CHAPTER 4

Wake-Up Call: The Air Force Years

(1970-1973)

4.1 Boot Camp and Technical Training

After flying to San Antonio—my first flight ever—I found myself standing in line with other recruits at Lackland AFB, facing a drill sergeant who yelled at us about the foolish mistake we'd made by joining the Air Force. Soon after, we were marched to the barber, where I watched my hair fall to the floor as I was transformed into a skinhead. It was amusing to see all the other newly shaved heads realizing I must have looked just as bald.

The six weeks of basic training followed a standard routine. We learned to march, prepare our beds and lockers for inspections, attend training classes, and of course undertake relatively rigorous physical training. For someone young and in decent shape, the training was challenging but not overwhelming. I really disliked guard duty at night more than anything else since standing at attention for hours was tiring and made my lower back ache. And like everyone else, I hated latrine duty and did my best to avoid it

by steering clear of demerits.

The open-bay room where 50 of us slept was quite a contrast for me. The two long rows of bunk beds made things crowded, and movement was restricted, especially when we were roused in the middle of the night for inspections or after returning from physical training, all rushing to shower and wash away the sweat and fatigue. The openness and chatter were a far cry from the silence of my small basement bedroom back home. Yet, I naturally accepted this situation, understanding that it was part of basic training—a necessary first step to my new life in the military.

It seemed like practically everyone smoked cigarettes back then, and at just 25 cents a pack from the tax-free commissary, there was little incentive to quit. Throughout the day, we had cigarette breaks and learned how to strip and dispose of the butts after smoking. Reveille came before dawn, and constant efforts were made to weed out anyone who couldn't meet the physical standards. I felt little concern for myself but couldn't help wondering about a couple of frail-looking recruits.

This experience also marked my first exposure to young men from different parts of the country, including Black and Hispanic recruits. Growing up in a sheltered small town, I had never interacted with people of color. My only exposure was through my dad's comments about a Black coworker he worked with at the malt house. He wasn't shy about using the N-word, so I had been predisposed to harbor less-than-positive impressions of non-Whites. To my surprise, I found the Black recruits in my platoon to be likable. We were all in the same boat, I suppose, fostering a sense of camaraderie and support when needed. The military has always been good at creating an environment where differences in race, background, and personal history can be put aside in favor of a shared mission and mutual respect. The daily grind of boot camp, the hardships, the triumphs, and the long hours spent together in close quarters, forced us to rely on each other regardless of where we came from or the color of our skin. I quickly learned that the Black recruits, as well as the Hispanics, were no different from me in terms of their desire to

succeed and serve.

Towards the end of the six-week training period, we took a battery of tests to find specializations best suited for our talents—at least, that's what they told us. When I received my results, my top two were security and the medical field. Since security involved using a gun, I quickly ruled that out. A health-related job wasn't initially appealing either, but as I scanned the list of job titles in the medical category, one caught my eye: "medical materials specialist." I selected it as my first choice, not fully understanding what it entailed but thinking it probably had something to do with hospital supplies and not health care. I soon learned that I would be assigned to this specialization, which would ultimately have some interesting consequences beyond just a job while in the Air Force.

As far as I know, everyone in my unit successfully completed basic training and was awarded a first stripe—that of an airman. After having single stripes sewn onto my shirt sleeves, I felt a sense of accomplishment as I donned my dress uniform for picture day. Soon after, I received orders to attend medical materials training for a three-month course at Sheppard AFB in Wichita Falls, Texas. This Air Force base specialized in health-related training, so those of us with medical specializations piled into buses and headed to northern Texas.

Upon arrival, one of the first things I noticed was the large number of WAFs (Women Air Force), which made sense, as I imagine that women were likely to be directed to health-related roles. There weren't any WAFs in my specialization, perhaps because medical supply personnel worked in warehouses. I don't remember much about the training, which consisted of hours of classroom lectures and slide shows, all rather boring. It was possible to earn a weekend pass, provided one's grades and behavior were acceptable, so I spent my free time studying in my barracks room. Despite being underage, I could also be served drinks at the Airman's Club. I made it to the Club only a couple of times during the training as I was committed to studying the lessons in the training manuals.

On one of those few occasions, I was having quite a good time and had too much to drink. It's all rather hazy now but later that night I ended up walking back to the barracks with a WAF. One thing led to another and the next thing I knew we were rolling around in a grassy ditch along a side street. I honestly have little memory of what happened. I hadn't bothered to ask for the name of the girl. I never saw her again. But I do recall being scared that we might get caught and how that could affect my training progress and any weekend passes. Fortunately, I got back to my barracks room without anyone having seen and reported the two of us.

One other memory I have at the base occurred in August of 1970, one of the hottest months of the year. I received a weekend pass, so my family drove from Minnesota to Texas to visit me. It had been three months since I had left St. Michael, the longest I'd been apart from my family, so I was excited and likely a bit homesick. On the trip, Dad and Mom let Randy sit in the front seat between them, while the three girls—Sheila, Linda, and Cindy—were in the back. Minky, Fuff, Jody, and Bunny stayed at Zita's. Minky recalls that Zita drove her to our house every day to empty the dehumidifier in the basement so it wouldn't overflow and soak the rug. I imagine adding four kids to a large family in the small basement house the Eull's had at that time was quite a feat on Zita's part, but I'm not surprised that it was her place my younger siblings stayed at.

Since it was a two-day road trip, the family stopped in Kansas City along the way to visit Mom's relatives. Cars didn't have air conditioning back then, making for a sweltering journey, so a stop on such a long trip was a welcome break for everyone. When they arrived, they were served iced tea without sugar, a common drink in hot weather in that part of the country, but completely new to our family. None of the kids could drink it. Quietly, when no one was looking, they poured their drinks down the kitchen sink and opted for tap water instead, but that didn't turn out much better due to the high amount of fluoride in the city water. It was a small adventure, which continued when they arrived at Wichita Falls. We stayed together at a motel just outside of the base, and I proudly wore my uniform the entire

time we were together. I was able to show them the Air Force base and this part of my life. It was a thoughtful gesture on Dad's part to make the trip, and I appreciated the effort they made coming to see me there. As I said, I was probably a bit homesick.

