

Takhli Royal Thai Air Force Base During the Vietnam War “PACAF’s Pride”

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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.

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 524th Tactical Fighter Squadron (TFS) of the 27th Tactical Fighter Wing (TFW) at Cannon AFB, New Mexico. More F-100s came from the 510th TFS of the 405th 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 8th TFW at Itazuke Air Base in Japan, in May 1964. More Thuds came for a while in 1965 from the 35th TFS of the 6441st TFW, and the 80th TFS of the 8th 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 476th TFS of the 479th 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 357th TFS from McConnell got permanently assigned to Takhli when the 355th TFW became the host wing in November 1965. The 355th was assigned to the 13th 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 355th 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 42nd 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.

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 357th 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 355th 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 355th 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 43rd 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 14 December 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.”

The departing F-105 squadrons went to McConnell AFB, Kansas; Davis-Monthan AFB, Arizona, and Kadena AB, Okinawa. The 355th 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 49th 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.

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 49th 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 4th TFS of F-4Es from Da Nang South Vietnam.
- The 8th TFW’s AC-130 “Spectre” gunships from Ubon RTAFB, which became the Det 1, 16th 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 49th TFW returned home. The 366th TFW remained until 30 October when it was deactivated, and its 4th TFS was reassigned to the 432nd

Tactical Reconnaissance Wing (TRW) at Ubon RTAFB. The 366th was reactivated at Mountain Home AFB, Idaho.

When the F-4s left, the F-111s came back. The 474th TFW came on TDY from Nellis AFB, Nevada, with its 428th, 429th and 430th 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

355th 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.

366th SPS at Takhli

Campaign Streamers

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

Republic of Vietnam Gallantry Cross, with Palm:

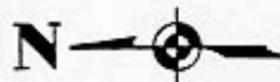
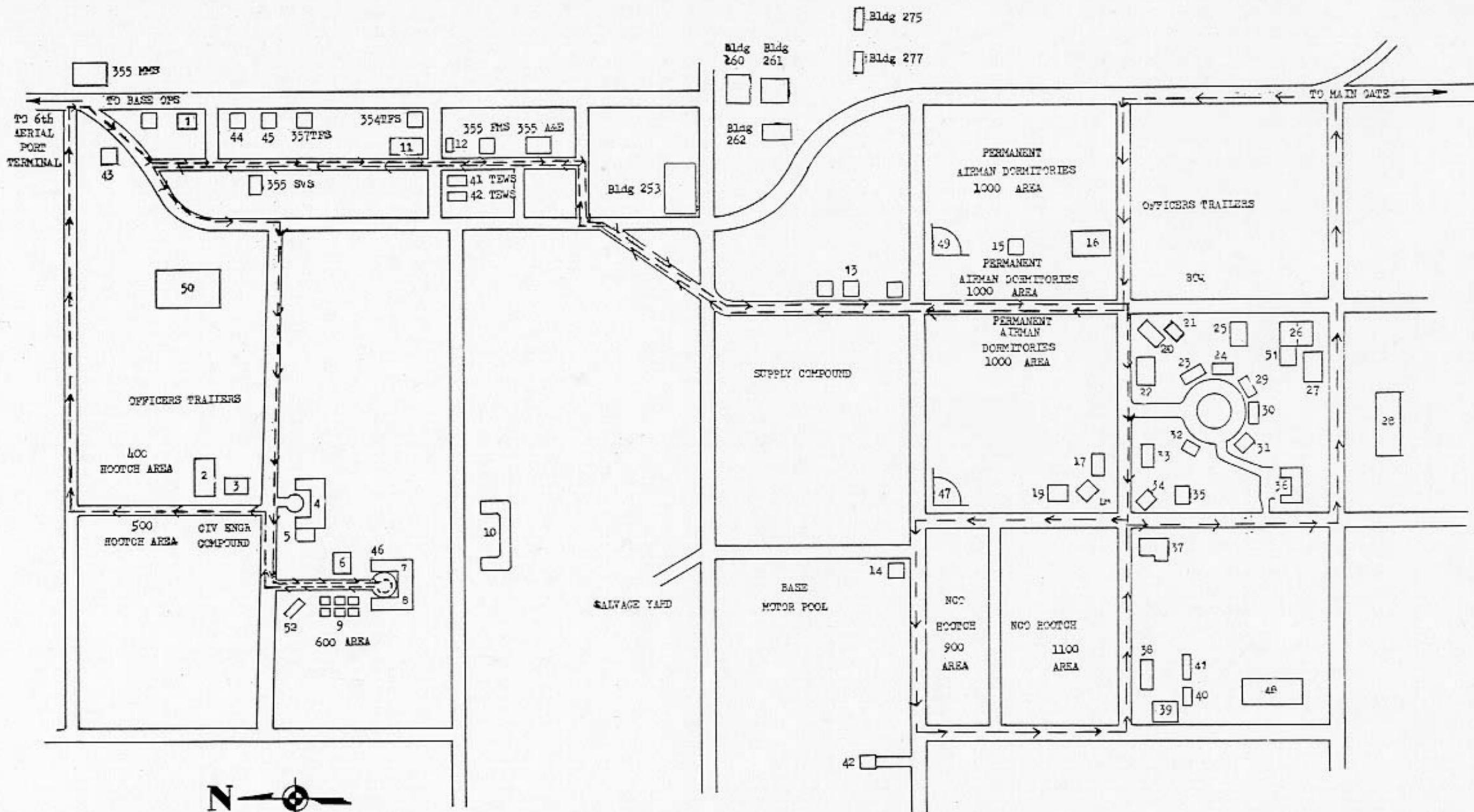
- 1 April 1966 – 31 October 1972.

