

Rustic India: My Secret War Over Cambodia

by Jerry Dufresne as told to Cal Taylor



RUSTIC OV-10 over Cambodia. (Photo from the Jerry Dufresne collection)

The Birth of RUSTIC FACs¹

Little did Sgt. Jerry Dufresne realize that his 1969 assignment to the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) would make him a pioneer in a secret air war. From a quiet radar facility he was moved to eight months of demanding air operations in the skies over Cambodia. In what became the RUSTIC Forward Air Controllers (FAC), the United States provided presidentially-directed assistance to Cambodian forces sorely beset by the North Vietnamese Army, which moved troops and supplies through Cambodia into southern Vietnam.

President Richard Nixon was under strong public and congressional pressure to get the United States out of Vietnam. He attempted to do so honorably, in what was termed “Vietnamization.” American military equipment was handed over to the Republic of Vietnam and air bases and ground facilities were closing.

Ground operations were fewer than in earlier years. In III Corps, the area around Saigon from the coast to the Cambodian border, the First Cavalry still conducted patrols, which were supported by the RASH FACs. The 25th Infantry Division was less active as were the ISSUE FACs, which had worked with them.

Activity at Bien Hoa AB, 15 miles northeast of Tan Son Nhut, was decreasing. The 3rd Tactical Fighter Wing had

converted from F-100 Super Sabres to the A-37 Dragonfly, which were being handed over to the Vietnamese Air Force (VNAF). The 19th TASS was the most active unit, with OV-10 and O-2 operations at 22 Forward Operating Locations (FOL) throughout III Corps.

Cambodia, which borders much of southern South Vietnam, had long been a transit route and supply area for North Vietnamese forces. Facing immense outside pressures, its ruler, Prince Norodom Sihanouk, had attempted to maintain neutrality and keep Cambodia out of any war. In 1965, he had made an agreement with the People’s Republic of China and North Vietnam to allow permanent North Vietnamese Army (NVA) bases in eastern Cambodia. Chinese military supplies for the NVA were allowed to enter Cambodia by ship and be hauled to the east.

Sihanouk made many speeches extolling the triumph of Communism in Southeast Asia (SEA) and indicating that Maoist ideas were worthy of copying. In 1966-67, Sihanouk loosed a campaign of political repression that drove many on the left out of mainline politics. Friendship with China collapsed due to Chinese attitudes during China’s Cultural Revolution. The result was a Cambodian civil war that began in March 1967. Three years later, on March 18, 1970, Sihanouk was on his annual trip to France. Prime Minister Lon Nol convened the National Assembly that voted Sihanouk out as Head of State. The government of the Khmer Republic was established and

immediately recognized by the United States.²

Though NVA and Chinese activity in Cambodia were well known to the U.S. and RVN, military operations were not permitted in Cambodia. There had been some clandestine raids across the border, supported by COVEY and RASH FACs. President Nixon had also authorized B-52 strikes in Cambodia, within 12 miles of the border. With Sihanouk's ouster, Lon Nol took immediate action.

The seaport of Kompong Som was closed to Chinese shipping and all military materiel was impounded. Lon Nol also closed the southern end of the Ho Chi Minh trail and told the NVA that it had 72 hours to leave Cambodia.

The NVA out-numbered the Forces Armée Nationale Khmer (FANK) and the deadline was ignored. Lon Nol had established good relations with the RVN government and he asked the U.S. for help. At this point, the impetus to what became the RUSTIC FACs was established.

On April 29, 1970, at Cambodia's request, troops of the Army of Vietnam (ARVN) and the American 1st Cavalry and 25th Infantry Divisions (ID) entered Cambodia to shut down the trail and locate NVA headquarters that were purported to be there. Heavy fighting ensued, supported by RASH and ISSUE FACs. Despite the fact that Cambodia had requested the assistance, these operations were termed an "invasion" by the U.S. Congress.

