

## **DID THE 20TH SOS PONY EXPRESS DIE NEEDLESSLY ??**

**The 20th SOS Pony Express was one of the most extraordinary and outstanding combat units in Southeast Asia. The Pony Express was located at Udorn RTAFB, Thailand during the Vietnam war. Morale of the Pony helicopter pilots and crew members, from the highest ranking officer to its lowest ranking enlisted man was extremely high. There was a wonderful togetherness in the unit which incited every member to want to be part of the team and to do his best in every endeavor. Every person took care of his fellowman, accepting his faults and using his strengths to the maximum benefit of the squadron. The esprit de corps radiating from the members of the Pony Express was constantly felt by everyone that knew the Ponies or had come in contact with the Pony mission in this supposedly secret war in SEA. BUT, THE PONY EXPRESS WAS TRULY A GREAT SQUADRON WHICH WAS FORCED TO DIE!!!**

**Everything that lives must die eventually. Sometimes things die of old age, yet, other things die because they are no longer useful. Some things are killed with honor on the battlefield and some things are uselessly killed without honor! Because of the way the Pony Express was killed without honor, the Pony Express can never be buried. Had it died with honor, it could be buried with the military dignity it deserved, and only the memory of a great outfit would live on. It would be listed in the Hall of Fame and the real Pony spirit would exist only in men's minds. Because it did not die with honor, though, the spirit still lives in everyone's heart and everyone that had a close connection with the Ponies is still disgusted about its death. These people force the memories to live on!!**

**What really happened to the Pony Express? Who killed it? To find an answer, let's go back to 1969 to Udorn and discuss what happened. The Pony Express always had two large and important missions, Tacan support and DOSA (Director of Operations for Special Activities) missions fraged by the 7/13th AF in support of the secret war in Laos. Most of these DOSA missions were lead by Air America or CAS and were flown all over Laos. The Ponies, though, did not have sufficient helicopters and pilots to accomplish every mission adequately. Because some of its missions were too massive and required many helicopters**

and more capability than the Ponies had, they were forced to call on other helicopter outfits to help them on some of their largest missions. Some of their large missions required the use of up to twenty CH-3E helicopters, and with only nine aircraft assigned, it was almost impossible to complete these large missions. On many occasions the Pony Express desperately called upon the 21st SOS at NKP to help with the largest missions. The 21st SOS had the same type of helicopters and needed something to do, as only 25% of their flying time was devoted to flying combat missions.

On most of these occasions, the 21st SOS volunteered to help, however, their headquarters, the 56th SOW, usually refused to permit them to help us. On one large mission, the mass infiltration of Hmong tribesmen on 25 March 1969, the two squadrons flew together. The mission turned out to be less than a total success and six aircraft were damaged by hostile fire and one pilot, the Pony Operations Officer, was seriously wounded in the thigh. On another large infiltration of General Vang Pao's Lao troops, the 20th SOS could not get the help of the 21st SOS, so they had to make a mass infiltration with only seven helicopters forcing the Ponies to make three dangerous shuttles into the besieged landing area. Had the 21st SOS been permitted to help on this mission, the job could have been accomplished in one shuttle, exposing the aircraft and crews to hostile fire for a much smaller amount of time.

Another important mission in June 69, the evacuation of a Thai Artillery team from Moung Soui required more helicopters that the Ponies could scrape together. Two days before this mission the Ponies were called to Lima Site 20A (Long Tieng) to accomplish the mission. After we landed we reported to the Raven shack for a briefing by Ambassador Sullivan and General Vang Pao. We were told to stand by and be ready to go to Moung Soui to evacuate the Thai artillery team. The weather was good and the North Vietnamese were still quite a ways from Moung Soui. I'm sure they thought the Viets would not keep coming so they delayed and delayed our takeoffs. Finally, as it was getting dark, they set up bunks in the Raven shack and fed us and let us go to bed as we would try again the next day. When we got up Sullivan and Vang Pao kept talking to the people at Moung Soui while we sat and waited. As it was getting late and the Viets had obviously

**stopped their convoy, they told us it was too late to evacuate the Thais and they sent us back to Udorn. During the night we were told to take off at first light and rush back to 20A.**

