

NAKED FANNY: A SPECIAL PLACE

A PLACE CALLED NAKED FANNY? ...That fosters memories? ...Must have been an after-hours hangout where GIs went at the end of their shift to help relieve the stresses of their work day.

In describing Naked Fanny I'm reminded of the "old saw" or adage about Indiana. It is said about the Hoosier State that "North Vernon is in the south; South Bend is in the north; and French Lick isn't what you think it is."

No, Naked Fanny wasn't a bar or, as they say in more polite circles, "a house of ill repute." In fact, its real name wasn't even Naked Fanny. But it's just as real as any of those other places and for thousands of Air Force veterans from the Vietnam War, it brings back tons of memories. You see, Naked Fanny was the nickname associated with a Royal Thai Air Force Base located near the northeastern town of Nakhon Phanom, Thailand. Leave it to a GI to slap a moniker like Naked Fanny on a city called Nakhon Phanom.

The following summation is based on factual information gathered and published in an article entitled "The First Bridge," written by Lt. Col. Robert Hanson, USAF, Ret., which appeared in the December 2012 issue of *Flight Journal*. Portions used appear with his permission.

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Nakhon Phanom village welcome sign. Notice that the spelling on the sign is “NakornPanom,” which is how the locals called it.

For the record, in 1962, plans were well underway to build an American airbase on the site of what was called Nakhon Phanom Royal Thai Air Force Base. As a matter of fact, the Seabees had already begun actual work on building the base in August of that year. So, it was not a result of the information that follows that the base was constructed. But since the whys and wherefores of locating the air base at Nakhon Phanom are steeped in international diplomacy; for our purposes a brief summary will suffice.

And while it was not the results of a specific U.S. Air Force mission that occurred on January 13th of 1965, that were responsible for its existence, the results of that mission do give credence to the need for the base’s being and for the overall mission it supported.

The mission, ordered by General Curtis LeMay, Air Force Chief of Staff, involved the bombing of a wooden bridge on Route 7 in Laos. To accomplish the destruction of the Ban Ken Bridge, the General called on four F-100 and 16 F-105 fighter bombers from bases in Thailand; four F-100s based at Da Nang, South Vietnam; and a recce or RF-101 Voodoo reconnaissance aircraft for damage assessment.

Although the Ban Ken Bridge was destroyed, unanticipated anti-aircraft artillery (AAA) placements near the target area brought down an F-100 and an F-105. While both pilots ejected and survived, it was truthfully “only by the grace of God” that they were rescued by Air America H-34 helicopters.

Captain Al Vollmer, the F-105 driver, was rescued only because an Air America C-123 happened to hear his call on the universal emergency aircraft frequency known as the “guard channel” and was able to get in touch with an H-34 that was nearby in Laos on a cargo and personnel run.

Captain Chuck Ferguson, pilot of the F-100, through the kindness of Laotian friendlies, was taken out of harm's way and picked up by another Air America H-34 the following day.

The fact that the two pilots were rescued almost entirely by chance, underscored the urgent need for locating U.S. Air Force Combat Search and Rescue (CSAR) men and aircraft nearer to what would become the field of air battle throughout the remainder of the war.

Nakhon Phanom Royal Thai Air Force Base (NKP- RTAFB), Thailand was located approximately 350 miles northeast of Bangkok and about 10 miles southwest of the town of Nakhon Phanom. More than 16,000 inhabitants lived in the northeastern Thailand town. The installation was operated continuously from the early 1960s, to approximately 1976, and the base population would swell to nearly 6,000. From this location, personnel supported several U.S. agencies in conducting what became known as "The Secret War." The dangerous missions carried out in Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam resulted in many aircraft and personnel being lost.

