

## Phu Cat Air Base History

Prepared by: John F. Forrette,

, from information contained in his PHU CAT AIR BASE HISTORY PROJECT. The Project consists of 11 volumes of documents, photographs, narratives, stories, and rosters obtained through research of various sources and from Phu Cat Air Base veterans. The purpose of the Project is to document the history of Phu Cat Air Base and the units which served there from 1965 - 1975.

**Introduction:** Phu Cat Air Base, APO San Francisco 96368, Binh Dinh Province, II Corps, Republic of Vietnam, was the last in-country home of the 12th Tactical Fighter Wing(TFW). The wing designation was moved to Phu Cat Air Base on 1 April 1970, to replace the 37th Tactical Fighter Wing and its units which were inactivated on 31 March. 12TFW was inactivated at Phu Cat Air Base on 17 November 1971.

**Assigned Units:** During its tour at Phu Cat AB, the wing consisted of the following assigned units:

- 12th Combat Support Group
- 12th Field Maintenance Squadron
- 389th Tactical Fighter Squadron (F-4D aircraft)
- 412th Munitions Maintenance Squadron
- 480th Tactical Fighter Squadron (F-4C/D aircraft)
- 12th United States Air Force Dispensary
- 12th Avionics Maintenance Squadron

12th Combat Support Group subordinate units were:

- 12th Headquarters Squadron Section
- 12th Services Squadron
- 12th Civil Engineering Squadron
- 12th Transportation Squadron
- 12th Security Police Squadron

During the years 1966-1971, 41 tenant units have been identified as serving at Phu Cat AirBase.

**Phu Cat Air Base:**

**Location:** The base is located approximately 20 miles northwest of the city of Qui Nhon just off Route 1. It lies in a 10-mile wide lowland which stretches northwest from the South China Sea to the Central Highland mountains. With the exception of the lowlands which extend to the north and southeast, these mountains are on

all sides of the base and range from three to six miles from the base perimeter. The lowland area is primarily devoted to the production of rice. The higher ground upon which the base is situated is surrounded by rice paddies and rolling terrain covered with dense underbrush and trees. A small portion of the southern perimeter is bordered by the Song Dap Da River and a portion of the northern perimeter by the Song La Vi River. The main north-south national railroad borders the south and east perimeters of the base. The railroad also separated the base from the Republic of Korea (ROK) 1st Tiger Division, 1st Infantry Regiment, camp to the east. Prior to being secured by combined US and ROK forces during Operation Pershing in March 1966, the area now occupied by Phu Cat Air Base was a Viet Cong training center.

#### History:

1966: On 16 February 1966, during the initial survey to locate a new air base, LtCol William Harold Bodner was killed by a phosphorous mine on what was later designated Hill 151 (Bodner Hill). He and a party of engineers had landed on the hill from a 161st Aviation Company (Airmobility, Light) helicopter.

The site for the new air base was selected in March, and designated Base X. In April, ROK Tiger Division troops cleared the base area of Viet Cong forces. On 1 May, elements of RMK-BRJ civilian construction firms arrived to build a camp for themselves and ROK security units. By 1 June, a temporary 3000-foot airstrip and a few barracks were completed. The airstrip was used by new Air Force C-7A squadrons to deliver construction equipment and supplies. The railroad was used to deliver rock to the base site. By 1 August, all of the construction workers and 150 Air Force personnel were out of their tents and in barracks. On 4 August, Capt Robert M. Sullivan led a convoy of 53 security policemen and approximately 63 RED HORSE (819CES) engineers to the base. The security policemen were the first element of 37th Security Police Squadron which immediately began to assume security of the base from the ROK units. September 19 marked activation of 37th Combat Support Group. On December 20, concrete pouring commenced on the main runway; several records were set for the most concrete poured in a single day in Vietnam.