At the end of my three-month training program, I was given the opportunity to make a request for where I wanted to be stationed for my first assignment. If there was an opening in the medical materials section, there was a good chance I could be assigned to that Air Force Base. I took the time to research the available options and discovered that the two nearest bases to St. Michael were Minot Air Force Base in North Dakota and Ellsworth Air Force Base near Rapid City, South Dakota. Both were far enough to require travel, but they were close enough to make regular visits home a possibility. I chose these two bases as my top preferences, hoping for the best. When my orders finally arrived, I was thrilled to find out that I had been assigned to Ellsworth.

Though Rapid City was located on the far western edge of South Dakota, making it a ten-hour drive home, the location offered me a manageable distance for longer holiday visits. The decision to join the Air Force, while initially daunting, was proving to be a decision that worked out better than expected. I was starting to see the benefits of my choice and felt more confident about the path ahead.

4.2 My First Posting at Ellsworth AFB

After spending a week on leave at home, I boarded a flight to Rapid City and then I was driven the short distance to Ellsworth Air Force Base. The base itself was vast, a sprawling hub for the Strategic Air Command (SAC) with a large contingent of B-52 bombers and KC-135 refueling planes. The scale of the place was impressive, but I was about to settle into a more specific corner of it—Ellsworth's hospital. The medical supply section was housed in the basement level of the facility, a large, functional space that I would soon come to know well.

To be honest, I've never liked the distinct, antiseptic smell of medical facilities. Thankfully, being located one floor below the wards and clinics meant that I didn't have to deal with the distinct odor of a hospital. It was a relief, really. I was able to focus on my work without the constant reminder of the clinical environment around me. In fact, I rarely, if ever, had any reason to go upstairs to the main hospital areas. My work in the medical supply section kept me busy and away from the patient-focused parts of the facility.

My first duties at Ellsworth were straight forward—I was assigned to stock shelves in the medical supply section. It was there that I met someone who would become my best friend during the 20 months I spent at the base. Sergeant Tom Luft, who was in charge of the warehouse, took me under his wing right from the start. I liked him instantly, especially after learning that he was from La Crescent, Minnesota in my home state. But it wasn't just his hometown that made me admire him; I was also impressed by the fact that he had completed a tour of duty in Vietnam, stationed at the Cam Rahn Bay base.

At Ellsworth, Tom was finishing up his four-year commitment, and his laid-back, carefree attitude stood in sharp contrast to the rigid military structure I had been adjusting to. I found it refreshing and began to look up to him as a mentor of sorts. As we got to know each other better, we gave each other nicknames. He called me "Chickie," a playful name I didn't quite understand, while I dubbed him "Elfman" due to his small stature. In fact, we couldn't have been more different physically—at 6'3", I towered over Tom, who was at least a foot shorter. Our friendship was solidified one late night soon after I arrived at Ellsworth. It was due to a rather awkward and unnecessary incident that upset me. Tom's reaction and support after the incident marked the beginning of what would turn into an enduring bond.

The sleeping accommodations on base were housed in barracks—long, two-story rectangular buildings. The layout was simple: bedrooms along both sides of a long hallway that ran the length of the building, with showers and

toilets located at both ends. Each room typically housed two airmen, but I lucked out and was assigned to one of the rooms in the middle, which had no roommate.

Having grown up in a small town where bedroom doors were left open and certainly never locked, I was somewhat naïve about the realities of barracks life. I hadn't yet learned the importance of securing my room, and so, I neglected to lock my door. One night, I took it a step further and unknowingly left the door slightly ajar. It was a mistake that would soon lead to an unexpected—and rather embarrassing—situation.

While I was sleeping, I felt an odd sensation around my midsection. I shifted to sleep on my other side, only to feel it again. Panic set in as I opened my eyes and realized someone was leaning over me. As I turned back, this person bolted out of the room and rushed into the hallway, where the ceiling light there allowed a glimpse of the fleeing person, although I didn't recognize him. Stunned and scared out of my wits, I decided to seek refuge somewhere else and went to Tom's room, where I stayed the rest of the night. He was reassuring and supportive, helping to ease my fear in that unsettling moment.

The next morning, while moving along the counter of the food line for breakfast, I spotted a guy named Phil Waith standing near the center serving food. I realized he was the person in my room the night before. He was a slender Black guy who looked utterly terrified when our eyes briefly met. I suppose he was afraid I'd report him, but in all honesty, I was the one who had left the door open, as if inviting someone for some late-night fun.

The incident solidified my friendship with Tom, though. After the incident, we became best buddies and were always together over the next year and a half before he was discharged. I'll never forget the day he left. Tom loved the movie Easy Rider with Peter Fonda riding on his Harley, American flag flowing behind him. Well, Tom replicated that iconic scene without the flag when he took off on his Harley, heading back home to Minnesota and then

on to Florida, where he would end up living the rest of his life. We managed to get together only once after that when I attended a conference in 1998 in Tampa, Florida. I met his wife then and we reminisced for hours.

Best friends or not, I didn't stay working with Tom in the warehouse. While the medical supply section was essentially a huge storage area with shelves full of equipment and supplies for the hospital, there was an adjacent set of offices where all the administrative functions of the unit took place. This was where Captain Riley, the officer in charge, and Senior Master Sergeant Don Godfrey, the top NCO, had offices. They ran the unit, and several airmen were also assigned to jobs in an adjacent office to provide administrative support that involved processing and maintaining the records for procuring and issuing the equipment and supplies for the various clinics, wards, and surgical units in the hospital.

With tens of thousands of medical items in the warehouse, keeping an accurate inventory and knowing what needed to be ordered as stocks run low required an efficient inventory system. At the heart of this system was a keypunch machine used to prepare cards needed to update stock records. This keypunch machine used the same FORTRAN programming language I had studied during my senior year. When Sergeant Godfrey learned about my high school course that included FORTRAN, he assigned me as an understudy to the keypunch operator, and within a couple of weeks, I took over the job when that colleague left the unit for another assignment.

I found myself sitting at that machine for eight hours a day, updating stock records by punching holes in cards that held inventory information. Once a week, the cards I prepared—literally thousands of them—were taken to a mainframe computer center with massive tape-spinning processing devices, where the cards with punched holes of updated stock information were converted into binders containing current inventory reports. These reports were used to keep track of all the medical items in the warehouse. I became proficient at this keypunch task. This job became my main duty throughout my entire time in the Air Force, as it was specialized and limited to those

who knew the procedures for inputting data to those punched cards. At Ellsworth, and even later at my next assignment, I was the only one who knew the ins and outs of running the keypunch machine for updating the stock records. Nice gig!

