

79 Sqn.
RAAF Ubon.

David Marr



79 Squadron was sent to Ubon, to help resist an expected invasion of Thailand by North Vietnamese forces. Although no attack eventuated, the Squadron's Sabres were kept fully armed, maintaining a state of constant operational readiness. After five years in Thailand, No 79 Squadron was disbanded,

The above photo was taken in Ubon in May 1962 by a media photographer who was there to do a news article for the "folks back home". The only names I can remember are; [Bill Bastion](#) (deceased) on the right, yours truly, third from the right (front row) and I think the big fella standing behind me in the centre (behind the Sq) is Dan McCann (correct spelling unknown) who was, I think, a sumpie and a great bloke. If anyone can put names to the other faces, I would appreciate it.



Some years later, after I had finished my RadTechs course and was posted to 11 Sqn at Richmond, I ran into both Bill and Dan again.

You may notice also, that we are all in regulation tropical kit, shorts and thongs!!.

Bill Bastion was a lovely bloke and a great mentor to a very “wet behind the ears” RadMech. We had some great times in Malaya and Thailand. Bill was a very active member of the “Boatie” club in Butterworth. It makes my blood boil to think of the treatment he received from Veteran Affairs in later years. I was with him in Ubon when the so called “incident” on which he based his disability claim occurred. The one that didn’t happen, according to the “investigators”??? It’s funny, I could have sworn I had a 303 Lee Enfield and clips of live ammunition shoved into my hands and told in no uncertain terms to “LOAD THAT BLOODY THING AND GET IN A HOLE”.

Must have been dreaming!!.

(The incident occurred on the night of the 19th/20th of June 1962. For several consecutive nights, the American LION radar team at Ubon had detected what they identified as possibly 20 low flying aircraft on their radar screens. They decided that the most likely explanation was that the Communist Pathet Lao was moving insurgents across the Thai border towards Ubon. Wing Commander Hubble, the Australian Commanding Officer at Ubon, ordered two Sabre jets, piloted by Flight Lieutenant Doug Johnston and Flying Officer Cliff Viertel, to take off and intercept the perceived threat. Hubble also ordered the ground crew to be issued with weapons and ammunition, to dig weapon pits and prepare to defend the base. Bill Bastion was one of those ground crew members. The incident turned out to be a false alarm, and the radar blips were never adequately explained - tb)

Here are a few tales from my memories of Ubon. Some of these tales may refer to questionable activities, so I hasten to say that, at no time did “baggers” participate. It was only us singleies. Of course!!.

Bill and I were the radio section (he the corporal, me the erk), detached from 77 Sqn. Butterworth and flown by Dak to Bangkok with the advance group, to stage the Sabres enroute to Ubon. We were given 12 hours notice and left the day before payday, so of course we were all penniless. Not a good situation to be in, in paradise. The FO in charge of the group was a very understanding bloke and broke out the imprest, which, when divvied up, was just about enough for a night on the town.



We received an official welcome from the Thai Government and were granted “guest status” for the duration and supplied with free transport. So that was another problem solved. We all headed for town, hell-bent on having a good time and sampling the wares while the money lasted. Well, you probably couldn’t understand how well we were received by the locals in general and the “lovely ladies” of Bangkok in particular, but, as I recall, we all arrived back at the hotel, in the morning, penniless, except for a stake to cover a return fare to town that night, (supplied by said lovely ladies). And so it continued for the duration.

After seeing the Sabres through Bangkok, we were flown to Ubon by Herc. and arrived to find a very basic “tent city” for accommodation, beside a large, concrete, WW11, Japanese airstrip. Nearby was the small town of Ubon and crossing the strip was a mud track to a nearby kampong (native village). On said track, at any time, would be seen, a continuous stream of villagers, water buffalo, pi dogs (*wild dog*) and other assorted livestock including [kraits](#) (small, deadly, vipers). Needless to say, these made landings and takeoffs interesting and after several blown tyres (“*lookit them smokin brakes!*”), a tarmac patrol was established to clear the strip when required. Interestingly, on a couple of occasions, the afore mentioned kraits were found up in the wheel wells of Sabres and must have been kicked up into there during takeoff or landing. Probably the former, because I seem to remember they were somewhat cold and dead.

