

Orphanage Party

TAN SON NHUT AB, Vietnam (Special) — The 903rd Aeromedical Evacuation Sq. here recently held a party for the 225 orphans at Regina Pacis Orphanage. The party was given by the men of the 903rd so they could become better acquainted with their “adopted” children.

Stars and Stripes
October 29, 1969 (page 7)

Viet Pilots 'at Home' in Skyraiders

Air of Casualness Recalls Old Days of WWII

By HELEN GIBSON

TAN SON NHUT, Vietnam (UPI) — With a blunt, heavy shape and a single huge propeller on her snout, the A1 bomber sits like a memory from old war films among her sleek fellow-bombers on the Tan Son Nhut airstrip.

And flying with the Vietnamese pilots who take the A1 on their missions brings back all the nostalgia of old wars to veteran American pilots.

"It's like being back in the old days in World War II," sighs Lt. Col. Samuel Dicarolo, of Fairfax, Calif., American adviser to the 33rd Vietnamese Air Force Wing.

For the Vietnamese, to whom the once-American Skyraiders now belong, flying is less a job than a calling. They fly on their days off because they like it.

The whole business has an air of casualness about it. The pilots climb into their machines and go. There are no set briefings unless the target is a complex one, coordinates for the mission are scribbled on odd scraps of paper, and the takeoff checklist is seldom bothered with. The only extras carried into the cockpit seem to be a map and a pistol.

But their accuracy on target is deadly.

"They're good — very, very good. Don't let anyone say otherwise," Dicarolo said.

Before a morning mission, Lt. Le Tan Phat and two fellow pilots, Lt. Son Dinh Van and Capt. Nguyen Van Huynh, breakfasted off Vietnamese noodle soup and the orange juice they probably acquired as a habit during training in the United States.

On the arm of his orange flyingsuit, Huynh had sewn a black cross.

"Like the German pilots who flew in World War I and got the Blue Max. I admire very much," Huynh grinned. A shock of black hair makes him look about 15 instead of 28. One could scarcely believe he had flown 1,400 combat flying hours and an average of 30 missions a month.

Back in the operations room, the three pushed past a noisy game of Chinese checkers, to grab helmets, harnesses and maps. They took a glance at the wall chart to locate the mission's target, jotted down some coordinates, signed a ledger and drove to the airstrip to join a fourth pilot.

I was flying with Maj. Nguyen Ngoc Khoa. He scorns a flying suit, but dresses in the dark

brown camouflages once worn by the French airborne in Vietnam, and thin leather ankle boots.

For Khoa this was a humdrum mission. After 15 years flying for the Special Operations Wing, a raid over a suspected Viet Cong camp was something like a walk to the corner store.

We reached his Skyraider, a plane that the "Peanuts" cartoon character "Snoopy" might have dreamt up. Yet black soot covered her nose, and the battered body bore testimony to the thousands of hours of combat flying put in by this old-fashioned-looking plane.

Many jet pilots bemoan their loss if they have ever flown a Skyraider. A generous fuel capacity and slower speeds than the jet bombers make it possible for the Skyraider to remain for as long as four hours over battling ground troops and give them support. She can carry twice the bomb load of the handsome F100 jet fighter-bomber.

With propeller whirling, Khoa taxied off — helmet strap loose and a cigarette in his mouth as soon as we were airborne. In between crackling rushes of Vietnamese over the radio, Khoa told me to pull the handle under the seat if we should be shot and have to bail out.

The other three Skyraiders flew in close echelon formation around us. About 30 miles from Saigon, over a grim, marshy area, a little FAC (forward air controller) put a marker rocket close to a canal.

One after another, the Skyraiders peeled around and with six dives at 300 miles an hour we dropped each of six 500-pound bombs. The concussion from their impact jarred the plane as we swept upwards, pushing up with a sickening three to four Gs, pulling at every fiber of the body and at every last morsel of breakfast.

When we used the cannon on the wings, we were 100 feet off the ground and the rounds seemed to splatter long after we had ceased firing.

The FAC plane stayed hovering to assess the damage done but Khoa made a happy roll-over and led the other three back to base. It took only a few careless looking movements to land. The mission for the four pilots was over until the next one — probably in a few hours' time.