There were other airmen in the medical supply section, some with university degrees, who would have loved to have my job. For whatever reason—karma or just dumb luck—I ended up as the main guy using that keypunch machine. So far, my experience in the military was shaping up to be a total win: stationed not far from home, working in a highly valued role, and surrounded by great buddies. Joining the Air Force was turning out to be a great decision.

In addition to Tom Luft, my circle of friends included a guy from North Dakota we nicknamed "Guts". The three of us were inseparable, and early on we decided to find a place to live off base. We found an old two-story shack of a house in a neighborhood in Rapid City that was primarily inhabited by Native Americans, which turned out to be a perfect situation for us. We were well-liked by the locals to such an extent that we never bothered to lock our doors. It almost felt like being back in a small town again, even though greater Rapid City was hardly small.

The house was run-down, but at just $50 a month in rent, it was a steal. Located on the Ellsworth side of the city, we could commute back and forth to the base in less than 20 minutes. We furnished it by buying second-hand furniture and transformed our rental into a lively party house, creating an atmosphere that made our time together even more memorable. There were two bedrooms upstairs for Elfman and Guts and I converted the front porch into a bedroom. During the winter months, the warmest room in the house was the living room where there was this giant gas fueled heater where you could see rows of individual flames through the vents. I'm sure it was a fire hazard, but somehow it remained functional during the two full winters we lived in that house. All three of us guys, having grown up in the Midwest, had no problem with the cold, especially since the nearby Black Hills kept

the temperatures higher than what we had experienced back home.

For our social fun, we'd often hang out at a bar in town called Charlie Brown's, meeting girls to bring back for late night drinks. Speaking of drinking, we preferred short 8 oz cans of Schlitz Malt Liquor, known for its strong flavor and high alcohol content. We saved the cans and stacked them to cover the walls, creating a unique decor that added to the party vibe of our "home". At one point, Dad, Mom and a few of the kids drove out to visit. To this day, Minky still remembers that beer display covering an entire wall. That's a lot of drinking!

Life was great at 18. Joining the Air Force opened my eyes to new experiences and let me enjoy unforgettable times with friends. I should also mention our dog, Leroy. Guts had brought that shaggy, brown mutt back from one of his trips to Bismarck. I'd never had a pet, but Leroy quickly became one of the guys in the party house. He was more than just a dog; he was one of us, going everywhere we went. I still remember how he loved to stick his head out the car window, soaking up the wind in his fur. Then, there was the day when, in a burst of excitement, he leaped out of Elfman's car, broke his leg, and ended up with a splint as he hobbled around the house. To this day, when I get one of those security questions about my first pet, Leroy's name is the one I enter with a fond memory of a dog, a place, and a time.

Once we moved off base, I needed a car, and Dad came through for me. By that time, he was supplementing his income by selling cars for Ford at dealerships in Buffalo and Rockford, so when I told him about needing wheels, he found a 1966 Ford Galaxie for $600. It had a lot of miles and needed a valve job, so when I flew home to buy the car, Dad tore down the engine and replaced the push rods in the valves over a long weekend. It also needed some transmission work, so Dad asked his buddy Carl Weiss, the head mechanic at the Co-Op, to handle that—gratis, of course. I can still see Carl with the opened transmission on the floor scooping up handfuls of oil saying how transmission oil was so pure and clean that he didn't have to wash his hands after finishing the job.

Overall, it cost very little to get the car running smoothly. I drove it back to Rapid City, and from that point on, I was mobile. One weekend, Elfman, Guts, and I drove the car to Milwaukee to meet up with three girls. It was an absolute blast for us—a day trip there, a night of heavy drinking and crazy partying with girls in the beer capital, and then a day trip back. It felt like I had taken the wild drinking side of my senior year and kicked it up a notch.

One of those girls, Jane Becker, was from La Crescent. Elfman knew her, which is how we met the group in the first place. Jane, who was much shorter than me with long blonde hair, and I hit it off right away. A bit later, she stayed with me for a couple of weeks at our party house. Eventually, she needed to return to La Crescent, so I drove her back there, making a stop at my place in St. Michael along the way. It was the first time my family met someone who I guess could be considered my first girlfriend. The intriguing part of this was that she was a Becker, but I never gave a thought about how closely we might be related. Although I'm sure she was a distant relative, at the time it didn't really matter. It was all part of the chaotic period I was going through—there just weren't many guardrails keeping me in check.

Living off base meant my meager Air Force pay wasn't nearly enough to cover the housing expenses and partying, so I got a job pumping gas. Back then, there was no self-service so you could get a job filling up people's cars and cleaning their windshields. What I remember most about this job was the price of gas in 1971. At one point, there was a gas war among the local stations, and I recall hanging signs advertising gas for 22 cents a gallon for regular. There was no unleaded gasoline then, just regular and premium. So, there I was hanging these large metal signs up on a post and changing them every shift to match the gas station across the street. It's crazy to think just a couple of years later, people would be lining up at stations to get gas when OPEC was created and caused huge shortages. I still can't believe that I pumped gas when it was so cheap.

Up until that time, I had been drinking socially, smoking cigarettes regularly, and occasionally enjoying a toke or two from a hash pipe. My boss, Sergeant

Godfrey, had been stationed in Turkey, and when he shipped his household goods back to the States—he was married with a family—he stashed some exceptional Turkish hash in the shipment. One day, Elfman, Guts and I were invited for dinner at his place, after which he took us downstairs to share his prized stash. I had only smoked a few joints of relatively weak pot before that, so this was my first encounter with hash and a stronger version of THC. I enjoyed it, but aside from these rare opportunities with Sergeant Godfrey, I didn't delve into the THC scene while at Ellsworth. I was far more interested in going to bars and drinking with my buddies. Then, there was also my first real long-term relationship with a girl named Laura Hadd, who was conservative and would not have accepted a pot smoker for a boyfriend.

I believe it was in January of 1971 when I first met Laura at a house party on an uncharacteristically cold night for Rapid City. Typically, the nearby Black Hills kept the winters milder, but that evening was frigid with a biting wind. From the moment I saw her, I was captivated by her tall, slender figure, average length brown hair, and a really cute face. As we talked, her reserved but friendly personality drew me in even further. At 21, she was three years older than me, having just graduated from college and starting her first job as an elementary school teacher in Rapid City.