For every one of us who served at Naked Fanny, or NKP, as the VOR (Visual Omni Range) designator for the airstrip was called, the memories are imprinted in our minds as surely as a branding iron leaves its lasting mark on the hide of a steer. Many of the events that triggered those memories may have been similar to events that occurred at other bases in Southeast Asia during that time. But the memories of Naked Fanny were made special because there was a certain unique feeling about the place. From the earliest temporary duty (TDY) troops who bivouacked there with only tents for shelter as they set up communication links; waited for the call to respond to a search and rescue mission; or established an operational search radar site; to the Air Commandos who fought the "Secret War," there was a feeling of camaraderie. No matter what your duty or mission was, for every guy on that base—whether it was during the early days with fewer than 100 troops, or later on with thousands assigned there—there was a feeling of brotherhood. If you were fortunate to have been there and experienced that special feeling, you were blessed. It was something that the men with whom I served never experienced anywhere else.

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To give the reader an idea of what it was like for those of us who were there during the early days, imagine you are an Air Force GI assigned to a radar operations crew. You are off duty, but are still very much aware of the sounds of the small base made up of a radar squadron, a helicopter rescue detachment, a small communications unit and base support personnel. You would often hear the sounds of F-4C and F-105D fighter/bombers passing overhead in flights of four heading toward, or returning from bombing runs over North Vietnam. All of a sudden you hear the “whoop, whoop, whoop” of the blades of the Kaman HH-43B helicopters coming to life along the flight line. You know what is happening. A call has come into the “chopper” unit that an aircraft is down somewhere between Naked Fanny and North Vietnam and its pilot is in harm’s way. Now, eight of the guys—four officers and four enlisted troops—men you may or may not know or associate with, even on a casual basis, but who are your guys none-the-less because they live, eat and sleep around you, are being called on to risk their lives in an attempt to rescue a fellow American, on the ground in enemy territory. It becomes a personal thing—something very serious. And it causes you and others like you who are also off duty to draw into a shell. You go about your business; not making eye contact or talking with anyone else. The radar operations (Invert) crew members on duty draw into their own shells: totally focused on the mission at hand as they soon will be following those two helicopters as small “blips” on their radar scopes and “tracks” on the luminescent plotting board. They’ll need to make sure they keep track of the locations of those fragile birds by keeping in close touch with the pilots on their radios. And they’ll perform their jobs in the most professional way they know how, because eight or nine lives depend on them. And because the range of the radar may be less than where the choppers will go and those blips will disappear, their hearts will be in their throats while the rescue attempt is being made. For other members of the helicopter rescue team, all they can do is sit and wait and pray for their comrades’ safety. The tension is so thick you can cut it with a knife. And it is present in every man on the base as every breath carries with it

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the hope that your guys can get out to the site where the pilot went down; pick him up and return safely to NKP. This day, everything goes as planned and in addition to the eight men who left Naked Fanny a few hours ago, there is a ninth man who may be the most thankful man on the face of the earth at that hour. You hear the choppers coming. There they are! They're home and it's "Katy bar the door!" It's time to celebrate.

But first, the base had to be built.

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Construction sign left by the Seabees. (Photo by Jim Burns)

A BASE IN THE MAKING

THE FIRST U.S. MILITARY UNIT TO ARRIVE ON THE SITE that would become “Naked Fanny” was the U.S. Navy’s Mobile Construction Battalion Three (MCB3) (Seabees). That was in August of 1962. Navy LTJG, now CAPT George Fowler, CEC, USNR, Ret., was the Assistant Commander of MCB 3 and told their story. It is reprinted here with his permission:

George E. Fowler: It was in August of 1962, U.S. Naval Mobile Construction Battalion Three (MCB 3) deployed to Camp Kinser in Okinawa to serve as the Alert Battalion in the Pacific. Orders were received to redeploy a major portion of the battalion to Nakhon Phanom (NKP), Thailand to construct a logistic support airfield. These orders were delayed several weeks by the Cuban Missile Crisis but, within a few weeks of arriving in Okinawa, Secretary of Defense McNamara personally approved the redeployment.

