

The Pilot

by Frederick Wickert

It was 1969 and the Vietnam War was in full swing. I was at Tahkli Royal Thai Air force Base in the 355th TAC Fighter/Bomb Wing. The wing was used primarily to bomb North Vietnam and the Ho Chi Minh Trail, the major supply route of the enemy. The wing flew two types of aircraft. Primarily, F-105's nicknamed the "nickel" or the "thud." They also flew the B-66. Most of them were converted to electronic jamming equipment to jam the enemy's radar and communications while the F-105's did the bombing

Hanoi Hanna said in her daily broadcasts, "When the rice is tall, Tahkli will fall." At the time there was a new water tower being built on the base and she said in her broadcasts the water tower would never be completed. At the time the new F-111, a highly classified aircraft was brought in to be tested for the first time in combat. A large scale sapper attack was not unexpected.

I served as an NCO (non-commissioned officer) in the Security Police for the American side of the base. We were the security that protected the base from the enemy, together with the Thai Jungle Patrol who patrolled in a three and four thousand yard circumference around the outside of the base. We were armed with M16 rifles and M62 machine guns. The Bomb Area patrol was armed with a jeep mounted .30 caliber machine gun and one of the SAT teams had a truck mounted .50 caliber machine gun. A .85mm mortar was placed at the Bomb Storage area to deliver flare lighting to whatever section of the base that might require it, in addition to whatever artillery assistance might be needed. There was a stand by helicopter to carry a SAT team with an m62 machine gun in the event an enemy helicopter was sighted dropping insurgents in the jungle in the base perimeter. In addition there was a contingent of Thai Guards armed with .30 caliber M1 Carbines to back us up.

The security forces worked in two shifts. The night shift from 7:00 P.M. until 7:00 A.M. had twice the number of men on duty as the day shift because 85% of all attacks occurred during night time hours.

The base was divided in sectors. Each sector had an NCO in charge. There were a number of security posts with sand bagged bunkers and there was a SAT team for each area. In some sectors we had K-9 sentries on foot in the perimeter areas. The outside fringes had trip flares in place to warn us of anyone approaching. The NCOIC, (non-commissioned officer in charge) rode with the SAT team. The NCOIC of every SAT Team was equipped with a grenade rifle and snap flares. The SAT Team patrolled the sector but responded to investigate anything unusual reported by any of the other guards. If any guard came under attack the SAT Team immediately responded to assist. There was an additional SAT team that could respond to whatever area might need it.

One night while patrolling with my SAT Team, I encountered some guards away from their post. They refused to go back to their post. An EB66 had crashed north of the end of the runway in the jungle. The crash site was kept under guard to prevent anyone from disturbing it or getting hurt from unexploded ordnance until it could be entirely cleaned up and crash investigators completed their work.

The guards off their post were in obvious fear and distress. They claimed they saw the ghost of the pilot standing with his seat still strapped to him and a big grin on his face. The pilot was trying to unlatch his seat belts to release himself from the seat. American personnel went to the scene and returned rapidly, reporting having seen the same thing the Thai Guards had seen.

The decision was made to allow the guards to guard the area from a wider perimeter than previously, until the remains of the aircraft had been recovered and the scene cleared.

The investigation had revealed the plane had burst into flames when it crashed. Some of it had dug itself into the dirt. None of the crew had escaped. The B66 was an extremely difficult aircraft to bailout from, the only exit being the bomb bay doors. Something had gone wrong and the plane crashed before getting to the runway to land. The body of the pilot had been found blown clear of the plane, still in his seat with the latches on the seat

belts melted into his hands. He had been alive when the plane hit and was unable to release the seat belts before he died.

Just for the record, Hanoi Hanna was wrong. Tahkli never fell and the water tower was completed and provided the required water pressure for the entire base. The last I heard it was still standing intact, long after the Vietnam War was over. Attacks were made on the Thai Communications site on what we called Signal Hill outside the base. We provided security for the American communications site on Signal Hill but the Thai provided their own. Three nights before I left for the States, I and my SAT Team captured a Viet Cong infiltrator in the same sector the bomber had crashed in. The prisoner was subsequently turned over to the Thai Air Police for interrogation. I never learned what the infiltrator was up to.



Photo of the author with the .30 cal. machine gun on the jeep in the Bomb Storage sector. Note the windshield tied down to permit the machine gun to swing 180 degrees.