1967: During January 1967, as construction of the main runway, taxiways, barracks, warehouses, etc. progressed, more Air Force personnel and units arrived at Phu Cat Air Base. For example, 459th and 537th Tactical Airlift Squadrons (C-7A aircraft); 1041<sup>st</sup> USAF Police Squadron (Test), communications, medical airlift control, aircraft maintenance, aerial port, and civil engineering personnel arrived. On 1 March, 37<sup>th</sup> Tactical Fighter Wing was activated and assigned to Seventh Air Force. Base Operations was activated on March 15. On April 15, 37TFW began combat operations with strikes by 416TFS (F-100D aircraft) enroute from Bien Hoa AB to their new home at Phu Cat AB. Det 1, 612TFS (F-100D aircraft) began operations at Phu Cat AB on 8 June, after flying a mission enroute from their former home at Phan Rang AB. Also in June,

Commando Sabre (Misty) was activated using F-100F aircraft as the first Fast FACs over North Vietnam. To date, three Misty pilots went on the four-star rank-- W. L. Creech (TAC), Merrill A. McPeak (CofS), Ronald R. Fogelman (CofS). Misty-31 Bravo, George E. "Bud" Day, was awarded the Medal of Honor for gallantry while a POW. During the rest of 1967, base facilities expanded, population increased, and thousands of combat sorties were flown by the tactical squadrons. The University of Maryland opened classes on 15 August 1968

1968: On 3 February 1968, 355TFS (F-100D aircraft), from Myrtle Beach AFB, SC, was attached to 37TFW for six-months TDY. By 28 February, 37TFW squadrons completed 18,000 combat hours and 13,000 combat sorties without a major aircraft accident since 1 April 1967. On 14 May, 174TFS (F-100C aircraft), Iowa Air National Guard, arrived at Phu Cat AB. The wing was then composed of four F-100 combat squadrons. As 355TFS personnel completed their TDY, Air National Guardsmen from New Jersey and Washington DC replaced them. Fourteen of the squadron pilots and approximately 80% of the enlisted force were Guardsmen. By the end of the year the base was well established with all of the facilities of a typical Stateside base, except dependent housing.

1969: As of 3 January 1969, approximately 90 aircraft were assigned to Phu Cat AB. Those included the F-100s of the tactical fighter squadrons, HH-43B/R rescue helicopters, AC-47 gunships, C-7A airlifters, EC-47N/P electronic warfare planes, UC-123B/K Ranch Hands, and RF-101C and RF-4C photo reconnaissance planes. The year also marked the transition from F-100 to F-4 combat aircraft. Det 1, 612TFS (F-100D aircraft) departed on 13 April to make room for 480TFS (F-4C, later D aircraft) from Da Nang AB. On 11 May, 174TFS (F-100C aircraft) returned to Sergeant Bluff (Sioux City), IA. 355TFS (F-100D) aircraft returned to Myrtle Beach, SC, on 15 May. On 27 May, 416TFW (F-100D aircraft) departed for Tuy Hoa AB. By the end of the month, Commando Sabre (Misty-FAC F-100F aircraft) was inactivated. 389TFS (F-4D aircraft) arrived from Da Nang AB on 24 June, to complete the transition to F-4 aircraft. The year also marked the beginning of significant withdrawals of US forces from Vietnam including US Air Force units. While Phu Cat AB lost some personnel, the primary effect was shuffling of tenant units. As AC-47 "Spooky" gunships were turned over to the Vietnamese Air Force, they were replaced by AC-119G "Shadow" and then AC-119K "Stinger" aircraft. 361st Tactical Electronics Warfare Squadron (TEWS) (EC-47N/P aircraft) moved from Nha Trang AB to Phu Cat AB. 25th Casualty Staging Flight was inactivated at Phu Cat AB.

1970: The US withdrawals continued, resulting in the inactivation of 37TFW at Phu Cat AB. The wing assets remained, however, to be redesignated 12TFW when the designation was moved from Cam Ranh Bay AB, on 1 April. While at Phu Cat AB, all 12TFW aircraft used the call sign "COBRA." In June, 459TAS (C-7A aircraft) was inactivated at Phu Cat AB. The base RANCH HAND unit was redesignated "A" Flight, 310th Tactical Airlift Squadron as TAS and RANCH HAND units were consolidated in Vietnam. Affecting all units and personnel was

the increase in VC and NVA mortar and rocket attacks on the base. Until 1970, the base was relatively secure from stand-off and sapper attack because of the number of ROK and US Army units patrolling the area, and because of the 1041SPS(T) and later 37th & 12th SPS Cobra Flight aggressive patrols outside the immediate perimeter. As those forces were either withdrawn or downsized, security patrols were decreased.

