

Lasting Impressions

Korat Royal Thai Air Force Base, Nakhon Ratchasima, Thailand: Late in the year, it was a cold and dim morning, and I was getting a ride onto base on the back of Don Sheridan's new, red Yamaha (pictured). My Suzuki was in the shop needing repairs from another vandalization. Vandalization became common after I loudly opined, standing on a chair in the shop, that we were getting like Nazis in our killing of "Indigenous Personnel", that is, those who actually own the country. It was unappreciated.

Don (pictured) picked me up in the dark and damp, and we started down the busy and narrow road to the base. We would have to putt-putt through the Thai side of the base to get to the American side, getting the salute and pass-through from the sentries. Then, it was a series of short, tight turns, and a sprint around the end of the runway to get to the US side of the base.

But even before we got close, the Air Raid sirens started growling up to their terrible and discordant wail. Most folk thought we were safe in Thailand, not knowing that there was always a question of security, of vulnerability. I "suggested" to Sheridan that in case of an air attack, the base might not be a good place to be, but I wasn't driving, . . . and Don's judgment was typical.



Approaching the Thai side of the base, we saw it was completely unmanned, . . . everyone was in bunkers and shelters. We were going as fast as we could by then, because we were the only things moving on either side of the base, . . . and very obvious: Nobody was out anywhere, buses had been emptied and their occupants thrown into the filthy ditches on the side of the roads, . . . and that lonely wail continued, chilling me from the core out. We roared through quick, tight turns and toward the end of the runway to get to our side, and I could see that our air defense fighters had already been scrambled.

As we came around the end of the runway, I looked straight down it, and there they were, the small silver aircraft with air intakes in their circular noses and high horizontal tails – *Mig-17's!* I knew every aircraft in service thoroughly, and we had none like that for decades. There were two of them, screaming low down the runway toward us in what looked like a strafing run, and we were the only things in sight, . . . directly ahead of them. I tried to tell them not to shoot, but was unable, completely paralyzed by the moment. I'm certain it would have saved us.

All muscular action was now involuntary, and apparently concerned with holding on. In complete paralysis, I watched helplessly, all eyes, mouth, and grip, as the two warplanes, right on the deck, got closer, closer, then suddenly pulled sharply up, spiraling into the air; two F-86 Sabrejets of the Royal Australian Air Force. I had no idea those Aussies were on base, or even still flew those aluminum fossils.

Wherever that Yamaha is 45 years later, the pucker is still in the seat.