**This we did**



**and we were joined by the 21st SOS and a HH-53 rescue helicopter.**

**Because of the sensitive nature of the mission, higher headquarters, the 7/13th AF, allowed the 21st SOS to supply three CH-3Es to support the mission. The weather was extremely bad and the mission was extremely dangerous as mortars were being fired and snipers were hiding in the hills surrounding the landing zone. The mission required the utmost in pilot technique. All pilots needed to make heavy gross weight takeoff and take off down wind. The first 21st SOS helicopter took on too many Thais and during the attempted take off fell to the ground landing in a rice paddy (actual photograph below)**



**a few yards from the takeoff pad. After off loading a few Thais the aircraft was able to take off and continue its trek back to 20A. The next 21st SOS helicopter unloaded too many people also. The aircraft drooped and crashed, but the crew and Thais were picked up by the rescue helicopter. Possibly an engine quit or the helicopter was shot down by small arms fire, but the fact remains the aircraft was lost on the mission and had to be destroyed by the fighters that were protecting us. All Pony aircraft completed their portion of the mission without incident although most of us had a high "pucker-factor" because the place was extremely hot and mortars were landing all over the place. Fighters were firing rockets at the oncoming Viets, at mortar sights and at any thing that moved.**

**The whole mission seemed to indicate that the Ponies were better qualified for this type of DOSA mission as we had been trained by our group to do this. The 21st SOS pilots were not used to flying at maximum gross weights with limited power. On their missions, they normally carried only six or seven persons and most often had out of ground effect hover capability. The 21st SOS crews did help us greatly on this important and sensitive DOSA mission, however, and because of the increased**

**number of aircraft on the mission, we were exposed to hostile action to a lesser degree and did not have to make shuttle runs to evacuate the 350 member Thai artillery team from Moung Soui.**



**Pictured above: My helicopter & crew as well as myself (middle) after landing at Lima Site 20A after the mission.**

**Because the Ponies needed help on these sometimes massive DOSA missions which was often provided by the 21st SOS, no one really thought too much about the coming of a possible merger of the two squadrons. All persons seemed to feel that it would be a good idea, as it would combine all the helicopter resources in Thailand and allow each squadron to better accomplish its mission. After all, the Ponies were flying 75% of their flying time as combat time and spending over 75% of their time flying their primary DOSA missions. The 21st SOS, on the other hand, was flying only 25% of their flying time on combat missions. Since this 25% included some combat time not in direct support of their primary mission, it is safe to say that less than 25% of their combat time was flown in direct support of their primary**

## mission.

Ideally then, the merger of the two squadrons should give the 21st SOS more combat missions and allow them to share the bigger DOSA missions of the Pony Express. The merger turned out to be a bitter battle, though, as no one could agree on the issues. Most everyone saw the merger as not really changing anything except the efficiency of the two squadrons. There would still be a Pony Express at Udorn as the FOL (Forward Operating Location) would still have the same people, the same aircraft and the same mission. The 21st SOS would still have the same mission at NKP, but they would assume part of the Ponies' mission and get better utilization out of their aircraft. Most everyone was actually looking forward to the merger, however, just before the merger took place, the 56th SOW entered the picture and asked that all aircraft and all personnel assigned to the Pony Express be transferred to NKP. This was quite a shock to the Pony personnel as no one wanted to leave the FOL at Udorn for an isolated outpost like NKP. Also, everyone knew that the wing at NKP did not have adequate housing facilities to accommodate the transfer of the entire Pony outfit. The Ponies were told that room would be made for them. After all, they said there was a war on and no one should mind doubling up for the old war effort. The Deputy Wing Commander of NKP visited the Ponies and told us how great NKP was and how he felt it was the best base in Southeast Asia. He convinced no one! In fact, he possibly woke up the sleepers in 7/13th AF who had not done their utmost to assure that the transfer worked smoothly. Too much had been taken for granted by everyone! No one expected too much to change!

All the preliminary planning on the merger was left to too few people. Only now did the concerned people began to stir. The original intent of the merger was to transfer all Pony assets to the 56th SOW, but fragging authority for the combined squadrons was to stay with the 7/13th AF. The Pony Express was supposed to remain in tact and in place at the FOL at Udorn. Hangers were already programmed, and H-53 helicopters were scheduled to replace the Ponies' aircraft. But, nevertheless, the wing commander insisted that everything be physically transferred to NKP. After many, sometimes bitter exchanges of views, messages, and phone calls, the merger took place. Three of the Pony

aircraft and several pilot spaces were transferred to NKP. Eighteen pilots and six aircraft were left at Udorn and the new 21st SOS was formed with one commander stationed at NKP to run the squadron, and an operations officer at Udorn reporting directly to the commander. What happened then, as this seemed to be a workable solution. The Pony Express FOL was smaller now, but the 21st SOS at NKP was going to assume part of its old mission, or at least the missions would be accomplished together; everything could work out.

