May 1962 in response to threats along Thailand’s border with Laos.

### **MACV and MACT**

In 1962, the U.S. Military Assistance Group in South Vietnam was upgraded to U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (the famous “MACV”}, a promotion which gave it authority to command combat troops. Shortly thereafter, the Military Assistance Command, Thailand (MACT) was set up with a similar level of authority in order “to aid

Thailand, (America's) ally and historic friend in resisting communist aggression and subversion.”

### **Organizational Smoke and Mirrors**

The Air Force component of the U.S. Pacific Command was Pacific Air Forces (PACAF). Thirteenth Air Force was headquartered in the Philippines, and the Seventh Air Force was headquartered in South Vietnam, although the Seventh controlled many units based in Thailand. Reportedly, Thai sensitivities about units based in Thailand reporting to a headquarters in South Vietnam caused a shift whereby the Seventh Air Force was ostensibly subordinate to Thirteenth Air Force for administrative matters (and therefore referred to as 7/13 Air Force). The commander, Seventh Air Force, played a dual role as MACV's deputy for air operations.

### **Thuds**

The first F-105 Thunderchiefs – affectionately known as “Thuds” to most of us - came to Takhli from the 8<sup>th</sup> TFW at Itazuke Air Base in Japan, in May 1964. More Thuds came for a while in 1965 from the 35<sup>th</sup> TFS of the 6441<sup>st</sup> TFW, and the 80<sup>th</sup> TFS of the 8<sup>th</sup> TFW in Yakota, Japan.

Thuds were what Takhli was all about when I got there in May 1970. They were terrific big heavy fighter-bombers – in fact they were the largest single-seater ever employed by the USAF. They combined the ability to carry huge bomb loads (up to *three times* the bomb load of the four-engine, ten-crewmember B-17 and B-24 bombers of World War II) with tremendous speed, especially at extremely low altitude. Thuds were capable of more than 900 mph at sea level, and 2.15 times the speed of sound at high altitude. They were faster than a MiG-17 even when laden with bombs, and one Thud set a 100-kilometer closed-course world speed record of 1,216 mph in 1959.

The Thud also proved tough enough to soak up tremendous punishment in combat and still make it home (although according to the Boston Sunday Globe, “The wreckage of 166 F-105s from Takhli is scattered across North Vietnam and Laos.”) In all, 833 were manufactured and nearly half of those were to fall victim to the Vietnam War.

The Thuds weren't alone at Takhli. In eight months of 1965, sleek F-104 Starfighters from the 476<sup>th</sup> TFS of the 479<sup>th</sup> TFW at George AFB California flew nearly 3,000 combat missions out of Takhli.

More Thuds from McConnell AFB Kansas came and went, until the 357<sup>th</sup> TFS from McConnell got permanently assigned to Takhli when the 355<sup>th</sup> TFW became the host wing in November 1965. The 355<sup>th</sup> was assigned to the 13<sup>th</sup> Air Force, and its aircraft took part in all the major strikes against North Vietnam including those against the famously dangerous logistical areas in and around Hanoi.

The 355<sup>th</sup> was awarded its first Presidential Unit Citation (PUC) for the period of January through October 1965, when it flew nearly 12,000 sorties, killed two MiGs and damaged eight more.

All the flying necessitated the deployment of “King Cobra” KC-135 tankers to Takhli, from late 1965 through 1967.

### **Wild Weasel**

The first “Wild Weasel” aircraft came to Takhli in 1966. This nickname refers to a mission which was carried out by a number of different aircraft types over the years. The first at Takhli were F-100 Super Sabres, which like all Wild Weasels had the unique job of baiting surface-to-air missile (SAM) sites to fire at them. Then “all” they had to do was evade the missile and lead an attack on the radar facility that guided the SAMs. Sometimes they, or the strike aircraft with them, would fire a radar-seeking AGM-45 Shrike missile which followed the SAM site’s radar beam right back down to the transmitting antenna. When these relatively early-technology missiles missed - as often happened - or when the aircraft ran out of missiles, Wild Weasels would attack SAM sites with bombs or their M-61A1 20mm Vulcan cannon.