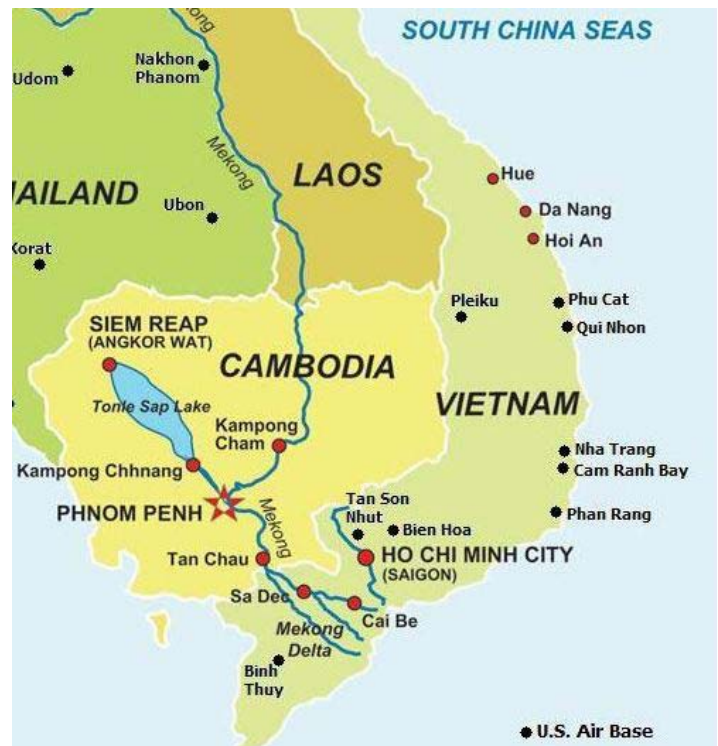
Very soon, senior Cambodian officers came to Tan Son Nhut to discuss military cooperation. Cambodia's entire MiG 17 fleet (12 in all) flew to Bien Hoa AB, where they were modified to carry American bombs.

President Nixon's hands were tied by the legal requirement that military forces he directed into combat could not remain in a foreign country past 60 days. Thus, ground troops had to be pulled out of Cambodia by June 30. But - the reasoning was that there was no apparent restriction on American aircraft operating over Cambodia. Nixon therefore directed 24-hour FAC coverage over Cambodia to assist with full air coverage to the FANK. These FACs, the RUSTICs, were run directly from the White House as a Top Secret operation.

RUSTIC flights and organization began on June 19, 1970. Capt. Jerry Auth and a Cambodian officer flew from Tan Son Nhut to Kompong Thom (KPT), where the FANK was engaged with the NVA. It was a challenge - at night, no accurate maps, no radio navigation aids and no lights on the ground. Auth's Cambodian officer was able to talk to ground forces and get target approval. Auth then directed on-station gunships to fire on NVA positions.

The same day, Lt.Col. Jim Lester, who was an OV-10 FAC assigned as air liaison officer (ALO) to the 25th ID, received direction to gather six aircraft and eight FACs at Tan Son Nhut. He would be the commander of the new RUSTIC FAC unit that would operate over Cambodia. Ultimately, the OV-10s were fitted with 230-gallon external tanks and were bedded down at Bien Hoa as part of the 19th TASS. From there, flight time to central Cambodia was about 45 minutes, making the extra tanks essential to provide adequate time over target.

At Bien Hoa, the 19th TASS quickly took over billets, ramps and other facilities belonging to the resident tactical



RUSTIC FACs area of responsibility. (From the author's collection)

fighter wing (TFW), whose commander objected strenuously. Soon, all RUSTIC personnel, officer and enlisted, shared the same billets, along with many Cambodian officers. The TFW commander was adamantly opposed to the takeover and unconventional arrangements. But, he could not prevail against Top Secret presidential direction.

Three problems had to be solved. Communications over Cambodia were difficult. There were no current maps of Cambodia. Biggest of all, there was the language difficulty.

Communications were largely solved by placing a radio relay station atop 3,200-foot Nui Ba Den, located 52 miles northwest of Bien Hoa and 120 miles SE of Kompong Thom. The first maps used were old French maps overlaid with a U.S. grid. U.S.-made maps showed up somewhat later. Navigation in Cambodia was also eased by the presence of Tonle Sap, the great lake in its middle area, plus its highly-developed agricultural landscape.

