

46th Special Forces Company



In the early years of the war in Vietnam the United States had many allies. Thailand was one of those valued allies that had troops in country to help fight the communists. The Thais had lived as peaceful neighbors of the Vietnamese for centuries, but during the 1960s and 1970s the struggle to keep the Communist out of that part of Southeast Asia became a major world issue. Thailand feared the fall of Cambodia and Laos to guerrillas, and wanted above all else to safeguard their independence. The 46th Special Forces Company assisted Thai forces in resisting Communist guerrilla activity along the Laotian border and in the south on the Malay Peninsula.

The origin of the 46th Special Forces Company was D Company, 1st Special Forces Group which was activated 15 April, 1967 in Thailand. In 1968, the 46th Special Forces Company was headquartered southeast of Lopburi at Camp Pawai. Later, in 1971 the 46th SF Company (which was considerably larger than a standard company) relocated to the Royal Thai Army (RTA) Special Warfare Center at Ft. Narai, Lopburi. As the 46th Special Forces received its own aviation assets, those aircraft would be located at the Pawai Airfield.

The 46th Special Forces Company conducted specialized SF training (Advanced Ranger/LRRP and radio communications' courses) at the Royal Thai Army (RTA) Special Warfare Center, Ft. Narai, Lopburi province. Additional Guerrilla and Commando skills were taught by instructors from the Royal Thai Army Special Forces (RTSF) and Royal Thai Police Aerial Resupply Unit (PARU) at the Phitsanulok training camp.



Originally the 46th Special Forces Company did not have its own aviation assets. Aviation support was provided by the 7th Airlift Platoon which organized at Fort Riley, Kansas 1967 as a classified unit designated as P001, later redesignated the 7th Airlift Platoon" (Provisional), call sign "Snow White". The unit was deployed to Thailand in February, 1968 and based at Camp Friendship adjacent to Korat Air Force Base.

By the time the 7th Airlift Platoon arrived in Thailand, the 70th Aviation Detachment was already in place at Camp Friendship. At that time the 70th had a mix of aircraft, one U-21, two Beavers, one Otter, two UH-1Cs, two UH-1Ds and an OH-23. The 7th brought with them eight brand new UH-1Hs: 17095, 17099, 17103, 17107, 17111, 17115, 17119 and 17123. They provided direct supported for the 46th Special Forces Company and USARSUPTHAI. The 70th Avn Detachment provided heavy maintenance support for the 7th, and subsequently, the 46th Special Forces after these aviation assets were reorganized.

In February, 1969, the 7th Airlift Platoon had completed its mission and prepared for deactivation. Its aircraft were reassigned to other Army Aviation units in Southeast Asia and CONUS. Four aircraft were assigned to the 70th Aviation Detachment supporting JUSMAG Thailand. That unit was relocated to Bangkok and had trimmed its fleet to U-21s and UH-1Hs.



(46th SF aircraft door art)

Some of the 7th Airlift pilots along with two UH-1Hs (17099 and 368) were assigned to the 46th Special Forces Company, call sign "Cobra", under section commander, CPT Wheeler, based at the airstrip at Camp Pawai. His command was followed by CPT James Hannon in 1971, CPT William Thompson, 1972, and CPT Bill Bethea in 1973.

Some of the other aviators assigned to the 46th Special Forces Aviation Section between March, 1972 and March, 1973 were as follows: CW2 Jerry D Wood, Maintenance Officer, CW2 Robert Whittaker, pilot, CW2 Pete Henry, pilot, CW2 Carroll A. Vaughan, instructor pilot, WO1 Wesley, pilot, WO1 Gary Bingham, pilot.



(CPT William Thompson, 1972)

The Aviation Section was under the operational control of the S-3, Operations Officer Major Munson. The missions performed by the Aviation Section of the 46th SF varied widely. They included, but were not limited to: VIP transport, USO transport, Pro Course [Special Forces Proficiency Course] support, LRRP Training Support, insertions and extractions, Photo missions, Support missions for the Thai Royal Border Patrol, Jumpmaster training mission support, E&E training support, McQuire Rig and Repelling missions, Metropop (high altitude joint parachuting competitions with civilian and military personnel), MedCap-Civil Affairs support flights throughout Thailand and adjacent borders, Company-wide Para drop proficiency training, HALO jump support, Low-Level Para drop support, Tactical and administrative transport of HHC

personnel throughout Thailand, Logistic transport for outlying training locations, and medical evacuation of patients to 5th Field Hospital in Bangkok. The unit also supported some of the transportation requirements of the Commander's Thai counterpart, Col. Tinchi who was the Commander of the Thai Special Warfare Center and was also a rotary wing aviator. Several decades later Col. Tinchi became the Minister of Defense for Thailand.