The new 21st SOS commander, bless his soul, wanted to keep some things as they were in the past, but at the same time, he had a new squadron and wanted to bring the two separate squadrons together. He wanted to retain the high spirit of the Pony Express and some of their glorious history. He wanted to keep the good reputation and accomplishments of the Dust Devils. He wanted one unit with the best of both squadrons to stay in his new unit. He wanted to capitalize on the greatness of the Ponies and the greatness of the Dust Devils and have a great squadron.

The new squadron needed a name. The Ponies had been around a lot longer and had a more glorious history. He had two old units combined with the less glorious of the two absorbing the more glorious. To do something about this problem, he appointed a committee from both squadrons to recommend to him a new name, a new patch, a new party suit and anything else that would benefit the new squadron.

This committee met and patches were introduced, names were suggested. The Ghost Riders, The Devil Riders, Gommers, Buffalo Fluckers, Dusty Horses, Dusty Ponies, Turtles, Dust Devils, and Pony Express---all these names were suggested. After the meetings and coordination with the two squadrons, the committee agreed that the "PONY EXPRESS" name should be retained for the new squadron. The new squadron would just be an extension of the fame of the Pony Express. After all, The Dusties were originally formed from the Pony Express. They were already part of its history. The fragment was just going back to the mother squadron. Naturally, many people at NKP complained, but the majority of the pilots in both outfits felt this was a wise choice.

The words Pony Express had a good ring to them. The Knife call sign had no special meaning to anyone. The Pony Express call sign fit

**the mission--hauling gommers, mail, goats, buffaloes through hostile territory like the old Pony express riders did.**

**Everything seemed set and nearly everyone in the squadrons agreed. Morale started to increase. WHAT HAPPENED THEN???**

**Some say the commander dropped the idea because he knew that the wing commander was bitter about not getting all the Ponies and aircraft assigned to NKP. Some say the wing commander blamed the Ponies for all his troubles with the merger and with 7/13th AF. Some say that since he did not have full command and control of the new squadron, he was determined to eradicate the Pony Express and everything that reminded him of it. Most people**

**think that he refused to let the new squadron adopt a new name and dictated that it would retain the present call sign and the present name. What ever the reasons, the whole thing was dropped and the new squadron retained the name and history of the 21st SOS. The PONY EXPRESS WAS SUPPOSED TO DIE!!**

**To appease the FOL and to try to accept the wing commander's decision, the Dusty commander allowed the FOL to call itself the Pony Express on the ground and wear the Pony Patch on the Dusty Hat which he asked everyone to buy. Every one started buying the new hats and morale started to pick up. Things seemed to working out pretty well. But, the 56th SOW sent its inspectors to the FOL to help them proceed to changing every thing over to the operating standards of the wing. Everyone of the inspectors seemed to stress that the FOL was a completely sub par organization. Everyone insinuated the FOL surely could not have ever done any thing right. The FOL was constantly told how terrible they were, and no one could understand how the FOL could ever have gotten an aircraft in the air, little on fly a combat mission. The inspection of the FOL did a lot of damage to the morale of everyone connected to the Ponies. However, as the new FOL was sub par and full of incompetents and Pony diehards, the answer was simple. The Wing sent a new operations officer to the FOL. They sent an officer who understood the 56th SOW, one who would shape up the FOL, or beat it into line. The new operations officer arrived in Aug. 69. He had been the old 21st SOS commander.**

**Even though skeptical, everyone accepted the new Commander.**

**At first he joined in the Pony spirit, called himself a Pony, bought himself a new Dusty hat with the Pony patch and worked extremely hard to gain the confidence of all personnel in the Pony Express. The Ponies needed leadership and he seemed to be a good answer to our problems. The new commander would be believed at NKP, his decisions would be approved and some of the confusion that was already developing in the new squadron would be cleared up. The commander worked hard, was very productive, and the squadron began to take shape again. Facilities were renovated, better procedures, systems and policies were established. MORALE WAS ON THE UPSWING!**