The language problem was the most critical. It was initially solved by scouring in-country Air Force personnel for any who spoke French. In almost a James Bond fashion, they weren't told what the job was until they volunteered and passed a conversation test with a Cambodian officer. Those who passed found themselves outfitted with flying gear, a pistol (and a barf bag) and sitting in an OV-10 within a few hours.

As one RUSTIC pilot, Capt. Don Ellis, described the situation, "Those backseaters were just something else. I mean, I was trained to go fly this plane. They were jerked out of things and thrown in the back of an airplane. Not ever briefed - just 'get in here, sit here, strap yourself up, hang on.' And not one quit. They were just so enthusiastic about being able to do something like that."³

That is where Jerry Dufresne's story begins.

The First USAF Backseater

My story began in July 1969 with an assignment to the 619th Tactical Control Squadron at Tan Son Nhut Air Base, Vietnam, as a radar operator and advisor to the Vietnamese Air Force (VNAF). This duty progressed through the first 11 months of a one-year tour. Things changed rapidly at that point.

During this period, we were in the process of training the VNAF to take control of various radar operations as part of President Nixon's transition program as we drew down our force levels. I had finished training my VNAF counterparts at the Air Route Traffic Control Center located adjacent to the Military Assistance Command Vietnam headquarters and returned for duty at the Combat Reporting Center, known as Paris Control.

On Saturday, June 20, 1970, Capt. Gabriel S. Saliva, the crew senior director, received a phone call from the Seventh Air Force (7th AF) Tactical Air Control Center that was going through the entire staff for French-speaking personnel. Saliva responded that he had one French speaker on his crew.

I was soon on the phone with a colonel who asked how well I spoke French. I answered that it was passable and that I often used it with my Vietnamese Air Force counterparts.

The colonel told me that I could help with a mission but, due to its classified nature, he couldn't give more information over the telephone. Would I be willing to come to 7th AF headquarters for further details?

"Yes, sir. I would."

"Good," he said. "Transportation is on the way." Some 20 minutes later, I reached headquarters and was escorted to the second-floor office of Col. Carlos Sklar, the officer in charge of the Combat Operation Center. After I reported in, Colonel Sklar introduced himself and informed me that what I was about to hear was classified "Top Secret Eyes Only."

He began by telling me that Cambodian Army Chief of Staff General Lon Nol had led a coup against Prince Sihanouk, the Cambodian head of state. The Cambodian Army was concerned that Sihanouk was turning a blind eye to North Vietnamese operations in Cambodia. Colonel Sklar told me that the U.S. Air Force was beginning 24/7 forward air controller (FAC) operations to FANK forces, many of whose officers spoke French. Further, he told me that there were on-going operations in Kompong Thom (KPT), an important provincial city in northern Cambodia. The city was under attack and in danger of falling under communist control.

The decision had been made to put French-speaking crew members in the back seat of the OV-10 used by the 19th Tactical Air Support Squadron (TASS). They could talk to the FANK officers and translate for the pilots. The colonel told me that I could be very useful, contingent upon passing an interview to assess my ability to perform the task. "Would you be willing to volunteer for this mission?"

I thought about it and replied, "Yes, sir. I would!"

He gave me a firm hand shake and thanked me for volunteering. I was questioned further about my military training and work experience, and then was introduced to the Cambodian Air Liaison Officer (CALO) who would assess my



Jerry Dufresne and Capt. Don Ellis (RUSTIC 17) at Bien Hoa. (Photo from the Jerry Dufresne collection)

ability to speak French.

The CALO took me to another room where he began by asking how I came to speak French. I replied in my Massachusetts-accented French that my family heritage was French -- my mother came from Canada -- so I had spoken French at home. In the Air Force, I had been stationed at Loring AFB, Maine, and Toul-Rosieres Air Base, France. At both, there was plenty of opportunity to speak French. We reported back to Colonel Sklar where the CALO said I was capable of doing the job.

From that point, the pace of events picked up sharply. I was going to fly that night!

More officers briefed me about the Cambodian situation. One was Lt.Col. James W. Lester, who was appointed the day before as the Task Force Commander and Air Logistics Officer (TFCO/ALO). Our aircrew call sign that very evening would be Minotaur and the ground commander would be Matador. There was an intelligence briefing on friendly and enemy troop dispositions around KPT. Next, I met the captain who would be my pilot on my first OV-10 mission over Cambodia. This would be the first mission with an enlisted backseater. I tried to recall his name, years later, but no one in the unit could remember him. He probably had flown in from a forward operating location (FOL) for that one mission.