Today's 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.

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← → SHUTTLE BUS ROUTE

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|---|----------------------------------|------------------------------|
| 1. 355 TAC FTR WG BQ | 16. DINING HALL #2 | 37. NEW NCO CLUB ANNEX |
| 2. OFFICERS OPEN MESS | 17. FINANCE OFFICE | 38. OLD NCO CLUB ANNEX |
| 3. SWIMMING POOL | 18. 355 CBMT SPT GP BQ | 39. PICNIC PAVILION |
| 4. BUILDING 600:
355 CSG, HQ SQ SEC
BILLETING OFFICE
RED CROSS
EDUCATION OFFICE
PERSONAL AFFAIRS
PERSONNEL SERVICES
ENTRANCE TO DINING HALL #1 | 19. CBPO | 40. GOLF DRIVING RANGE |
| 5. DINING HALL #1 | 20. CHAPEL | 41. ARCHERY RANGE |
| 6. THEATER | 21. CHAPEL ANNEX | 42. MARS STATION |
| 7. NCO OPEN MESS | 22. POST OFFICE | 43. 1980th COMM SQ |
| 8. AIRMENS CLUB | 23. BX | 44. WG INFO OFFICE |
| 9. TRANSIENT QUARTERS | 24. BX CAFETERIA | 45. WG SAFETY |
| 10. THAI BX | 25. BOWLING ALLEY | 46. RECREATION CENTER |
| 11. DEPUTY CMDR/MATERIEL (DCM) | 26. HANDBALL AND TENNIS COURTS | 47. SOFTBALL FIELD |
| 12. SNACK BAR | 27. GYMNASIUM | 48. FOOTBALL FIELD |
| 14. FMEL | 28. DISPENSARY | 49. SOFTBALL FIELD |
| 15. LINEN EXCHANGE | 29. BX CONCESSIONS & BARBER SHOP | 50. FOOTBALL/SOCCER FIELD |
| | 30. BX CONCESSIONS | 51. BASKETBALL |
| | 31. BANK | 52. OUTDOOR STAGE |
| | 32. CLOTHING SALES STORE | 13. BASE REPRODUCTION
PFO |
| | 33. LIBRARY | |
| | 34. FIRE STATION | |
| | 35. RADIO - TV STATION | |
| | 36. HOBBY SHOPS | |