### **“Soowies”**

Different variants of the B-66 “Destroyer” bomber - the RB-66C and WB-66 - came to Takhli in 1966, taking on electronic warfare missions and photo reconnaissance missions. These old planes were originally medium-range nuclear bombers derived from the Navy A-3 Skywarrior. They came to Takhli from the 42<sup>nd</sup> Electronic Countermeasures Squadron (ECS) in France and the 41st and 42d Tactical Electronic Warfare Squadrons (TEWS) from Shaw AFB South Carolina. They were fully mission-capable, with up to twice the radar-jamming punch of a B-52 “BUFF.” They were very helpful to F-105 strike missions. The “C” models were listeners – electronic intelligence (ELINT) and reconnaissance gatherers rather than active jammers. Soowies (their unofficial nickname) were said to be something of a maintenance headache, with idiosyncrasies that included having to burglarize aircraft museums to find spare engine parts.

### **Ranch Hand**

The herbicide spraying missions began in Vietnam in 1961, and it has recently been revealed that some took place from Thai bases, including Takhli, as early as 1966. This pre-dates the Air Force receiving permission to use herbicides for clearing areas on and around Thailand bases for area and perimeter defense, which was given in 1969. The missions in 1966 defoliated areas surrounding parts of the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos, near the Vietnam border and north of the DMZ (the De-Militarized zone at the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel), and had the approval of both the Thai and Laotian governments. C-123 aircraft were used on the missions, possibly escorted by B-57 Canberras. The missions were extensive enough to have required pre-positioning or maintaining stocks of the herbicides.

It seems likely that Orange would have been the agent of choice for these missions, since it was the best choice for area defoliation. White was also used, but required up to four times the application rate of Orange, and Blue was primarily used for crop destruction. Instances of herbicide use on Takhli are finally being reported today.

### **Operation Rolling Thunder**

Under Operation Rolling Thunder IV in 1966, Thuds from Takhli took a big role in bombing closer than ever before to downtown Hanoi, in an attack on a petroleum-oil-lubricants (POL) storage facility four miles from the center of Downtown. Ninety-five percent of the tank farm was destroyed, and the smoke column from burning fuel rose to 35,000 feet. As icing on a successful mission, 18 trucks were destroyed by 20mm Vulcan cannon strafing after the bombing, and one MiG was shot down.

In late 1967, the first F-105G Wild Weasels arrived and were assigned to the 357<sup>th</sup> TFS. Their aircraft were specially modified two-seat variants of the Thud, which took over the Wild Weasel job from the F-100s. The Electronic Warfare Officer (EWO) in an F-105G (also known as the “back-seater;” “GIB,” for guy-in-back; or “Bear,” for trained bear) ran all the new electronic equipment for locating SAM or anti-aircraft artillery (AAA) radars, warning of SAM launches, and sending Shrike missiles down the radar beams.

### **MiG Killers**

Although the F-105 was not designed to be primarily a dogfighter, the aircraft was successful in killing at least 27 confirmed North Vietnamese MiGs in aerial combat. Air Force Captain Max C. Brestel, piloting a Thud from Takhli, shot down the first MiG “double” of the Vietnam War on 10 March 1967. He was the only Thud pilot ever to do that.

### **Medal of Honor**

On the very same day that Captain Brestel got his double, Captain Merlyn H. Dethlefsen won the Medal of Honor for actions including taking out two SAM sites during a mission from Takhli. His flight leader was shot down, his wingman was shot up and had to abort, and his own aircraft was severely damaged by AAA on a mission to bomb the Thai Nguyen steel works north of Hanoi. Major Dethlefsen took over command of the flight and attacked the defensive positions around the target. He evaded several MiG fighters and successfully destroyed two missile sites. His back-seater was awarded the Air Force Cross for this mission.

On 19 April 1967, Major Leo K. Thorsness won the Medal of Honor on another F-105 mission out of Takhli. The Major killed one SAM site with a missile, bombed another, shot down a MiG, damaged another, and repeatedly chased or lured other MiGs away from an ongoing rescue mission for his wingman, who had been shot down by AAA fire. Thorsness’ back-seater Captain Harold E. Johnson was awarded the Air Force Cross for the mission. Less than two weeks after this mission, the two were shot down by an Atoll missile from a MiG-21, and became prisoners of war. They were not released until 1973.