I can never give him enough credit. God bless him, wherever he is! He drove me to the Personal Equipment section to be fitted with our survival vests and helmets. From there, off to the OV-10 where there was a final briefing on the flight line. The crew chief helped me climb into the back seat. Once seated, I was briefed on how to arm the ejection seat, to tune the FM radio and several other backseater functions. It was just enough to get me through the first mission. This was only four hours after the first phone call!

When we arrived over KPT, it was 98 percent the pilot's



Cessna O-2A Skymasters were also used by RUSTIC FACs. (From the AAHS archives, AAHS-P006778)

show, as it would be in all of my future missions. The remaining two percent was shared by me and the ground commander. Now, more than 40 years later, I can recall only making initial contact in French with the ground commander. He spoke to me in Indochinese-accented French with some Khmer and English words thrown in.

After acquiring some on-the-spot intelligence and necessary targeting information and clearance to fire, we rolled in for the mark. For me, this was basically a 90-degree dive toward the ground while strafing, jinking and firing a Willie Pete (white phosphorus rocket) at the target. This was quite the unforgettable maneuver! At night, from the back seat of an OV-10, it was just plain hair-raising scary! I would never get used to this, not even in daytime. I mean never! Throw in the 4G-plus force (it felt like 7!) when we pulled up from a dive, add the sight of tracers coming up from ground fire, well, you get my drift!

We watched as the on-station gunship lit up the night with its Gatling guns. Looking at the ground through the canopy, I watched fires burning in the city with occasional explosions. With scattered muzzle flashes and tracers going off, it was a terrible and eerie scene. When we finally landed at Tan Son Shut after the 5.9-hour mission, I thanked God that it was over. After our debriefing concluded, I was told to pack up and report back right away. I would be flown shortly to nearby Bien Hoa Air Base for duty with the 19th TASS, call sign RUSTIC. The unit was also designated as the III DASC-TF (Third Direct Air Support Center Task Force).

Upon my arrival, I was given the call-sign RUSTIC INDIA and assigned my own single room in the squadron hooch. God bless our senior task force officers, especially Colonels Lester, Morton and Wood, for taking flak over this! Special thanks go to Col. Perry J. Dahl⁴, Deputy Director of III DASC and Brig. Gen. Walter T. Galligan, director of 7th AF TACC, for their support on that issue. Normally, a three-stripe sergeant would not be billeted in the same quarters as rated officers. Over time, those quarters would house not only USAF officers and enlisted

but also Cambodian personnel.

I had already extended my tour in Southeast Asia (SEA) while in my old job. During the balance of my tour, I would fly 120 day and night combat missions over Cambodia in the OV-10 and the Cessna O-2. During that time, I was also promoted to SSgt. To the 38 different pilots with whom I flew, I say, "Thank you all for getting me back to base safely and in one piece."

During my assignment, I received continuing on-the-job training from my outstanding pilots and our squadron intelligence officer, Capt. Jim Gabel (RUSTIC BRAVO) and

his staff. An essential part was learning to work with charts in various scales. Initially, they were old French charts of Cambodia on which the USAF grid was printed. Eventually, updated U.S. charts became available.

I would witness at close range every type of ordnance that was available being placed on the enemy with horrific, devastating results! It was delivered by every type of armed aircraft flown in SEA. I would learn much about Troops in Contact (TIC), Killed by Air (KBA) and Battle Damage Assessment (BDA), the score card given during our debriefings.

My fellow interpreters began to trickle in by the hour. I cannot speak more highly of their dedication and professionalism. I would not have made it without their support and friendship! Over time, I would come to love flying in the OV-10 and the O-2A and to have the highest respect for our outstanding ground crews. I was totally committed to our Cambodian and Vietnamese allies with their cause against the Communists. I will always be grateful for the honor of having played a small part in that conflict.