1971: Personnel and unit withdrawals continued. The RANCH HAND mission was moved to Tan Son Nhut AB. Det 1, 608th Military Airlift Support Squadron was inactivated at Phu Cat AB. Aerial Port, Aerospace Rescue and Recovery, Communications, and Weather units were either inactivated, downsized, and/or redesignated. 537TAS (C-7A aircraft) was inactivated at Phu Cat AB and the aircraft turned over to the Vietnamese Air Force (VNAF) 429th Transportation Squadron (TS) being formed at Phu Cat AB. VNAF 431TS (C-7A aircraft) was also formed at Phu Cat AB. 361TEWS (EC-47N/P) aircraft departed Phu Cat AB. On 8 October, 389TFS flew its last scheduled combat sortie in SEA. On 15 October, 389TFS (name only) was transferred without equipment and personnel to Mountain Home AFB, ID.

On 20 October, the 48OTFS flew its last combat mission, which was also the last combat sortie for 12TFW. The mission was against portions of the trail network in the tri-border area of South Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia and consisted of four F-4Ds with 12 MK-82 LD bombs each. Thus the combat missions flown from Phu Cat AB ended as they began--interdiction and/or close air support. On 26 October 1971, the deployment of 389TFS aircraft to Holloman AFB, NM, started when the first cell of six F-4Ds departed Phu Cat AB at 0645 local time, with the second cell of six leaving 30 minutes later. Crews for the deployment were selected from F-4 units throughout SEA. There were 13 12TFW crew members included in the deployments. 48OTFS F-4Ds were originally scheduled to also be redeployed to Holloman AFB; however, it was decided to distribute them within SEA. The last two F-4Ds of 12TFW departed Phu Cat AB on 2 November for Clark AB, PI. Other wing F-4Ds were sent to Ubon AB (four) and Udorn AB (six), Thailand; Da Nang AB, RVN (one); Clark AB, PI (five); Inspection and Repair as Necessary facilities in Taiwan (five).

The wing and its assigned units were inactivated at Phu Cat AB on 17 November 1971.

The 6259th Air Base Squadron and USAF Dispensary were activated at Phu Cat AB on 18 November to provide services to the Air Force personnel remaining at the base.

Inactivation of 12th Security Police Squadron was delayed until 23 December because of VNAF reluctance to assume base security duties.

1972: Phu Cat AB, RVN, was officially turned over to the Vietnamese Air Force on 1 January. In March Detachment 5009, 1005th Special Investigations Group (AFOSI) was inactivated at Phu Cat AB where it had provided intelligence collection, analysis, and dissemination services since January 1967. Other US Air Force personnel remained on the base as instructors to VNAF C-7A (airlift) and A-37B (tactical fighter) units.

During the NVA Easter Offensive, VNAF units at Phu Cat Air Base were effective in halting the attacks down Highway 19 from Kontum/Pleiku toward Qui Nhon. Several VNAF units in other regions shifted detachments to Phu Cat AB. Phu Cat AB VNAF units also provided support for the South Vietnamese ground counteroffensive which began in July.

1973: During another NVA offensive into Binh Dinh province, Phu Cat Air Base VNAF units responded aggressively and effectively, both in stemming the attacks and in the subsequent South Vietnamese ground counteroffensive.

1974: No significant information about Phu Cat Air Base has been obtained.

1975: By March 6, Route 19 between Pleiku and Qui Nhon was cut in several places by NVA forces. That forced retreating ARVN and refugees columns onto undeveloped roads leading out of the highlands. VNAF 6th Air Division planes from Phu Cat Air Base dropped supplies to the columns and provided fire support to slow the NVA advance.

During evacuation of Pleiku throughout the night of March 14, VNAF C-130s shuttled in and out of Pleiku moving equipment and people to Phu Cat Air Base. When VNAF 6th AD commander arrived at Phu Cat Air Base from Pleiku he was designated the senior military commander for the area. Thus the base became a focal point for South Vietnamese ground and air combat operations. The A-37Bs at Phu Cat AB and Phan Rang AB flew an all-out effort. The two A-37B units put up the best fight of the war. Pilots in some cases loaded their own aircraft. VNAF troops fought as soldiers in defending the airfield at Phu Cat after ARVN soldiers pulled out. Targets struck by the A-37Bs were so close to the airfield that pilots hardly had time to get the gear up before dropping bombs. As the area became untenable, aircraft were evacuated to Bien Hoa and Phan Rang. Phu Cat Air Base and Qui Nhon fell to NVA forces on March 31.