The Battalion CO, CDR David P. Whyte; OPS Officer, LT Robert P. Phenix; and CDR Ben Saravia of the Commander, Naval Construction Battalion’s Pacific (COMCBPAC) staff in Pearl Harbor visited the construction site in early August. Initially, the

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airfield was to be constructed adjacent to the west side of the town of Nakhon Phanom, but this site was subsequently moved ten miles farther west in order to place the airfield out of mortar range from Thakhek, Laos, just across the Mekong River. The airfield to be constructed was designed to be 100 feet wide; 5,000 feet long; would have 500 foot overruns on each end of the runway; a parking area; a marshaling area; and a taxiway/warm-up pad.

Upon receiving the redeployment orders, an advance party was formed and sent to NKP with the mission of building a camp area where everyone could live, while constructing the airfield. This camp was located on the west side of the town of Nakhon Phanom. Commander Whyte decided to deploy the main body of MCB 3 to NKP, which would consist of a portion of Headquarters Company, Alpha (heavy equipment) Company, and Delta (construction) Company. This amounted to approximately 325 personnel covering all necessary trades and skills. The remainder of the MCB 3 would remain in Okinawa at Camp Kinser.

The necessary equipment was loaded on the USNS Muskingum for transport from the port of Naha in Okinawa to Bangkok, Thailand. Several Seabees rode the ship with the equipment and upon arrival in Bangkok the equipment was off-loaded and everything that could travel by rail was sent by train to Udorn, Thailand, where it was off-loaded and then driven to NKP. Most of the Seabees being sent to NKP flew from the U.S. Air Force Kadena Air Base in Okinawa on November 4, 1962, in KC-135s and landed in Udorn, Thailand the same day. Upon arriving in Udorn we were greeted by several Buddhist Monks in saffron robes and several water buffalo next to the runway. At this time we split into three groups. One group flew to Bangkok to drive the large equipment to NKP; one group flew into the small dirt landing strip in NKP next to the base camp; and the other group stayed in Udorn to drive equipment that had arrived by train, over the road to NKP. It was 150 miles from Udorn to

NKP and the road was unpaved, rutted and buffalo wallered. Throughout the deployment, MCB 3 continued to haul equipment and supplies, such as Pierced Steel Planking (PSP), over this road.

Meanwhile, approximately 55 personnel went to Bangkok to drive the large equipment (too large to be carried on the train to Udorn) to NKP. LTJG Richard Y. Wisenbaker was the OIC of this convoy. The route from Bangkok to NKP was approximately 550 miles long and included 150 miles of paved road from Bangkok to Korat. Unfortunately, the remaining 400 miles were unpaved, rutted, buffalo wallered roads with bamboo bridges that could not support the weight of the heavy trucks and construction equipment. All rivers had to be forded and it took 16 days for the convoy to cover the 550 miles.

After 16 days on the road, the convoy of heavy equipment arrived in NKP and it was time to get to work on the airfield.

First the site had to be cleared, then all organic matter had to be grubbed out of the soil; then borrow pits had to be opened so we could get good fill dirt that could be properly compacted; then we started bringing the airfield up to grade. To do this we worked two 10-hour shifts (0600-1600 and 1600-0200) followed by a fuel and lube crew from 0200-0600, six days a week. (Military time is based on a 24-hour clock; hence 0600-1600 would be 6 a.m. to 4 p.m.)

Shortly after arriving at NKP and starting work, MCB 3 decided that it needed more prime movers and scrapers to move the laterite fill from borrow pits to the runway site. We also decided that the five ton sheepsfoot rollers that we had were not heavy enough to properly compact the laterite. Six additional prime movers, four more scrapers and two ten ton sheepsfoot rollers were ordered. This equipment was shipped from the Seabee Center in Port Hueneme, California to Bangkok. Once again the equipment had to be driven over the road 550 miles to NKP. LTJG George E. Fowler (author of this segment) was the

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OIC of this convoy. During this convoy from Bangkok to NKP there was a major accident caused by the extremely poor roads. Unfortunately, a Seabee was killed when the steering apparatus on one of the prime movers failed; the tractor hit a tree and turned over on him.