The Rest of the Story⁵

There were six volunteer backseaters, to begin with, one officer and five enlisted. Besides Dufresne, the other enlisted backseaters were MSgt. Ron Dandaneau (RUSTIC FOXTROT), SSgt. Joe Vaillancourt (HOTEL), TSgt. Arthur Paradis (XRAY) and SSgt. Mike Gagne (KILO). Lt. Louis F. Courier (RUSTIC 09) was a French-speaking pilot already in the unit. Later, Sgt. Charles Manuel, SSgt. Roger Coutourier, SSgt. Joseph Gallant and Sgt. Timothy Early were added to the backseater roster.

The RUSTICs grew from six airplanes, eight pilots and the few backseaters to 52 aircraft, 70 pilots, 20 backseaters, 10 radio operators and 10 intelligence specialists as well as maintenance and other support personnel. The operation, which began on June 19, 1970, flew its last mission on August 15, 1973. That was the date upon which President Nixon agreed to congressional demands to terminate all U.S. military activity in Southeast Asia.

The initial handful of French-speakers was obviously not enough. The Air Force granted tour extensions to some backseaters while searching service-wide for those capable in French and without an SEA tour. The hunt brought more volunteers and pilots began language training at the Defense Language Institute in Monterey, California. They began to arrive in Vietnam in 1972 and with their arrival, the enlisted backseaters were no longer needed. The last flight for them was in August 1972.

At Bien Hoa, the RUSTICs set up the entire complex of functions necessary to carry out their mission. For Cambodian ground radio operators and pilots, the French-speaking backseaters provided training in FAC procedures. Technical vocabulary lists made possible quick understanding of French-language terminology. This was essential to both FAC operations and intelligence gathering.

As FAC operations were a 24/7 operation, aircraft and crews suitable to night operations were soon found necessary. The OV-10 was not suitable for night ops because the canopy could not be opened in flight, which was necessary to use night vision scopes. The solution was to incorporate the SLEEPYTIME FACs already at Bien Hoa into the RUSTIC operation. They were well-versed in night operations and their Cessna O-2 aircraft had a side window that could be opened in flight. These Night RUSTICs operated for 14 months, during which they established the definitive tactics of night FAC operations.

In addition to operations inside Cambodia with the FANK, the RUSTICs provided FAC cover for water convoys transporting critical supplies up the Mekong River from Saigon into Cambodia. During the dry season, when the NVA could get close to the shipping channel, convoy operations were often exciting.

In summer 1971, it was clear that Bien Hoa would be closed entirely for American air activity. The RUSTICs were still growing and their mission was still essential. The OV-10 operation was moved to Ubon Royal Thai AFB, in eastern Thailand, which added about 30 minutes to transit time to and from Cambodian. Ubon was, however, too far for efficient O-2 operations. The Night RUSTICs were disbanded and the crews dispersed to other O-2 units, among them the TILLYs at Bin Thuy AB and SUNDogs at Tan Son Nhut plus a new unit at Phan Rang.

The RUSTICs at Ubon became an FOL of the 23rd TASS, which had operated at Ubon for several years. They continued to support FANK operations, which were, unfortunately, being overwhelmed by the NVA. Things changed for a while in mid-1972.

The prospect of peace talks in Paris caused the NVA to withdraw many forces from Cambodia in order to take over larger portions of South Vietnam. The RUSTICs and NAIL FACs deployed temporarily to Danang AB, in South Vietnam, to help defeat this land grab. During that period, they became very familiar with weapons not seen in Cambodia, particularly tanks, which they became experts at locating and destroying. Once this operation was over, the RUSTICs returned to Ubon, again flying into Cambodia.

In the fall of 1972, peace talks stalled in Paris and President

Nixon picked up the combat pace in South Vietnam. The RUSTICs operated briefly from Tan Son Nhut but returned to Ubon after a cease fire took effect in Vietnam and Laos, in January 1973. The cease fire did not apply to Cambodia, though. American air assets of all kinds were now available to operate in Cambodia.

By this point, there was no longer the need to keep American air operations in Cambodia secret. The American ambassador in Phnom Penh obtained permission for RUSTIC and NAIL FACs, flying OV-10s, to land at Pochentong Airport, refuel and then fly another mission. These were called Phnom Penh turns.