We hit it off well at that house party, so I asked for her phone number. Soon after, we began dating—proper dating, complete with flowers, proper attire, and dinners. Our evenings often ended in her small basement apartment, where we enjoyed gentle affection. Laura, who was adopted, made it clear from the beginning that she had no intention of repeating the mistake of her biological mother. I never brought her back to our "party" house either, as she wasn't "that kind of girl." My buddy Tom, a wild man in the bedroom—evidenced by the noise he typically made—teased me endlessly about the limitations of my relationship with Laura. Laura and I liked each other and got along well, typically meeting for dates on weekends. It felt right to be "properly" dating her. But when I wasn't with her, I was still partying "hard" with the guys.

Laura and I dated for over a year, and towards the end that period, during one of my trips back from St. Michael, I stayed overnight in a separate bedroom at her parents' house in Sioux Falls, where she had grown up. The relationship appeared to be on track towards a possible marriage, at least in Laura's mind, although we never talked about it. We genuinely enjoyed each other's company, but despite really liking her and getting along so well, I couldn't shake the feeling that something else was brewing inside me. I certainly wasn't ready for marriage or to settle down to a conventional life.

During a four-year hitch in the Air Force, you typically had two or three assignments: the first one at a base in the U.S. followed by one overseas. Depending on the length of the overseas one, you would have third hitch either in the U.S. or overseas. Germany for instance was a two-year hitch while a place like Vietnam was one year. Intrigued by the conversations I'd had with Elfman about his time in Vietnam, I opted to put in a request for reassignment to "Nam", as everyone called it. I'm also sure that my motivation was partly tied to my dad; knowing he had served in combat, I likely wanted his approval.

By going to Vietnam in the Air Force, I would be in a combat zone without the immediate danger of being killed in battle—especially since I'd be assigned to an Air Force hospital which would not be near any front lines. While there was always the danger of saboteurs trying to infiltrate the perimeter of the bases to disable or destroy planes, I figured I was unlikely to be directly affected. I'd be able to say that I had been stationed in a hazardous duty zone, even though my role was related to the medical field, and I'd be at a distance from any potential danger. During the time I was stationed overseas, it turned out that the base that I was at was hit a couple of times by saboteurs, but it was always near the runways and tarmac, sufficiently far from my workplace and the barracks so I was always safe from any danger.

With all of that in mind, I submitted the paperwork, which listed my requested assignment as the "Southeast Asian theater" region, rather than the country of Vietnam. I later learned this meant either Vietnam or Thailand.

Interestingly, this would be the first time I had heard of a country called Thailand. It was included with Vietnam in the "theater' of action because the US military had a headquarters in Bangkok and the Air Force had five major bases and several smaller ones strategically located throughout the country, allowing them to launch air operations over Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia.

I hadn't heard of Thailand or any military bases there, but when my orders arrived, I learned that my assignment was with the 11th USAF Hospital at U-Tapao Airfield, a huge facility hosting B-52s strategic bombers and KC-135s refueling planes. This was in 1972, during a time when President Nixon was intensifying the bombing campaign to push North Vietnam to the negotiating table in a bid to end the war. I can still recall the 1972 Christmas bombing campaign, when those bombers took off continuously every three minutes, one thundering down the runway after another for weeks in a relentless stream, heading to Hanoi to bomb it into smithereens. But we'll get to my experience in Thailand in a bit because I first needed to convey my farewells to friends and break up with Laura.

Another reason to move on from Ellsworth was Elfman's discharge from active duty. I had bonded with him like no one else in my life up to that point. The 20 months we spent doing crazy things together were special, but as they say, all good things must come to an end. This fun ride would conclude in early May 1972 when Tom rode off from our house in Rapid City riding his iconic "Easy Rider" Harley. As I bid farewell to him, I felt a mix of sadness for the end of an era and a spark of excitement about my upcoming overseas assignment. One of the most enjoyable periods of my life was ending, and the new phase ahead was filled with uncertainty and anticipation.

One nice aspect of military relocations is that all the logistics are handled by your unit, so you basically just need to show up ready to move. I left Leroy and the house in Guts' care and managed to sell my car without any difficulty. However, before flying home for a short leave and then a flight

overseas, I still needed to say goodbye to Laura. I literally waited until the day before I left Rapid City to talk to her about it and about us.

In retrospect, I acknowledge that my behavior was insensitive. I casually informed Laura about my new assignment, neglecting to express any desire for her to "wait" for me or to commit to regular communication. Despite our growing closeness as a couple, I had always kept my German trait of emotional restraint, which hindered our relationship's depth. Settling into married life was not on my radar then, as I was looking for a new life experience and wondering what opportunities the upcoming overseas assignment would bring. Nonetheless, I still regret how I managed the breakup. Laura was a wonderful person, and I could have managed the situation with more empathy and consideration!

So, in early June of 1972, I flew home just in time to attend Sheila's high school graduation. It was a time of both joy and reflection spent surrounded by family. Despite the celebrations, there was a palpable sense of anticipation about what lay ahead. The thought of going overseas to a foreign country was always in the back of my mind. During those brief weeks between my two assignments, I focused on being with my family, enjoying the time together, before boarding a plane for the long flight to Thailand, uncertain of what the next chapter would bring.

4.3 My Overseas Hitch in Thailand

At that point in my young life, my time at U-Tapao and in Thailand was undeniably a most transformative period. Despite my aversion to aggression and killing, which led me to join the Air Force instead of the Army, I had initially supported the Vietnam War. However, my experiences at U-Tapao turned me into a pacifist and a "quiet" anti-war advocate, a stance I had to keep hidden within the military. My closest colleagues, who agreed with me, and I drew peace signs under the brims of our caps, revealing our sentiments about the war. When greeting each other, we'd flip our brims up.

Additionally, my religious faith, already wavering, was further challenged by the contradictions I saw in Asian society and Thai culture, which I will explore as I recount my time in Thailand.

U-Tapao Airfield, located about 70 miles southeast of Bangkok, played a significant role during the Vietnam War. Established in the mid-1960s, it served as a key logistical and operational hub for U.S. Air Force operations involving heavy bombing raids over Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. The base was critical for the U.S. to conduct long-range bombing missions, as it allowed aircraft to refuel and perform operations at extended ranges. The base was used for B-52 Stratofortress bombing runs over Vietnam, as well as for air refueling operations using KC-135 Stratotankers. The 11th USAF Hospital located at the center of the base was the largest medical facility in Asia and the medical supply depot in a separate location from the hospital provided logistical support in the form of medical equipment and supplies for military instillations throughout the Southeast Asian region.