### **Tet**

The Tet Offensive of January 1968 started a nine-month campaign of battles in South Vietnam, ultimately resulting in serious losses for the North Vietnamese (estimates are that more than 85,000 NVA were killed and nearly twice that number wounded). Despite very limited experience in using big fast F-105s for close air support of ground troops up

until this time, Takhli pilots took their Thuds into the thick of it, participating in most of the counteroffensive campaigns.

### **Operation Combat Lancer**

In 1968, the first F-111 “Aardvarks” (an unofficial nickname, since the F-111 never was graced with an official one) arrived at Takhli from the 428th Tactical Fighter Squadron at Nellis AFB. These huge, brand new, very expensive swing-wing all-weather day-or-night fighter-bombers were to get their first combat test and evaluation to see if they could actually replace the aging Thuds. Unfortunately, three of them were lost within the first month – two to unknown causes and one to a manufacturing defect. The three surviving F-111s returned to Nellis in November, having proven that only a few aspects of the new aircraft worked as they were designed to. When 50 F-111s returned to Thailand in 1972, however, they proved much more successful.

In 1969 the 44th Tactical Fighter Squadron moved from Korat RTAFB in central Thailand, to Takhli. This move put all the Thuds in Southeast Asia at Takhli, where they stayed until December 1970.

Earlier that year, the 355<sup>th</sup> TFW got its second PUC, for action in 1967 in and near Hanoi, as well as the attack later that year which took out the largest MiG base in North Vietnam. The wing’s third PUC was awarded in 1970 for action in 1969, during which the 355<sup>th</sup> flew 17,000 combat sorties and dropped 32,000 tons of ordnance on 2,100 targets.

### **Six Fifties**

I wrote home one day in 1970 about the Thai Air Force 43<sup>rd</sup> Tactical Fighter Wing pilot who got the undivided attention of every last man on the base. It was lunchtime, and the chow hall was busy, but when that pilot pulled the trigger on the six fifty-cal machine guns in the nose of his F-86 Sabre as he lined up for takeoff ... everybody froze. He must have emptied the guns, because it was a very, very long burst. Lucky for everybody, he was pointed toward empty jungle when he let loose, and not any part of the base.

### **The Son Tay Raid**

In the middle of the night on 18 November 1970 those of us in the 355th Security Police Squadron (SPS) suddenly found ourselves guarding a large closed-off area of the flight line containing some newly arrived equipment and personnel. We were told nothing about what was in there or why; rather it was strongly suggested that we ignore what we saw and not speculate (“*The Air Force doesn’t pay you to THINK, Sergeant!*”). As it turns out, this was the staging area for the raiders who were about to try to rescue 90 American prisoners of war (POWs) from the Son Tay prison camp in North Vietnam.

The raiders traveled in closed vans from a sealed hangar to their barracks in an old CIA compound in a remote corner of the base. On Thursday, 19 November, they rode in those vans to our firing range to test-fire all their weapons one last time - 65 men, and 111 weapons including M-16s, CAR-15s, .45s, M-79s, M-60s and 12-gauge shotguns.

At 2030 hours Friday night, 20 November, they took off in a C-130 bound for Udorn RTAFB. There they boarded CH-53 helicopters for the actual mission. Everything about this daring, complex and innovative mission worked, except that when they hit the prison camp the prisoners had already been moved elsewhere. The discussion of why the prisoners were moved continues even today. After reading the details of this amazing operation, I'm very proud to have played even my unnoticeable small part in it.

### **Shutting Down**

Takhli began closing down in late 1970, as a part of a general withdrawal of American forces from Southeast Asia. First, the B-66 squadrons were transferred to Korat. In September, the F-105G Wild Weasels followed. The wing's last combat mission, a strike in Laos, flew in October. The next day there was a ceremony to retire the wing's colors, and a flyover of F-105s that I photographed.

I noted as many as four C-141s, seven C-130s and two C-47s hauling stuff out of Takhli *every day* toward the end.

With the departure of all the combat aircraft, the Security Police and K-9 mission shifted to guarding the remaining equipment and supplies, base infrastructure, personnel and our own personal possessions from marauding locals. We K-9s were taken off the perimeter and spent our nights guarding the supply compound, hootches, salvage yard, clubs, bank, BX and so on. The more we packed up and shipped off, the bolder the local area resident thieves became. Plumbing fixtures, wire in the walls of buildings, virtually anything unguarded was fair game. It got to the point that one of our own K-9 troops had to defend himself with his bayonet in his own hootch on his night off, resulting in the bleeding suspect being tracked down and apprehended by another dog team.