By June 1973, the president knew that he could no longer continue U.S. military activity anywhere in SEA. Consequently, he agreed to terminate operations on August 15, 1973. On that date, following their final sorties into Cambodia, four RUSTIC OV-10s crossed the border into Thailand exactly at noon. At Ubon, RUSTIC and NAIL aircraft flew a missing-man formation before making their final landing from combat.

In just over three years, the RUSTICs had low losses. The OV-10 was well armored, especially against small caliber guns and while in the permissive environment in Cambodia. Four aircraft were lost to enemy fire in Cambodia and one during the Danang deployment. Two O-2 crews, Garrett Eddy and Michael Vrablick, were killed during a Cambodian mission, as was Joseph Gambino Jr., when his OV-10 went down. Both aircraft were downed by enemy ground fire.

During the entire RUSTIC mission, close and enduring friendships developed among the Americans and between them and their Cambodian counterparts. The Americans returned to other Air Force assignments or to their homes in the United States. For the Cambodians, unfortunately, the awful years of the Khmer Rouge killing fields took their toll. Eventually, many of those who survived were able to settle in the United States, where old friendships were renewed. In 1997, the RUSTIC FAC Association was formed, enabling former RUSTICs to once again connect.

Just Rewards

Sgt. Jerry Dufresne pioneered as an airborne interpreter. As with many pioneers, his participation preceded standardized procedures. He was told right up front that he was not guaranteed anything, such as flight pay or official recognition. During his RUSTIC FAC flying, he accrued 570.1 flight hours in 120 missions. He was also promoted to SSgt. while at Bien Hoa. Some five years later, he was awarded permanent enlisted aircrew wings. More immediately, he received many letters of commendation and individual and unit awards recognizing the hazardous service.

The awards included:

The Distinguished Flying Cross with one oak leaf cluster (OLC)

The Air Medal with one silver OLC (six medals, total)

The Air Force Commendation Medal

The Republic of Vietnam Gallantry Cross with Palm

The Vietnam Service Medal with five bronze service stars



SSgt. Dufresne receiving his Air Medal award from Col. Perry Dahl. (USAF photo from the Jerry Dufresne collection)

The Republic of Vietnam Campaign Medal
The Outstanding Unit Award with three OLC and "V" attachment

The Presidential Unit Citation with one OLC

Such awards were typical for all FAC crew members, who customarily found themselves well within the threat envelope of enemy weapons ranging from rifle fire through .50-calibre light antiaircraft (AAA) to very heavy AAA. Dufresne was the first backseater to reach 100 day and night missions in the OV-10.

TSgt. Jerry Dufresne retired at Luke AFB, Ariz., on November 30, 1981, after 20 years of service.

Notes

1. This section, except for background on Norodom Sihanouk, is summarized from "The Rustics," by Richard Wood, RUSTIC 11, posted on www.fac-asoc.org/Rustics/R-2.htm. Wood is the author of *Call Sign Rustic: The Secret Air War over Cambodia, 1970-1973*.
2. Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Norodom_Sihanouk.
3. Chaney, Sandi. "Man on a mission: Former RUSTIC Ellis recounts time with unit in Cambodia." *www.theitem.com*. Sumter, SC: *The Item*, January 27, 2005.
4. Col. Dahl began his Air Force career in 1943 as a young P-38 pilot in the 37th Pursuit Sq. at Olympia Army Air Field, Olympia, Washington. Dahl went on to shoot down nine enemy aircraft in the Pacific.
5. Wood. *op cit*.

The Authors

TSgt. Jerry Dufresne was a radar operator/advisor at Tan Son Nhut Air Base, RVN, when he was tapped to become the first OV-10 backseater with the RUSTIC FACs. Previously, he served at Loring AFB, Maine, Sembach AB, Germany and Toul-Rosiers AB, France. After leaving Vietnam, he finished his 20-year USAF career at Luke AFB, Arizona.

Cal Taylor is a 26-year veteran of the USAF, serving as a navigator and intelligence officer. First assigned to the B-52H, he later flew in the C-141, AC-130, C-133, C-5 and C-130. Intelligence assignments included DIA, Military Airlift Command in Korea. He is also a member of the Swedish Aviation Historical Society, which published two articles.

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