

This interview was extracted from The Thailand Laos Cambodia Brotherhood (TLCB) Newsletter, Mekong Express Mail (MEM), Volume 3, Issue 3, September 2002.

This interview contains information of an Air Force helicopter unit of which very little information is available. A valuable part of our Air Force helicopter history.

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*USAF ROTORHEADS* thanks the TLCB with a special thanks to Dave MacDonald, Editor, Mekong Express Mail, TLCB.

*MEM Interview: Preston Bridgewater,  
USAF Huey Pilot*

Preston Bridgewater was in the 606th Air Commando Squadron at NKP, flying UH-1F Hueys. The 606th was officially activated by President Lyndon Johnson in the Spring of 1966 to help the Thai Army by transporting them while their Huey pilots got trained in the "F" model. The squadron had about 50 pilots, flying "slicks" that came out of SAC, where they were used to travel out to remote missile silos in Arkansas. Thus it was they were called slicks: no weapons and no self-sealing fuel tanks.

The humanitarian mission soon expanded. For instance, once there was a firefight about 20 miles south of NKP [Nakhon Phanom Royal Thai AFB]. Says Preston: "We were sent to carry Thai soldiers in to surround some CTs who occupied an island. They called for air support from the Thai Air Force, but weather kept them on the ground at Ubon that night. All night a C-123 from our unit dropped flares, which was a beautiful sight. After

daylight the Thai T-28s showed up and attacked the island; then the troops went in, but all they found was a dead farmer. Then the villagers scavenged the site for metal scraps from napalm canisters, to use in making ashtrays."

**MEM:** Did you ever fly outside of Thailand?

**PB:** Once in a while we did. Once I even flew as cover on a rescue mission into North Vietnam. I was assigned to fly high cover for a H-3 "Jolly Green," sent in to pick up a downed fighter pilot. Our own fighter cover, A-1s called "Sandy," flew down to cover the rescue, which was successful. But it sure got lonely up there at 8000 feet! We weren't used to flying with all that air under us."

**MEM:** Were there other out-of-Thailand missions?

**PB:** When the Mekong flooded Thailand and Laos there was lots of humanitarian support to Laotians, carrying rice and safe water to them. We even got sent into Laos with road teams, who were sent in to observe activity on the Ho Chi Minh Trail. After seven days we went back to pick them up at pre-planned locations, carefully avoiding areas of enemy opposition.

**MEM:** Did you enjoy your tour?

**PB:** I loved my tour of duty in Thailand. The people were great and the country was beautiful. Of course the mission changed a little from what we were told. The most fun was our mission to Bangkok to support President Lyndon Johnson's trip to SEA late in 1966. But my most rewarding, most memorable civic action mission was when a little boy had his arm crushed by a truck wreck. For Lieutenant Daniels and me it was our first night mission, about 50 miles West of NKP. You can't believe how dark it was there, once you left the bright runway lights. We had both

forgotten to turn on our instrument lighting, since we never flew at night! I pressed my nose against the attitude indicator and called for Daniels to turn up the night lights. They turned on truck lights around a field so we could see to land. We picked up the boy and his father and flew them to Korat AFB, where they treated the boy. A week later we flew them home. It was quite a reception! The villagers were so nice, giving us great food, gifts, and many expressions of gratitude. I really felt good being in a position to help!

**MEM:** We heard your unit flew the first night rescue.

**PB:** Yes, our squadron got called in to rescue two Navy pilots one night. It was successful, but one of the pilots got caught in a tree while he was being extracted and they lost contact. At daylight they tried to find him, but never could.

**MEM:** You mentioned an A-26 pilot called the Red Baron.

Many of our readers will know this to be Joe Kittinger, the Project Eagle operations officer, who led the squadron across the Pacific and incidentally holds some spectacular records he set in 1960 for highest ascent in a balloon, longest freefall, and highest speed attained by a human outside of a cockpit. Tell us your contact with the legendary Joe.

**PB:** He was a character! He had a red beard and wore a white scarf. One evening some of us were having supper with him. Somebody suggested we fill his bomb bay with garbage, so we did! Intel pictures next day showed the garbage strewn on the Ho Chi Minh Trail, and somebody wrote 'litterbug' on the picture.

**MEM:** He still is a character!



Preston Bridgewater on humanitarian mission out of Nakhon Phanom, 1966 shown carrying a bag of rice during a relief mission.

**END OF INTERVIEW**

Note: In June 1967 15 Bell UH-1F/P Huey helicopters, originally assigned to the 606th Air Commando Squadron at Nakhon Phanom, were transferred to the 20th Helicopter Squadron in South Vietnam when their services were no longer needed by Thai government.