A week after that incident, I wrote in a letter home: "One of the guys caught a Thai stealing from the barracks just last night – actually he caught three, but 97-pound Dante ate one while the other two disappeared." Dante's handler, Alex Liverano, received the following letter for this incident:

Department of the Air Force  
Headquarters 355<sup>th</sup> Combat Support Group, PACAF  
9 Dec 70  
Reply to: Attn 355<sup>th</sup> Security Police Squadron

Subject: Letter of Favorable Communication

To: A1C Liverano, Alexander

1. I wish to commend on your outstanding performance while performing protection duties around the 1100 hootch area on 7 Dec 1970. Your devotion to duty and aggressive action led to the apprehension of a suspect who was in the process of looting government and personal property from the area.

2. Your accomplishment has set a standard for your contemporaries to follow. It is a pleasure to have men of your caliber in the organization. I know that you will continue to exhibit the same outstanding performance in the future.

William J. Fadal, Captain, USAF  
Director of Security

The departing F-105 squadrons went to McConnell AFB, Kansas; Davis-Monthan AFB, Arizona, and Kadena AB, Okinawa. The 355<sup>th</sup> TFW was inactivated, then in 1971 reactivated at Davis-Monthan AFB.

The last USAF personnel left Takhli RTAFB by April 1971.

### **Reopening**

On 30 March 1972, the North Vietnamese Army sent 120,000 NVA regular troops into South Vietnam. They brought three different kinds of Soviet-built tanks, long-range artillery, radar-controlled AAA, mobile SAM sites and shoulder-launched SAMs with them. It was the first time they had deployed some of this stuff anywhere besides Hanoi. The attack has been called the "Spring '72 Invasion," "Easter Offensive," or "Spring Offensive."

The USAF reacted to the invasion quickly and with many resources. One of these was Operation Constant Guard III, the largest movement that the Tactical Air Command (TAC) had ever pulled off. In nine days, they deployed 72 F-4Ds of the 49<sup>th</sup> TFW from Holloman AFB, New Mexico, to Takhli. The move included more than 3,000 personnel and 1,600 tons of cargo.

Airmen arriving from Holloman reported that Takhli was a mess, with missing or broken plumbing fixtures, no hot water, and no drinking water - that had to be trucked in from Korat every day. Bed frames had been thrown out of the hootches into the high snake-infested grass, and mattresses or bedding consisted of whatever you had brought with you. Sorry, guys, we left it in better condition than that. Honest.

Security Police were deployed with an unbelievable lack of support equipment, vehicles and communications gear. Equipment was sent from other Thailand and Vietnam bases, but in a sad display of selfishness, much of that equipment was inoperable. Radio battery chargers didn't work, at least one M-60 was inoperable, base communications stations sent from Ubon and NKP were received without any transistors or tubes, and a mobile radio unit from Korat was inoperative. In May, with more than 100 base defense positions to man, they could only muster 15 radios, and they didn't get enough radios until July. More than half of the few vehicles available didn't run. Also typically, base defenses were constructed, or rebuilt, using the Security Police troops for labor. The Air Force has concluded that it's fortunate the base defenses weren't tested during this time.

The squadrons from Holloman were the 7th TFS, 8th TFS and 9th TFS. It's notable that during this deployment the 49th TFW flew more than 21,000 combat hours over five months without losing any aircraft or personnel. The 49<sup>th</sup> TFW was awarded an Air Force Outstanding Unit Award with Combat "V" Device for this tour.

Other units deployed to Takhli at this time included:

- The 11th Air Refueling Squadron's KC-135's from Altus AFB, Oklahoma.
- The 366th TFW's 4<sup>th</sup> TFS of F-4Es from Da Nang South Vietnam.
- The 8<sup>th</sup> TFW's AC-130 "Spectre" gunships from Ubon RTAFB, which became the Det 1, 16<sup>th</sup> Special Operations Squadron.

The "6499th Provisional" was the first unit number given to the Security Police assigned to the newly reopened base, followed by at least "two or three additional designations," according to one of the first dog handlers to arrive. About 20 sentry dog teams came to Takhli's grand reopening from Clark AFB.