Ahhh!!! Ubon, what a place. Just a small provincial town, and sooo-- friendly. Everywhere we went people waved and welcomed us and the children were beautiful.

Being good airmen, the first priority of course was to check out the entertainment. Waaa— hooooo!!!. BONANZA!!! There were movie theaters, eateries and drinkeries (who remembers Ah Fats and Frosty Freddie's ?) and surprise! surprise!, quite a few “houses of evening entertainment”, so many in fact, that after the first few nights, when they were given descriptive names such as The Shiny Floor or The Staircase etc. we had to resort to sequential numbering, ie. Number. 86, Number. 87 etc. We were only “sight seeing” of course.



And so, we settled into regular Air Force life in Thailand. Wake up in the morning, (god! there must have been a budgerigar perched over my head all night), crawl out of the cot, check the boots for scorpions, wear the boots to the ablutions to avoid bites from the deadly kraits and thense on to breakfast and the flight line. Preflights first up, see them off into the “wide blue” and then settle down to some serious 500 for an hour or so until they return. It’s a hard life, but someone has to do it.

The Americans arrived after a few weeks, with a radar installation, Talk about air movements! After our big operation involving a Herc. and a Dak to move our unit, this was something to see. An endless stream of Herc’s etc. on 20 minute turnaround, disgorging endless amounts of heavy vehicles, equipment and personnel. They do it in style, the Yanks. Their bloody great trucks had automatic transmissions, for god’s sake. This is the early sixties don’t forget. The first automatic Holden didn’t surface until the EK in 1962 and I doubt if there would have been more than half a dozen automatic vehicles of any kind in Australia at that time. And their tents! They had timber floors and air-conditioning !!!!! They really do it tough in the US services.

Soon after their arrival, we had a conference with the Yanks, to advise them on how to best blend in with the local population and respect their ways. For instance, don’t throw money at them, be prepared to haggle over prices etc. This was normal life and an enjoyment to the Thai’s. This system worked during the time that I was there, but sadly, soon broke down, as I discovered, when passing through a couple of months later.

On that occasion, I caught a samlo to the base from town, (a fare of 4 baht previously) and when I beat him down from 40 baht (Yank price) to 4 baht, the poor guy actually broke out in tears and wrapped his arms around me and thanked me for doing it. The Yanks had lost the Thai's respect.

I'm not bagging the Yanks. I actually became very good mates with two of them for the duration and was overwhelmed by their generosity. They just seem to lack subtlety or common sense when it comes to other races.



The "incident" referred to previously, (apart from scaring the shite out of everybody and putting a whole new slant on the reason for our being there), had it's lighter moments.

I had received notice of my imminent return to Butterworth and so, had gone to town with the Yank mates, for a last night of entertainment and to purchase a few bottles of Mekong whiskey, which I had become partial to and knew I wouldn't be able to get in Malaya. We were rudely awoken in the early hours of the morning, by the unearthly howling of every pi dog in the region. We couldn't go back to sleep, so decided to return to base. In the confusion I forgot the 4 bottles of Mekong under the bed. Damn! It wasn't a good start to the day. When we got to base, all the lights were on and there seemed to be a lot of activity. "Oh well, it's a bit early for me, must finish me beauty sleep. Another big day coming up." I had just dropped me daks and was standing there scratching the goolies, when a very irate WOD stuck his head through the flap and demanded to know what the hell I was doing? My brain was at full idle at the moment so the response was totally automatic. "I'm just getting dressed sir", pulling up previously dropped daks. (There is a God that protects drunks and erks). It was at this stage that I was told in no uncertain terms to, "get dressed, get to the armoury, get a rifle and ammunition and get in a hole".

All the personnel not on the flight line had been issued "spades, digging, for the use of" and told to dig trenches. A certain "*cooks arse*" who had never previously been observed in actual motion, was to be seen in a hole, about 4 metres deep, from which a mighty stream of dirt and invective was issuing. I think he was on his way back to Malaya or Australia, by shovel.