Living conditions in the Kingdom of Thailand were good. While some of the pilots in the Aviation Section lived in the BOQ at Fort Narai in Lopburi, most aviators lived in rented bungalows in Lopburi, commuting to Pawai Airfield and Fort Narai where HHC was located. Fort Narai had an officer's club, a medical clinic, a supply facility, a small PX which sold goods and some food, and a large building which housed HHC. Adjacent to that building was a small officer's club annex where all officer's calls (meetings) were held every Friday afternoon at 4pm sharp. On the other side of the main officer's club was an enormous soccer field facility with a sprint track around it surrounded by forty foot tall trees. Every evening of the week hundreds of Thai and American Special Forces pounded the cinder track in an effort to stay in shape for the upcoming missions and training they inevitably faced. Everyone, from the commander, to the staff, and everyone else based at Fort Narai kept in good physical shape for their missions.

When aviation support was required at HHC, pilots from the Aviation section would land aircraft at the soccer field near the northeast corner at a point where a large "H" was imprinted in the grass. Passengers would proceed from the HHC building westward past the officer's club to the soccer field and board the aircraft for whatever destinations were planned for the day, which could include some long distance flying for a UH-1H. Over the years the 46th SF was in country, detachments were located for various periods at: Camp Carrow (Trang), Chonburi, Kokethiem, Saraburi, Ratburi, Fort Narai (Lopburi), Kanchanaburi, Hua Hin, Bangkok, Udorn, Ubon, Nakhon Phanom, Mai Rem, Songkhia, Pranburi, Phitsanulok, Nam Phong, Chiang Kham, Ban Nong Saeng, Ban Haui Khu, Chiang Mai, Lamphun, Nan, Ban Haui Sai Tai, Muang Loi and Samae San. At most locations aviation support was an essential element to sustain the mission.



Konchenoburi, "Bridge over the River Kwai"

Most of our flights were within Thailand which was a very large AO. Thailand is the size of Texas. In-country destinations varied from Don Maung International Airport in Bangkok to NPK, or Udorn, or Pataya, or as far as Chang Mai in the extreme northwest. The 46th SF had a training facility in the western extremities of Thailand adjacent to the Burmese border, west of Konchenoburi. The photo above was taken near that location at a bridge better known as the Bridge over the River Kwai. While the movie depicted a tall bridge between outcrops of the river's high banks, the real bridge was much less dramatic. The movie location was filmed about six miles upriver from the actual bridge. The real bridge did survive WWII, but several of its bridge spans were bombed out and later repaired. The bridge is still in use today. Parts of the jungle in that region of Thailand were still infested with WWII booby traps and ordinance left by the Japanese. From time to time we operated out of old Japanese airstrips where rusted airplane parts could still be found; nothing of value, just corroded stringers and firewalls or a prop blade.

From time to time our destinations were so isolated and remote that extra fuel was carried in barrels inside the aircraft to provide sufficient range to get the aircraft to a refueling point. Outlying SF locations usually maintained fuel stores to facilitate aircraft that would be flying in support of their mission. A manual hand pump was used to pump the fuel out of the barrels and into the aircraft. Usually, members of the crew took shifts to accomplish this task.

Aviators in the 46th had maps of the areas of operation which were published in 1957. This meant that each new aviator spent the first couple of weeks updating his personal map with a chart update manual drawing in cities, highways, dams, and airports that had been constructed since the map was published. These maps became a very valuable tool and had to be safeguarded if it contained sensitive information about SF locations or activities.

Our flying schedule was busy, but not too busy. One aircraft usually went to Bangkok every weekend fulfilling the transportation requirements of the 46th. That aircraft would usually refuel at the 70th Aviation Detachment at Don Maung International Airport, Bangkok, but would reposition to the "Cav Pad" which was a landing site on a Thai Army facility closer to downtown Bangkok. That aircraft would usually return to Lopburi Sunday evening.

Once a month, the entire company conducted Para drop proficiency training at Pawai Airfield. There were several types of drops that had to be conducted. The normal drop was from 1,500 feet agl, followed by a low-level drop over rough terrain. The low-level jumps frequently resulted in injuries. While the 46th had its own medical clinic at Ft Narai, injuries beyond their medical care capability would require an aircraft being diverted to the 5th Field Hospital in Bangkok.



One aircraft was usually committed to MedCap-Civil Affairs support flights. This activity was paramount to the mission of the 46th in that it directly affected the hearts and minds of Thai communities supported by Special Forces civil affairs efforts. Along with a civil affairs officer, 46th SF aircraft would transport a doctor, dentist, and civil engineer to remote locations on the civil affairs itinerary.

The mission of the 46th Special Forces Company was complete in early 1974. The unit departed Thailand in April, 1974 infused into the 1st Special Forces, Ft Lewis. In the decades to come, Special Forces Support Aviation took on a greater role as a specialized aviation organization assigned to meet the ever changing needs of “Black Ops”. These aviators have specialized training unique to SF operations, sophisticated helicopters, and much better equipment than their predecessors of the 1970s. And so it should be. I cannot imagine working with a better group of people. SF is an organization of committed, talented, and highly trained individuals who pull together as a team to get the mission accomplished. I am very proud to have served with them.

Information for this story was gathered from many sources including members of the 7th Airlift Platoon, and other SF soldiers. These individuals are part of the history of the 46th SF in their place and time, and they are very proud of it, as they should be. This is but a brief account of what took place during the years I served with them.

William Thompson