In September the squadrons of the 49<sup>th</sup> TFW returned home. The 366th TFW remained until 30 October when it was deactivated, and its 4th TFS was reassigned to the 432<sup>nd</sup> Tactical Reconnaissance Wing (TRW) at Ubon RTAFB. The 366<sup>th</sup> was reactivated at Mountain Home AFB, Idaho.

When the F-4s left, the F-111s came back. The 474<sup>th</sup> TFW came on TDY from Nellis AFB, Nevada, with its 428<sup>th</sup>, 429<sup>th</sup> and 430<sup>th</sup> squadrons. Their first combat mission, started only hours after their arrival at Takhli, resulted in the disappearance of one of the aircraft and another temporary cancellation of F-111 missions. Despite this bad start, F-111s gave a good account of themselves over the next few months, especially in conditions when other aircraft types could not strike. They finally racked up more than 4,000 sorties with a loss of only six aircraft.

The USAF left Takhli under Operation Palace Lightning in 1975. Takhli's F-111s were sent to Korat, which did not send home the last of its aircraft until December of that year.

### **Vietnam War Honors**

#### **355<sup>th</sup> SPS at Takhli**

##### Campaign Streamers

- Vietnam Air Offensive, Phase II, 9 March 1967 – 31 March 1968.
- Vietnam Air Offensive, Phase III, 1 April – October 1968.
- Vietnam Air Ground, 22 January 1968 – 22 February 1969.
- Vietnam Air Offensive, Phase IV, 1 November 1968 – 22 February 1969.
- TET 69/Counteroffensive, 23 February – 8 June 1969.
- Vietnam Summer-Fall, 9 June – 31 October 1969.
- Vietnam Winter-Spring, 1 November 1969 – 30 April 1970.
- Sanctuary Counteroffensive, 1 May – 30 June 1970.
- Southwest Monsoon, 1 July – 30 November 1970.
- Commando Hunt V, 1 December 1970 – 14 May 1971.

#### Presidential Unit Citations

- 1 January – 10 October 1966;
- 11 – 12 Aug and 24 – 28 October 1967.

#### Air Force Outstanding Unit Awards with Combat "V" Device:

- 12 April 1967 – 11 April 1968;
- 1 July 1969 – 24 November 1970.

#### Air Force Outstanding Unit Awards:

- 1 October 1976 – 31 May 1978;
- 1 July 1978 – 31 December 1979;
- 1 June 1980 – 31 May 1981;
- 15 December 1991 – 1 August 1993.

#### Republic of Vietnam Gallantry Cross, with Palm:

- 1 April 1966 – 7 March 1967.

### **366<sup>th</sup> SPS at Takhli**

#### Campaign Streamers

- Vietnam Ceasefire, 30 March 1972 – 28 Jan 1973.

#### Republic of Vietnam Gallantry Cross, with Palm:

- 1 April 1966 – 31 October 1972.

### **The War on Terrorism**

The Thai government claimed neutrality on the war in Iraq, but U-Tapao Royal Thai Navy Airfield (RTNAF) was used by American combat aircraft flying into Afghanistan and Iraq. In addition, retired American intelligence officials have stated that U-Tapao was among the locations where al Qaeda operatives have been interrogated.

### **The 355<sup>th</sup> Today**

The wing was activated at Davis-Monthan Air Force Base in Tucson Arizona after moving from Takhli, and flies A-10 Warthogs now. I recently had the opportunity to reunite with the 355<sup>th</sup> Security Forces Squadron, when Bill Cummings and I visited the "D-bar-M." We were simply overwhelmed by the professionalism, enthusiasm and hospitality of today's Skycops. Security Forces Squadron Commander Major Kit Johnson, his Operations Deputy Captain Jim Hughes, TSgt George Roach and TSgt Ryan Wade in particular, all showed us a fantastic warm welcome and a terrific tour of their unit. Their organization, training, equipment and dedication are a wonderful tribute to my old squadron, and to the memory of many absent companions.

When I saw what Security Forces in the 355<sup>th</sup> have become I felt a little bit of inadequacy, comparing present capabilities to what we could do in 1970. But the attitude of today's warriors is that they wouldn't be what they are today without the foundation we put down, the things we learned, and the sacrifices some of us made during the Vietnam War. They salute us, and that makes me very, very proud.

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