Fortunately, my absence from the flight line was noticed and I was retrieved and returned to the line before I got involved in any serious shovel work myself.

The Thai Royal Family (King Bhumibol and Queen Sirikit) visited the base to officially thank us for our presence in Thailand. A couple of Sabres and crews (pilots and line crew) were moved out to the end of the strip to maintain the state of readiness for which we were in Thailand, (not "active service" according to DVA). Well, it was pretty boring, sitting around out there and missing the fun back in camp, so, someone suggested a krait hunt. I think the score was half a dozen before we lost interest. Is it any wonder we wore our boots to the latrines at night?

The Thai Air Force turned up to take an active roll in the defence of the country. It was an awe inspiring sight when they flew overhead, in formation, to join the landing circuit. Four WW11 Harvards in full fighting kit. The enemy probably turned on their heels and took flight right then.

The Harvards were pretty scary, (In Australia they were called the WIRRAWAY - tb) they carried their armament under the wing and it consisted of any combination of two, of the following; machine guns, rockets or 25 lb. Bombs. They would in fact, probably be very effective in jungle warfare. I'm not sure what equipment they used for communications. Probably Mk. 11 speaking tubes by the look of them. You know, blow in the mouthpiece, tweeeet. "Blue leader to base". "Over".



It was interesting to compare the different landing techniques of the Sabres and Harvards. The former would be, full on brakes, with smoke pouring off them all the way, and the latter would touch down and run the entire length of the strip, with the tail up, until they reached the exit point, where they would throttle off, drop the tail and swing off to the park area. The Thai pilots were terrific young kids and as proud as peacocks. You should have seen them strut in their stuff in their leather jackets and helmets.

Well, all good things must come to an end. It was with great sadness that I left Ubon and returned to Butterworth, I would have liked to stay there for the remainder of my overseas posting but the powers that be had other ideas. Ah well, ours is not to question why.

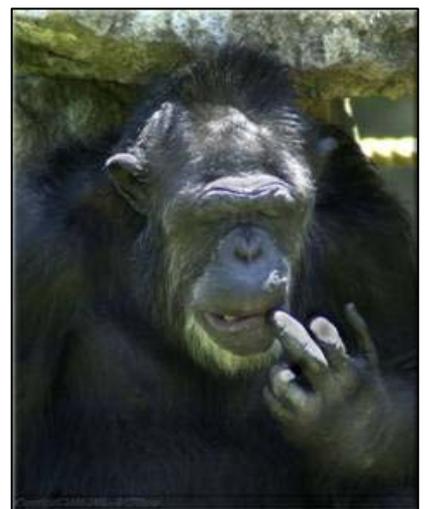
THE RAAF STORY

A tourist walked into a pet shop and was looking at the animals on display.

While he was there, an officer from the local RAAF base came in and said to the shopkeeper, "I'll take one of those monkeys, please".

The shopkeeper nodded, went to a cage at the side of the store and took out a monkey. He put a collar and lead on the animal and handed it to the officer saying, "That'll be \$2000, please" The officer paid and left with the monkey.

The surprised tourist went up to the shopkeeper and said, "That was a very expensive monkey. Most of them are only a few hundred dollars. Why did that one cost so much?" The shopkeeper answered, "Ah, that's a special 'Technician' monkey; he can rig aircraft flight controls, pass the RAAF fitness test, set up a perimeter defence and perform the duties of any Warrant Officer with no back talk or complaints. It's well worth the money."



The tourist then spotted another monkey in another cage. "That's even more expensive! \$10,000!! What does it do?", he asked.

"Oh, that one", replied the shopkeeper. "That's an 'Engineering Officer' monkey. He can instruct at all levels of maintenance, supervise maintenance at Unit, intermediate and Depot level and even does all the paperwork. A very useful monkey indeed."

The tourist looked around a little longer and found a third monkey in a cage. This time the price tag was \$50,000. The shocked tourist exclaimed, "This one costs more than the other two combined! What in the world can it do?"

"Actually," said the shopkeeper, "I've never really seen him do anything but drink beer, play with himself and wind-up the other monkeys, but his papers say he's a Pilot."