Upon arriving back in NKP, the work went on at an accelerated pace. The goal was to have everything completed by June 1963.

As the airfield came up to grade, the drainage ditches across the center of the runway were put in and the conduits for future runway lighting were installed. Then, after final grade was achieved, it was time to “shoot” the airfield with emulsified asphalt and then cover it with PSP. Once the PSP was laid it was staked along the edges to keep it from rolling up in front of landing aircraft.

We were only approximately three weeks from finishing the entire job when the monsoon rains started. They were several weeks early that year. Because of the rain, we could not finish the airstrip at this time. A decision was made that everyone would return to homeport in Port Hueneme, California while the rains were coming down, except for a detachment of 35 Seabees who would remain in NKP. The detachment OIC was LTJG George E. Fowler and the mission was to maintain drainage at the airfield site, maintain the construction equipment and make sure that it would be ready to go back to work when the rains stopped, and to tear down a portion of the base camp that would not be required in November when everyone returned to finish the work.

Even though the warm-up pad, taxiway, parking area and marshaling area were not totally completed, an Opening Ceremony was held in mid-June 1963. An Air Force C-123 was the first plane to land on the airfield and it was followed by planes carrying members of the U.S. Embassy, the Commander of the U.S. Military Advisory Command, Thailand and the Thai Prime

Minister. The U.S. Ambassador to Thailand, Ambassador (Kenneth Todd) Young, was a speaker. The runway was officially opened.

The pilot of the C-123, the first aircraft to land on the new runway, said his instructions were to get Bangkok's international press corps to NKP before the official opening party arrived from Bangkok in the pictured C-54. Flying it was Brig. Gen. Rollen Anthis, then-7th Air Division commander in Saigon. Seabees' officials in their Navy "whites" greeted the airplane. With no ramp or taxi strip, the C-123 pilot had to taxi his aircraft off into the mud and out of sight to make room for the C-54 in the formal picture.

After the ceremony was complete, several C-130s landed and all but 35 Seabees boarded the planes for the first leg of the trip back to the States. The Detachment that remained was known as Detachment Whiskey.

Finally, in November the rains stopped and Seabees returned to NKP to finish the airfield.

All work was completed and the equipment that could be sent to Bangkok via the rail system was driven to Udorn for loading onto the train. However, there were still approximately 25 pieces of equipment that were too large for the rail system and had to be driven 550 miles back to Bangkok. On the morning of December 24, 1963, at about 0600, the airfield to be known as NKP was turned over to 13 Thai Air Force Security personnel and the final convoy of equipment left NKP heading to Udorn, which was approximately 150 miles away. The convoy OIC was LTJG George E. Fowler with LT T.C. Schmitz, Medical Corps, and 38 Seabees who had volunteered to drive the equipment to Bangkok. The convoy arrived in Udorn at approximately 2330 that same day. On Christmas Day we worked on our equipment and got it ready for the next 400 miles to Bangkok and at 0600 on December 26, 1963, we left Udorn heading for Bangkok.

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Overall, it took us six days to get to Bangkok. On December 30, we decided to keep driving as long as it took to get to Bangkok, day or night. We agreed to re-group outside of Don Muang Airport for the trip across town to the pier. The first piece of equipment got to the meeting point at 2300 and by 0200 on December 31, all equipment was there and we were escorted through Bangkok by the Thai Police. By 0400 the equipment was parked at the Klong Thoy pier, ready to be loaded aboard ship to return to Port Hueneme, California, and everyone went to a hotel and slept for most of the day. After about two days, we boarded a plane and headed back to Okinawa where we joined the main body of MCB 3 and started construction of facilities for the U.S. Marines at Camp Hansen.