The airfield itself was a sprawling complex, equipped with multiple runways and support facilities. It housed numerous types of aircraft, including bombers and fighter planes, contributing to the extensive air campaign in Vietnam. The base was bustling with activity, with the sound of planes taking off and landing around the clock. I was excited to be based at U-Tapao; I initially felt like I was part of something important in stopping the spread of communism, which I had bought into at that point in my life. That belief would change.

I'll also never forget the thick, musty smell of the tropical air on my first day as I stepped off the plane. It was unlike anything I had ever seen, and at first, I wasn't sure I liked it. Eventually, however, it became a scent I found enticing and exotic. Life on the base was a mix of camaraderie and tension. While the tropical climate and surrounding scenery provided some respite, the reality of the conflict loomed large. There were rows upon rows of barracks-style dorms housing military units directly supporting air operations, including mechanics and personnel loading armaments onto planes. Interacting with

them in the NCO club could be intense. Many service members, including me, grappled with the moral implications of these missions, especially as the war escalated and reports of both American and civilian casualties increased. Living in the hospital dorm alongside health-care personnel heightened my awareness of the war's horrors. My interactions with colleagues and the stark realities of conflict led me to reevaluate my beliefs and values concerning the war.

My first glimpse of the medical supply depot took my breath away—it was enormous. There must have been at least eight huge rectangular shaped warehouses. Forklifts buzzed around, moving crates and boxes to various bins, all within an area secured by a tall wire fence. It was clear that a large number of personnel was needed to manage the medical equipment and supplies in these warehouses. Compared to the cramped storage space in the basement of the Ellsworth AFB hospital, the sheer size of this depot left me in awe.

Another striking aspect was the tropical heat. While Texas summers were certainly sweltering, I had never experienced humidity like this before. It wasn't uncommon to see airmen working without their shirts in the open-air areas of the depot, sweat glistening on their skin as they toiled under the oppressive sun. Upon arrival at the depot, my first thought was that I'd soon find myself doing the same kind of manual labor as those I observed on that initial day. Fortunately, I had luck on my side.

My old boss, Sergeant Godfrey, back at Ellsworth had connections; he knew the Chief Master Sergeant in charge of the enlisted airmen in my new unit at U-Tapao and had reached out on my behalf. When I walked into the air-conditioned offices on that first day, I was directed to his office. He at once began quizzing me about my keypunch experience at Ellsworth. As it turned out, they needed someone to run one of the keypunch machines since they were short-staffed. From Day 1, I found myself in a private office where there were two keypunch machines. Sitting at one of them was another airman, but I soon learned he was wrapping up his one-year tour and would

be leaving soon. I was put to work on the other machine at once.

So, why did this depot need two full-time keypunch operators? Well, the supply depot was so large that it normally needed two airmen working full-time to handle all the data entry demands needed to meet the weekly deadline for processing the keypunch cards. These cards were updated on a keypunch machine and then used to process up-to-date inventory reports. I hate to brag, but I will: I had already figured out how to automate the keypunch machine back at Ellsworth, so I told my supervisor rather smugly that there was no need to fill the other keypunch vacancy as I could handle all the keypunch tasks myself.

Over the next few days, I devised a system that had both machines operating simultaneously, automating much of the work of entering stock information. The actual data I had to input manually was the 'quantity' column on the punch cards, as that was the only information that typically changed. While keypunch operators usually entered all the data on new cards, including redundant information, my way of automating the system made it possible to complete eight hours of work in two or three hours. Best of all, I had my own private office, so as long as I made the weekly data processing run, I was completely unsupervised. I had this system set up within the first few weeks of my one-year tour—talk about sweet!

When not in my office, I became a regular fixture in the dorms, where many of us engaged in discussions about the war while indulging in the most potent strain of marijuana available, known as 'Thai sticks,' which we dubbed 'Buddha weed.' Shortly after my arrival, I found myself getting stoned and zoning out every night. As we smoked, we'd melt four-foot candles purchased off-base, watching them form giant, colorful wax mountains. Before smoking myself to sleep, I often engaged in anti-war discussions with colleagues from the health field.

Our marijuana use was generally tolerated by our superiors due to the more relaxed enforcement of laws and regulations in a war zone. However,

we'd occasionally get an advanced warning about an upcoming raid by the security police (SPs), prompting us to hastily hide our paraphernalia. The SPs, accompanied by their dogs, would conduct searches, but no actual contraband was ever found. Hilariously, the dogs could detect the remnants of the pot, providing ample indications of our activities. I believe we were targeted because the extent of marijuana use in our dorm was excessive, to put it mildly. It had become common to move from one smoking party to another, as the dorm was one large open bay with rows of tall lockers creating makeshift walls for our sleeping areas. Without doors, our individual smoking 'dens' were easily accessible to anyone passing by who wanted to join in.

The Thai sticks we smoked were sourced off-base from a nearby village. You could buy a 'brick' holding 20 sticks tied together with thin thread, resembling an actual brick. It cost around 100 Baht ($4). Each stick was approximately five inches long, finger-sized, sticky and gooey, and laden with THC-rich buds. We used a round wooden cutting board and a cleaver to chop each stick into small pieces for rolling joints or loading into a bong. The potency was remarkable, but over time, I built up a tolerance, making the feeling of being stoned seem normal. Nonetheless, I refrained from smoking at work, only indulging once back at the dorm with the other stoners.

I'd like to share an intriguing anecdote about one of the dorms, something I learned only recently when reconnecting with my childhood friend, Tom Bruner. Tom, one of the brightest in our class, went to college after graduation without deferring his student status, assuming he'd receive a high draft number and avoid military service. However, he received a draft number that wasn't high enough to prevent him from being drafted into the Army. Poor Tom ended up serving as a helicopter gunship gunner in direct combat in Vietnam. He was shot down three times, and on the third occasion, he sustained severe injuries.

I only recently discovered that Tom's army helicopter unit was nicknamed the 'Flying Tigers' and I remembered there was a unit by the same name at U-Tapao. They flew into Vietnam to provide air support during skirmishes. Tom and I had met in 1974 after we'd both been discharged, but the specifics of his assignment never came up. It was only last year, when he visited me in Thailand, that he mentioned his unit's nickname. I was stunned to realize we were in nearby dorms at the same time. It's astonishing to think we may very well have passed each other on the sidewalk without recognizing one another. Then again, given my stoned state back then, I might not have recognized him had we ever crossed paths. What a small world indeed!