**However, unfortunately, this boost in morale did not last very long. First the Pony Express trucks were repainted, the Gommers, and the words Pony Express were removed from the sides. Dust Devil sign appeared. The Pony patch and the old 20th SOS hats were forbidden, and the new Dusty hat with the Pony Patch was outlawed on the base as not being a proper hat to wear. This quick change was accomplished without any explanation. The new leader had not kept his troops informed. When several of the officers in the squadron questioned him, they were told that the wing commander at NKP had ordered him to take all the Pony Express signs down**



**and put up the Dusty signs. The word was out that the Wing Commander 56th SOW at NKP said that he never wanted to hear the words PONY EXPRESS again!!!**

Morale dipped to an all time low and the new commander of the FOL had lost the devotion and respect of his troops. As a visible revolt all the officers and enlisted men started growing mustaches, comical at times as one young captain bragged about the two hairs that sprouted on his upper lip area. He was trying to fit in though. My mustache was more gray than black but it looked like the one Stalin used to wear. The Dust Devil signs stayed up but were sprayed with black paint a few times. All personnel reverted to wearing their regulation military hat with rank pinned on and hid their pony patches. The High Frequency call sign was changed by the wing from "WELLS FARGO" to "LOLLY POP FOXTROT" Most of us refused to become part of this new 21st SOS even though we always did our jobs to the best of our ability.

Many unfortunate things happened since the merger. The FOL lost many of its maintenance people and much of its capability to perform maintenance. The FOL pilots were forbidden to talk directly to the 7/13 AF DOSA shop. Flying schedules, which used to be published before noon, never seemed to get published until late at night. Crew planning for combat missions became almost non-existent. The High Bird or rescue aircraft which the Ponies always had on a combat mission, was tampered with. Crew rest was extended many times. Some tactics were changed just for the sake of change and because they were known to be Pony tactics. Command and control by the 56SOW caused confusion and the FOL continually had to wait to be told what to do. No decision could be made at the FOL as every decision had to be phoned from NKP.

What was really accomplished by this merger? First of all, it is necessary to look back at the reasons for the merger in the first place. Simply stated, the Pony Express had too big of a mission and the Dusties' mission was not big enough. Since the Pony Express flew 75% of their flying time as combat time supporting DOSA and the clandestine war in Laos versus only 25% for the Dust Devils at NKP, the merger should prove beneficial to both squadrons. Ideally, the 21st SOS should be flying more combat missions and the Ponies should be flying less. Together they should be better able to accomplish their primary missions. To find out if this is true, let's look at three months of combined operations -- Oct, Nov, and Dec 1969.

The 21st SOS history is on file and 1969 is a closed issue, however, let's take a look at these last three months of 1969. During this period the Pony Express FOL had four helicopters and eighteen pilots as one aircraft was lost and one was in IRAN. During this period, the FOL flew 915.3 hours; NKP flew 1224.5 hours. The Ponies flew 595.4 hours of combat time and NKP flew 541.3 combat hours. In other words, the Ponies flew 309.2 hours less than the Dusties, but flew 54.1 hours of combat time more than the 21st SOS. NKP flew 44.2% of their total flying time during Oct-Dec 69 in the combat zone while the Ponies flew 65% of their time in combat. (Note: In Oct, NKP 30.1%; FOL 64.5%; in Nov, NKP, 48%; FOL 57%; In Dec, NKP flew 34%, the FOL flew 73.5% of their flying time in the combat zone of Laos.)

These figures bear out the fact that NKP has assumed a small percentage of the combat load from the FOL, however, the Ponies with only 18 pilots and four CH-3Es are doing almost the same as before and still flying more combat time than the Knives. In essence, then, what has happened is that NKPs 21st SOS are doing about the same combat flying that they were doing before the merger, but now have more aircraft and personnel to do it with. The transfer of pilots and helicopters from the FOL to NKP just gave them a better capability to do their primary mission. The Ponies on the other hand are doing about the same amount of combat flying as they have always been doing but have fewer aircraft and pilots to do it with.

To further show this, during the same period of time, there were 616.4 hours devoted to DOSA missions of which NKP flew 228.5 hours or 27% of the DOSA hours. The FOL Ponies flew 387.9 DOSA hours. There were 222.3 hours flown for TACAN out of country support. NKP flew 64.4 hours or 28% of the TACAN support hours. The Ponies flew 157.9 TACAN out of country hours. It should be obvious that the FOL gave up 1/3 of its capability to have NKP support 27% of its DOSA and 28% of its TACAN mission. Had the FOL at Udorn retained its full capability, it could have easily done this small amount of hours with out the 21st SOS.