For its efforts at Nakhon Phanom, MCB 3 received a “Well Done!” from CINCPAC (Commander in Chief Pacific).

THE BIRD

INFORMATION ABOUT THE HH-43B IS COURTESY OF Talking Proud website and Lt. Col. Edward S. Marek, USAF, Ret:

Lt. Col. Edward Marek: *Called the “Huskie,” the HH-43 was the first U.S. Air Force Search and Rescue bird placed in service in the Vietnam and Laotian War. That was done in June of 1964, at Nakhon Phanom (NKP) Royal Thai Air Force Base (RTAFB).*

Initially designated as H-43, it was produced by the Kaman Corporation and was first flown in 1953. The emphasis was on ruggedness of construction and increased performance that would include medical evacuation capabilities at high altitudes. The Navy, Marines and USAF bought them. The Marines loved them, logging more than 10,700 flight hours in the western Pacific and western USA.

The Air Force saw the H-43 as a crash rescue and firefighting helicopter to be used near air bases, referred to as “Local Base Rescue” (LBR). This is because the Air Force had done a study that said the lion’s share of its aircraft losses occurred within about 75 miles of an air base. As a result, the Air Force was satisfied with a 75 mile range for this helicopter. When there was

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Kaman HH-43B Huskie.

a fire, or risk of fire, with a crash, the H-43 was seen as the first responder; aloft in a minute or so, and to the scene. The pilots would drop off the firefighters on the crew, and they in turn would use the FSK (Fire Suppression Kit) to suppress the fire as best

they could until the fire trucks could get there. The rotor design was such that they created so strong a downwash that the smoke and fire would be blown away from the firefighters, allowing them to get in close to lay down the foam from the FSK. The H-43 would also bring along a medical technician.

In 1956, a Marine aircraft was tested with a new Lycoming T53 gas turbine shaft engine technology. The USAF liked that added power and in 1957 contracted with Kaman for the Huskie as a crash rescue helicopter, buying into the H-43A and the yet-to-be-flown H-43B. The Air Force took the first delivery of H-43As in November 1958, and assigned them to the Tactical Air Command (TAC), a fighter-oriented command. This reflected the requirement for the LBR mission for which the helicopter had been designed and was being procured. While the aircraft was not designed for combat SAR, you can see that it was designed as a “jack of several trades,” which is why it was not a major conceptual leap to add a SAR mission to its list of trades.

Performance using the T53 turbine engine improved so much that the H-43B was developed and flown in 1958. Production began that year and the USAF took delivery of the first of 175 H-43Bs in June. In mid-1962, the USAF changed the H-43 designation to HH-43 to reflect its rescue role. The “Huskie” was retired in April 1973.

While this helicopter looked like a toy, it was a “heckuva”

flying machine. Two Air Force pilots, Major William J. Davis and Capt. Walter J. Hodgson, flew a production H-43B to an altitude of 29,846 feet in 1959, setting a new world altitude record for helicopters. By 1961, the H-43B set five new world records: two international altitude records and three new time-of-climb records that took the aircraft to 29,526 feet in 14 minutes 30.7 seconds. In 1962, the H-43B set two new records for distance: 655 miles closed course, 688 miles straight-line course.

In September of 1964, an upgraded version of the Huskie made its way to Southeast Asia. Curiously, the first two aircraft, which had been given a more powerful engine, armor plating and additional fuel capacity in self-sealing fuel cells as well as a hoist with 250 feet of cable, were sent to Bien Hoa, an airbase outside Saigon, rather than to NKP. It was only during the fourth group of TDY personnel that elements of the upgraded version were delivered piecemeal. As Joe Ballinger recalls, the spools with 250 feet of cable came first, followed later on by the self-sealing, expanded fuel cells that allowed them to do away with the barrel rigs (credited to Fred Glover in the third TDY group).

Realizing, of course, that since, according to their initial mission, the NKP birds weren't supposed to be flying into North Vietnam, they were way ahead of the war planning game.