Incidentally, while Tom had a draft number that led to his being drafted into the Army, I learned while at Ellsworth that my draft number was 267, which meant I would never have been drafted had I opted to not join the Air Force. Although a fear of being drafted was one of the factors influencing my decision to enlist, I wonder if knowing my draft number in high school would have made a difference in my post-graduation choices; probably not, as I had numerous other reasons for joining the military at the time. At any rate, let's shift back to reality and continue exploring my experiences at U-Tapao back in the early 70's.

The American military sanctioned off-base red-light districts, and U-Tapao was no exception. Years before I arrived in 1972, bulldozers had carved out a 100-yard strip of land from the jungle about five miles down the road from U-Tapao, and about halfway between the base and a larger city called Rayong. It was called "Newland" and on both sides of this "entertainment" strip, filled with loud music and raucous drinkers, stood small buildings, each one featuring a vibrant bar at the front end and discreet rooms in the back for more private encounters. I'd estimate there were at least 30 of these places, each featuring decor and music tailored to a diverse clientele—cowboys, motorcycle enthusiasts, Blacks, among numerous others. This vibrant mix of bars was complemented by a variety of "special attention" massage parlors, all contributing to quite an eclectic entertainment scene.

The air buzzed with a mix of laughter, music, and the boisterous chatter of patrons. The young women working in these places were predominantly from the impoverished northeastern regions of Thailand. While they certainly weren't hardcore working girls, they often had to navigate a range of questionable behavior from some of the more rowdy, drunk customers, showcasing remarkable resilience in an environment that could be both demanding and unpredictable.

It might be helpful to understand the political and economic context of Thailand in the 1970s. The country had a revered royal family, with a king who held a ceremonial but highly influential role while the actual executive power rested with a military junta that controlled political and economic affairs. This military control was the reason the U.S. Air Force was allowed to establish multiple bases in Thailand, conduct bombing campaigns, and carry out covert CIA operations. The junta profited significantly from this arrangement.

Thailand's economy in the 1970s was predominantly agricultural, characterized by an abundance of locally grown fruits, vegetables, as well as fresh pork, chicken and seafood products. Rice was the country's main export. Processed and packaged food was scarce. Most people lived a day-to-day lifestyle with access to inexpensive food sources. If you lived outside the cities, you were likely a farmer working in the rice paddies or a laborer in some related agricultural activity, forming the backbone of Thailand's agricultural economy.

Thailand's society in the 1970s showed a stark contrast between the haves and have-nots. Members of the royal family, their associates, senior military officials, and affluent business tycoons enjoyed wealth and privileges, while the rest of the population lived modestly. Society was essentially divided into two classes: the entitled elite and everyone else, with no discernible middle class. Families in northeastern Thailand were typically farmers with limited opportunities. For young women from this region, working in bars at these airbases was not uncommon and was less stigmatized than it would

be in a U.S. setting. In most cases, it was a means of survival, providing financial support for families back home and a chance to improve the family's economic situation.

The reality was that these young women could reach financial stability through opportunities in the bars and entertainment venues that was virtually non-existent in their rural communities. Their earnings far exceeded what their families could make through traditional farming or labor. Thai society, especially the working class, which formed the majority, largely accepted this reality, understanding the pragmatic choices these women made to support their families.

This acceptance reflected a broader understanding of economic necessity and social mobility, contrasting sharply with my American-centric beliefs, which often viewed such choices through a lens of stigma. This was one of my earliest realizations about Thai culture, highlighting the complexities and nuances of the local social fabric. As you'll see, it wouldn't be my only revelation.

I visited the entertainment strip at Newland a couple of times, although my newfound preference for smoking pot over drinking meant I wasn't as drawn to the rowdy bar scene. When I did go, the journey itself was quite an adventure. Exiting the base's main gate, I needed to catch a ride in a vehicle parked on the side of the road. These vehicles, called 'songtaews,' were small pickups with a fabric-covered roof over a metal frame, featuring narrow benches on both sides. I had to duck to get in and out, and once seated, the vehicle sped along at breakneck speed, the wind rushing in from all directions as I shared the ride with a lively group of fellow revelers, all bound for the same destination.

Before hopping into one of these songtaews, there would be chatter from individuals milling nearby, inviting visits to the shanty huts nearby. These individuals were lady boys—males who not only dressed as women but also adopted feminine behaviors, and in some cases, appeared remarkably

feminine. Over time, I learned to recognize them by checking for an Adam's apple. This aspect of Thai culture surprised me and challenged my preconceptions about gender and sexuality. Lady boys were not only accepted but also integrated into Thai society. On trips to Newland, they could be easily ignored as one jumped into a songtaew, looking for fun down the road. But I found their presence intriguing from a cultural perspective since it was so public and seemingly normal and acceptable.

During the early months of my one-year tour, I decided to take a trip to Bangkok—a popular choice among my fellow airmen, given that U-Tapao was just a three-hour bus ride. Upon arrival, I was utterly captivated. The city pulsed with energy, its streets alive with large neon signs and flashing lights, the sights and sounds of bustling markets, and the enticing aroma of street food wafting through the air. Vibrant colors of traditional attire mingled with modern influences, creating a dazzling display of culture. It was surprising after spending time in the more rural setting surrounding U-Tapao.

Bangkok in the 1970s was a city of contrasts, where ancient temples stood alongside neon-lit nightlife districts, and every corner promised a new adventure. I was captivated by its chaotic charm and the blend of rich traditions with modern elements, an experience that ignited a profound sense of wonder. Asian culture reshaped my worldview, deepening my appreciation for life's complexities beyond my youthful experiences. This trip fostered a growing affinity for Thailand, a sentiment that only intensified over time.

There were two types of living situations back then. You could spend your one-year hitch in the dorms on the base, eating at the cafeteria, and drinking at the NCO club, occasionally venturing off base, or you could immerse yourself in a different lifestyle by renting a place in a nearby Thai village called Ban Chang. One of my colleagues from the warehouse, Al Browne—nicknamed Big Al for his impressive physique—was a heavy drinker who kept extending his time in Thailand because he relished the lifestyle that he had created for himself living off base. As a pot enthusiast, he wasn't

someone I would normally have been hanging out with during those days.

One day, while smoking a cigarette with the warehouse crew—about three or four months after my arrival in June—Big Al suggested I consider getting a 'teelock,' just as he had. I had heard that a teelock served as a live-in housekeeper, cook, and companion. Intrigued, I decided to take him up on his invitation to visit his place and see for myself. When I arrived at his bungalow in a part of Ban Chang called *Klaikongwon*, I was at once intrigued at the thought of doing something similar. A couple of days later, Big Al's teelock introduced me to a lovely girl named Yupin, who was from Pimai in northeast Thailand.