Any sane person has to ask himself, just what has been accomplished by the merger? How has the merger helped the 20th

## **SOS "Pony Express" better fulfill its primary mission of DOSA and TACAN support???**

**What is NKP doing if they are only flying 27-28% of the Ponies primary missions?? During Oct-Dec 69, NKP flew 258.9 hours of Prairie Fire on 29 different missions. NKP tied up three helicopters daily on Prairie Fire alert, yet in these 92 days of Oct through Dec 69, the 21st SOS flew only 258.9 hours. This means that of their total flying time during this period (1224.5 hours), 21% of it was devoted to their primary mission of Prairie Fire. Also, 228.5 hours were devoted to DOSA or 18% of their flying time. 5.2% of their flying time was devoted to out of country TACAN support. Thus 44.2% of their flying time was devoted to their primary mission of Prairie Fire, DOSA, and TACAN out of country missions. NKPs TACAN in country support only amounted to 25.3 hours or about 2% of their total time. Giving them this credit raises the percentage to 46.2%, but this still means that 53.8% of their flying time is devoted to other than their primary mission.**

**The FOL at Udorn, on the other hand, devoted 74% of their flying time in support of their primary missions of DOSA and TACAN support, and only 26% of their time flying other than their primary mission.**

### **What can be concluded from all these statistics?**

**1. The FOL at Udorn, the Pony Express, still flew the major share of combat time of the combined squadrons. 65% of the FOLs time was combat time; 44.2% of NKPs time was combat time. From Oct to Dec 69 the FOL flew 309.2 hours less than NKP but 54.1 hours of combat time more!**

**2. NKP picked up only 27% of the DOSA missions supporting the secret war in Laos and 28% of the TACAN hours even though they were given three additional helicopters and all but eighteen of the FOL pilots.**

**3. Before the merger, NKP flew 25% of their time as combat time primarily on Prairie Fire missions and they still fly 21% of their flying time doing this mission. They used to fly 75% of their total time in support of missions other than their primary mission. Now they spend only 53.8% of their time supporting these**

**other missions. This decrease is because they now fly 18% of DOSA and 7.2% on TACAN support. By adding 18%, 7.2%, and 21% on Prairie Fire, one can see that they now fly 46.2% of their flying time on the primary missions of Prairie Fire, DOSA and TACAN support!**

**4. The FOL at Udorn lost three helicopters to NKP and many pilot spaces which amounted to one third of its capability, yet the FOL still flew 63% of the DOSA missions and 60% of the TACAN and an amazing 53.8% of the overall mission of the entire newly formed 21st SOS headquarters at NKP with the FOL stationed at Udorn RTAFB, Thailand.**

**In summary, the merger of the two squadrons did not really work as the planners felt it would. The old Pony Express outfit even though it was much smaller in size, had fewer helicopters (only four helicopters and eighteen pilots during Oct-Dec 69) flew more than half of the Squadron's primary mission. Every pilot at the FOL still flew more combat time than the pilots at NKP even though the pilots at NKP supposedly flew more time.**

#### **WHAT DID THIS MERGER PROVE?**

#### **DID THE PONY EXPRESS DIE NEEDLESSLY?????**

#### **NOTE:**

**This story was written in Jan 1970 by Major Matthew D. Kirkpatrick USAF while stationed at Udorn RTAFB, Thailand, assigned to the 20th Special Operations Squadron (Pony Express) flying the CH-3E Helicopter as a Flight Commander and Aircraft Commander. While there the 20th SOS was absorbed by the 21st SOS at NKP. When I wrote this article I had all the figures, hours, percentages before me so they are accurate to this date. 30 years ago, this sad story was written by a 39 year old Major and now it is being typed and published by a 70 year old retired LtCol from the U.S. Air Force. Although I had the utmost respect for the 21st SOS pilots and aircrews, their leaders in the squadron and Wing were some of the worse that I experienced in my Air Force career. Because of the outrageous way the merger of the two squadrons was accomplished, and the despicable actions of their leaders, I swore to all that were present at my going home party at Udorn that I would**

**always be proud to call myself a PONY, but I would never openly admit that I was also a Knife during the last few months of my combat tour in South East Asia! AMEN!!**