



PHOTOS BY JEANNE SCHRAM

Veterans who attended the local Thailand veterans group recently: from left Gary Anderson, Bob Johnson, John Gibbs, John Peterson, Russ "Sgt. Rock" Clark, Ed Anderson, Tom Fielder.

A common denominator

All the members of a local group were in Thailand during the Vietnam War

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Serving in Thailand during the Vietnam War is the common denominator for one group of veterans, all in their 70s.

This group that meets a few times a year, was organized by Tom Fielder, Aitkin. It is an offshoot of a Facebook group he discovered called Thailand-Laos-Cambodia veterans.

There were seven men in attendance at the Oct. 22 meeting held in Crosby, at the Drunken Noodle, which incidentally serves Thai food.

All but one that day served in the Air Force in the 1960s or 1970s.

U.S. MILITARY IN THAILAND

According to Wikipedia, the official American military presence in Thailand started in April 1961 when an advance party of the USAF 6010th Tactical (TAC) Group arrived at the request of the Thai government to establish an aircraft warning system at Don Muang Royal Thai Air Force Base. The USAF presence grew rapidly with the expansion of the Laotian Civil War and the Vietnam War.

The USAF would eventually use eight air-bases in Thailand: Don Muang, Korat, Nakhon Phanom, Nam Thong, Takhli, Ubon, Udorn and U-Tapao.

Due to its proximity to Thailand, Vietnam's conflicts were closely monitored by Bangkok. Thai involvement did not become official until the total involvement of the United States in support of South Vietnam in 1963. The Thai government then allowed the U.S. Air Force in Thailand to use its air and naval bases. At the height of the war, almost 50,000 American military personnel were stationed in Thailand, mainly airmen.

Following is a short synopsis of the service experiences of this local Thailand veterans group:

- Tom Fielder, Aitkin. U.S. Air Force 1968-1974. Fielder was a crew chief on F-4D Phantom jet fighters. He was at Ubon AFB in Thailand from May 1970 to May 1971. "My F-4D Jet Fighter's tail code was #7764," he said. This particular F-4 was built in 1967. Fielder said it was shot down in Laos in April 1972, but all on board were rescued. "My highlight while I served at Ubon was a ride/mission in my F-4. I got to fly it for 20 minutes. Wow, we pulled five G force on our flight." Fielder formed this group to share stories with other Thai veterans.

- Ed Anderson, Aitkin. Volunteered for the draft in the U.S. Army in 1971. He was assigned as a cryptologist working for the Defense Intelligence Agency. His group worked for all U.S. Military branches but primarily the Air Force. In Bangkok, Thailand, his group worked in a 30 foot by 30 foot vault-like building guarded by a Marine. They were trained to destroy the sensitive information if necessary. "While I didn't serve on the ground with the Air Force, I like hearing the stories about Thailand, with which I am familiar."

- John Peterson, Cromwell. He knew he would be drafted, so he enlisted in the Air Force in 1966. He was a weapons mechanic at Nakhon Phanom (NKP) Royal Thai Air Force Base in Thailand. "I made sure the guns worked as we rescued or recovered pilots who were shot down. Peterson joined the local group about a year ago and said he enjoys swapping stories.

- Bob Johnson, Tamarack. Johnson's father served in the Army Air Corps so he leaned toward the Air Force where he enlisted in 1966. He was a crew chief on the C130s at Ubon. "We were called the Blind Bats," he said. "We did

night reconnaissance, watched troop movements and lit up the trails." Johnson said one of these planes is on display in Littlerock, Arkansas. "I like being around the guys with the same experiences. It all comes together."

- John Gibbs, St. Cloud. He said he wanted to serve in the military and enlisted in the Air Force in 1968 (serving until 1972). "I thought I could learn a trade," he said. With the 388th Tactical Fighter Squad, his job while in Korat, Thailand, was working on radar and electronics on the F105s. "I considered a career in the Air Force but after I got home I changed my mind. Four years was enough." Gibbs has been in this group for about six years. "I love to hear the other's stories. It brings back good memories. I never saw the war up close but I saw the effects of it."

- Russ "Sgt. Rock" Clark, Eagle Bend. In the delayed enlistment program, Clark served in the Air Force from 1968-1974. In 1970-71, he was at U-Tapao, the largest Air Force base in Thailand and located about a four-hour distance from North Vietnam. "I was a weapons mechanic - in other words a bomb loader on a B52-David model," said Clark. His five-man crew had to load 108 bombs aboard the planes. They worked 16 hours a day and six days a week. The planes did bombing missions in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, he said. Clark heard about the group on Facebook and joined three or four years ago. "I like the camaraderie and BS war stories," he laughed.

- Gary Anderson, St. Cloud. He served in the Air Force from 1971-1974. He said he was tired of working at Montgomery Wards for \$5 an hour so he and a buddy enlisted in the Air Force. "My number would have come up the next year - I beat the draft," he said. Oddly, with the 307th Bomb Wing, Anderson was in the same squadron as Sgt. Rock at U-Tapao,

loading bombs on B52s only a short time later. "Our team made load team of the month seven times out of 12," he declared. He noted he was at that base when Hanoi was bombed. Anderson learned of the group from Sgt. Rock joining about the same time. "I like the reminiscing and talking about old times and current times," he said.

MEMBERS WELCOME

"Our group meets three to four times a year," according to Fielder. Anyone interested in joining this Thai veterans group may contact him at fielder1968@gmail.com. Fielder also belongs to a "snowbird" Thai veterans group in Gulf Shores, Alabama. He encouraged interested veterans to look into the Facebook group, Thailand-Laos-Cambodia Brotherhood and join a local group where possible.



Tom Fielder with his jet