Unlike the girls at the bars in Newland, who might lose their "Thainess" due to the daily chaos of dealing with rowdy, intoxicated GIs, teelocks were typically servant-like, loyal, and gracious. You paid them a monthly fee to manage your living arrangements, setting up a mutually beneficial relationship. With the automated key punch system running smoothly, my workday was reduced to half a day or so, giving me the freedom to leave base early each day and dive into a different kind of cultural experience.

I went ahead and rented a bungalow in the same area as Big Al's, making it convenient to socialize with him and other guys living nearby. We'd spend time drinking, smoking, and sharing joints. The bungalows were arranged in rows, each consisting of ten units, totaling around 50. These bungalows had a main floor on stilts, with a staircase leading to a single room upstairs that served as both bedroom and living area, measuring approximately 15 by 15 feet. Inside this room, we had a foldable mattress, a bamboo chair, and a plastic wardrobe. This room was connected to a small bathroom. The top floor was supported by four corner posts on a concrete base at the ground level. It was enclosed with wooden slates an inch or two apart. This open-air area had a table, kitchen appliances, a cabinet for pots, pans, and dishes, and a sink for washing dishes. Cooking was done on a small charcoal stove. The ground floor also served as the laundry area, where clothes were hand-washed in a basin and hung on lines tied to the posts supporting the upper

floor. I found the bungalow quite charming and felt a sense of ownership and independence.

Evenings were typically spent at a picnic table in front of Big Al's place. He would drink heavily, becoming loud and boisterous before eventually stumbling upstairs to sleep for the night. The other guys living nearby were friendly and good-natured. Some practiced judo and karate, so I'd get high and kick back to watch them spar. In the background, the girls would chatter away in Thai. I had no idea what they were saying, but it provided a pleasant backdrop to the whole iconic scene. The atmosphere was relaxed and inviting, creating a welcoming environment. Another pastime I enjoyed was learning more about Thailand.

As luck would have it, Yupin had an older sister living just down the road from our bungalow, and her sister was married to a Thai named Boontod, who came from Bangkok. Well-educated and employed at U-Tapao, Boontod spoke excellent English and quickly became a close friend and confidant. I spent a fair amount of time with his family, where Boontod generously shared insights into Thai culture and history, and gave me basic Thai language lessons. This experience offered me a fascinating glimpse into a Thai family, deepening my appreciation for Thailand and Asian culture. It's safe to say I was becoming enamored with life there. And of course, with Thai stick at hand, I fully immersed myself in the local environment while enjoying the mellow euphoria from smoking pot, which only enhanced my connection to this captivating culture.

During the final months of my time in Thailand, a significant political event unfolded that, while unrelated to my personal situation, resonated with my evolving views on the Vietnam War and peace activism. Thailand had been under military rule since 1932, and when I arrived, the military junta was receiving massive kickbacks from the U.S. government to keep American bases in the country. Over the years, student activism in Thailand had been growing, with many students who were inspired by leftist ideologies

organizing demonstrations against the pro-American policies of the ruling government.

The rise of university students as a political force was significantly influenced by a dramatic increase in student enrollment. Between 1961 and 1972, the number of university students soared from 15,000 to 150,000, and the number of universities expanded from five to seventeen. These students were the future middle class, and the military's tight grip on power limited their opportunities. On October 14, 1973, protests involving over 500,000 students in Bangkok turned violent, sparking a student-led uprising that toppled the military dictatorship and reshaped the Thai political landscape. This uprising highlighted the growing political influence of Thai university students and resulted in the removal of military leaders.

For me, seeing such political change left me conflicted yet it was also inspiring. Here I was a part of the very entity these students protested against while at the same time feeling affinity for their movement. Ultimately, it would lead to the closure of all American military installations in Thailand a few years later after a civilian government took the reins of power and the war in Vietnam had ended with the U.S. departure. I recall engaging in lengthy discussions with Boontod about the country's political future after those tumultuous events in Bangkok. It was all so new and exciting for me, someone who had never been engaged in any type of political activism.

As my one-year mark approached, I learned of an Air Force regulation that would work to my advantage since, by that point, I didn't want to be in the military any longer than I needed to be. The regulation related to the amount of active duty remaining when returning from an overseas assignment. As it was, the Air Force wouldn't reassign me to a new base if I had less than six months left in my four-year commitment. After doing the math, I gleefully discovered that by extending my tour of duty at U-Tapao an added six months, I would actually have five months and three weeks remaining before my normal discharge date on June 7, 1974. I discreetly informed my superiors of my desire to extend my tour by six months, the paperwork was

submitted, and quickly approved, benefiting everyone involved—though no one was any wiser about my true motivation for the extension. This extension allowed me to keep my current work situation and continue living off base for another six months. The rest of my time in Thailand followed the laid-back routine I had set up, and as my new discharge date approached, I began to consider my future options.

While I would now have the GI Bill to fund my college education, I felt an undeniable pull to Thailand, and the idea of returning to live there as a civilian began to take shape in my mind. With large Air Force bases still operating throughout the country, I saw that I could maintain a connection to my existing lifestyle by hanging out near these bases, while immersing myself more fully in the vibrant Thai culture. The prospect of traveling the countryside, exploring remote villages, and experiencing the warmth of local communities excited me. The thought of extending my fun-filled existence in Thailand was incredibly appealing.

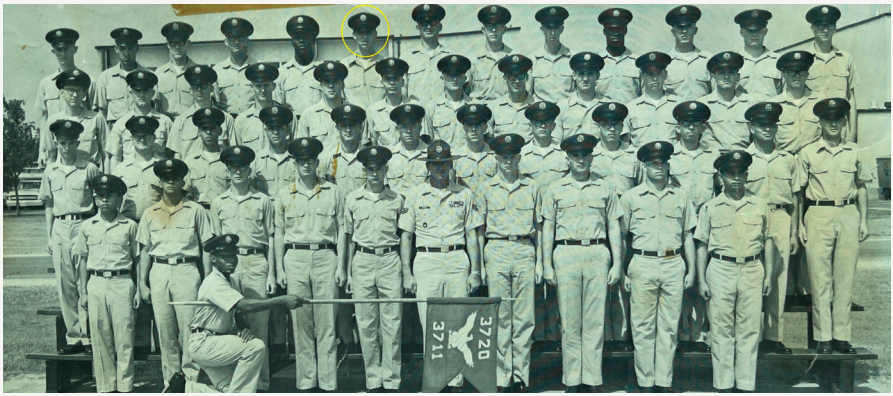
As my time in the Air Force ended, I found myself increasingly convinced that delaying my education for a year or two would be worth it. The allure of the tropical landscapes, bustling outdoor markets and inexpensive food vendors, as well as the unique blend of tradition and modernity held a magnetic charm. I envisioned a life where I could continue to enjoy the rich experiences that Thailand had to offer. This sense of adventure and possibility lingered in my mind as I packed my bags, knowing what awaited me if I could find a way to return to this tropical country.

To be candid, though, there was another significant motivation behind my decision to return—my love for Thai sticks. The prospect of returning to a life where I could indulge in that potent, sticky bud was incredibly enticing. I imagined lazy afternoons with friends, enjoying the mellow euphoria of smoking while exploring Thailand's beauty at my own pace. The idea of being stoned all the time seemed like the perfect escape, allowing me to embrace the country's laid-back culture that had captured my heart.

With my carefree plan in mind, I packed my bags, said goodbye to Yupin and headed back to U-Tapao where I soon boarded a plane to Travis AFB in California. I was officially discharged from active duty on December 13, 1973, at a pay grade of E-4 and rank of Sergeant. I had 33 days of unused leave, which I cashed in for about $400. The timing of my discharge allowed me to return home in time for the Christmas holidays, where I reconnected with family and friends. Despite the warmth of home, I was resolute about returning to Thailand, determined to save enough money to fund my trip, and embrace new adventures in the Land of Smiles.

Before moving on to the next chapter and my efforts to return to Thailand, I'd like to provide some additional perspective about my changed perceptions during my time in Thailand. While I had become captivated by Thai mannerisms and the culture, I also realized I wasn't ready to settle into a traditional learning environment. I was too immersed in the euphoria of the life I had been living, wanting it to continue. Thai people had welcomed me with open arms; the warmth and graciousness were nothing short of enchanting. Standing at 6'4", I towered over everyone, often needing to duck to go through doorways designed for shorter people. Yet, when I sat cross-legged on the floor with someone like Boontod, discussing Thai life, I felt a profound connection. This blend of feeling both out of place and completely embraced only deepened my affection for the country.

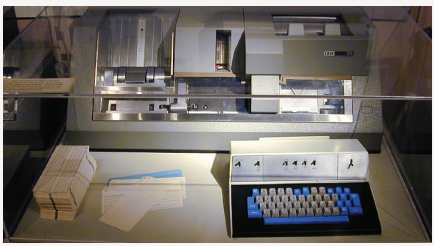
My intrigue extended beyond the culture to the spiritual landscape as well. Growing up as a devout Catholic, I now struggled to understand how millions of virtuous individuals could be denied entry into heaven simply because of their birthplace. The non-judgmental nature of Buddhism greatly appealed to me; its ethos of "live and let live" offered a refreshing perspective. This stood in stark contrast to my childhood experiences with Christianity, not to mention the religion's mission to convert non-believers. Buddhism's philosophy resonated deeply with me, inviting contemplation rather than condemnation, and I found myself drawn to its compassionate embrace. These varied reasons only strengthened my determination to return to St. Michael fully intent on saving enough money to go back to Thailand.



Squadron 3711: Graduation picture taken of my unit at Lackland Air Force Base in late July 1970. I was one of the tallest standing in the middle of the top row (sixth person from the left). The black airman next to me was a good friend, but after basic training ended, I never saw any of these guys again.

Sheila's Graduation: Between my Ellsworth and U-Tapao postings, I was home on leave in time for Sheila's graduation in 1972. Although Sheila had just recovered from a bout of mono, I'm not sure why many of the rest of us aren't smiling in this photo taken in the basement.

Weekend Pass: Dad drove the family down to Texas in late August 1970 while I was in a three-month technical training program at Sheppard AFB. Dressed in a light tan summer uniform, I'm standing in front of the motel in Wichita Falls where we stayed for the weekend visit.



Keypunch Machine: I spent my entire time at Ellsworth and U-Tapao on a keypunch machine similar to the one pictured here. You can see a stack of keypunch cards on the lower left with the keyboard on the right. The cards would be loaded on the upper left part before passing along the front for processing.

Sergeant Heuring: I earned the rank of Sergeant (E-4) with three stripes while stationed at U-Tapao. At this point, I had been awarded the Republic of Vietnam Campaign Medal, National Defense Service Medal, and Vietnam Service Medal. Upon discharge, I also received the Air Force Good Conduct Medal.

Warehouses: Entering the gates at the medical supply depot at U-Tapao, you can see four of the eight immense warehouses where hospital equipment and supplies were kept. There were plenty of forklifts, a couple of flatbed trucks, and plenty of my colleagues working in the hot and humid outdoors in this gated area.

The Runway: I snapped a picture of a B-52 Stratofortress bomber taking off from the runway not far from the depot. During the Christmas bombing, these bombers took off every three minutes around the clock for 12 days, from December 18 to December 29, 1972. It was deafening!!!

The Bungalows: These are rows of wooden bungalows in the area of a town called Klai Kangwon where I stayed off base. The ground level had everything needed for cooking and hand washing clothes, while the second level featured a bedroom and a connected bathroom.

Yupin and Me: This photo was taken in the bungalow where Yupin, the woman I stayed with off base, and I posed for this shot. Life was carefree during my time living there. It's pretty clear from my eyes that I had just smoked something, and I was oblivious to what I now realize is Yupin giving us the finger.

Karate Practice: My bungalow overlooked an open area where some of my neighbors would participate in karate and judo training sessions. This picture was taken from the top of the stairs leading to the second floor living room/bedroom of my bungalow.

Yummy: It looks like Yupin made me a hamburger with bread, which I'm enjoying on the bottom steps of the stairway. Yupin was a devoted homemaker and companion. While I occasionally had Thai food, I didn't truly appreciate the full wonders of Thai cuisine until years later, after I returned.

Storm Clouds: The monsoon season unleashed torrential rains unlike anything I had ever experienced. This shot captures the menacing clouds, rolling in above a row of houses. The middle unit belonged to Yupin's brother-in-law, Boontod, and his family, where I spent countless hours discussing Thailand.