

THE MAN BEHIND THE LOGO

*The Origin of **RED HORSE's** Iconic Logo Design*



By Ret. SMSgt Jason Nieves

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*How a Young Airman in Vietnam Drew the Symbol That Identified **RED HORSE***

A Unit Finding Its Identity



In 1966, RED HORSE was still young — a handful of Airmen carving out a mission in the dust, heat, and uncertainty of Vietnam. The photos from those early days tell the story better than any archive ever could: forklifts and heavy equipment lined up beside fighter aircraft, the air thick with humidity and jet exhaust. Engineers and operators lived shoulder to shoulder with the flightline, building the infrastructure that kept the war moving.

This was the world a young Airman First Class named Bill Ackley stepped into.

Life at Phan Rang Air Base — Dust, Sweat, and Brotherhood

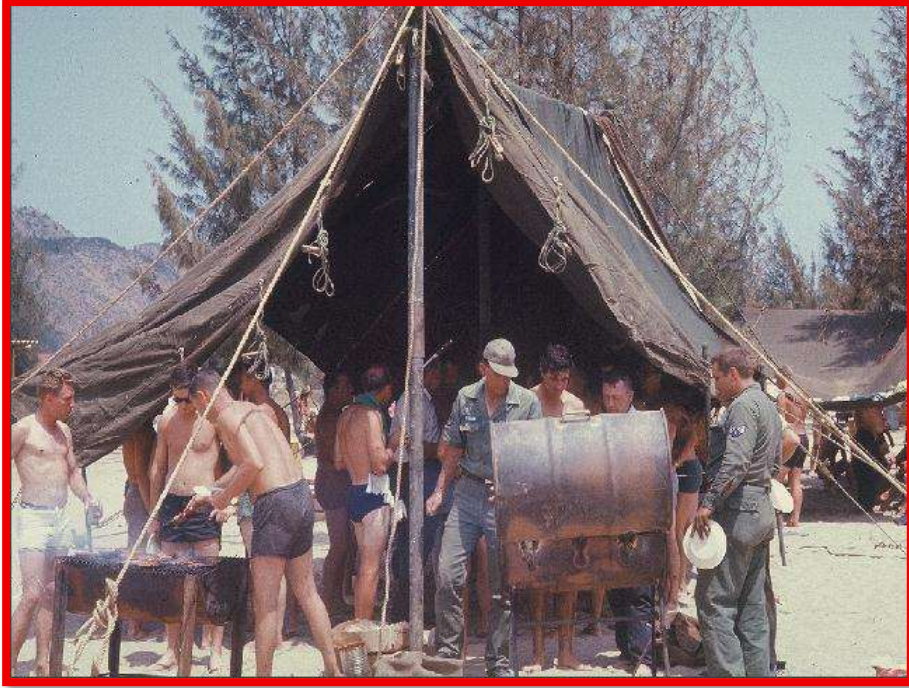


Every new Airmen started the same way: working in the quarry on the rock crusher. Bill's photos show towering machinery belching dust, loaders grinding through endless piles of gravel, and Airmen coated in a fine gray haze. It was loud, dirty, and unforgiving — and it was the foundation of everything RED HORSE would become.



Beyond the work, the living conditions were raw. No base TLF to retreat to, no high paying per diem to collect and fancy off-base hotel to complain about. Just canvas-roofed hooches lining narrow dirt paths. Sandbag bunkers guarded the perimeter. Laundry hung from lines strung between buildings. Bicycles — not gators or six-packs — leaned against the walls.

These images capture the daily rhythm of a unit living simply, working relentlessly, and relying on each other — without a “union card” in sight.



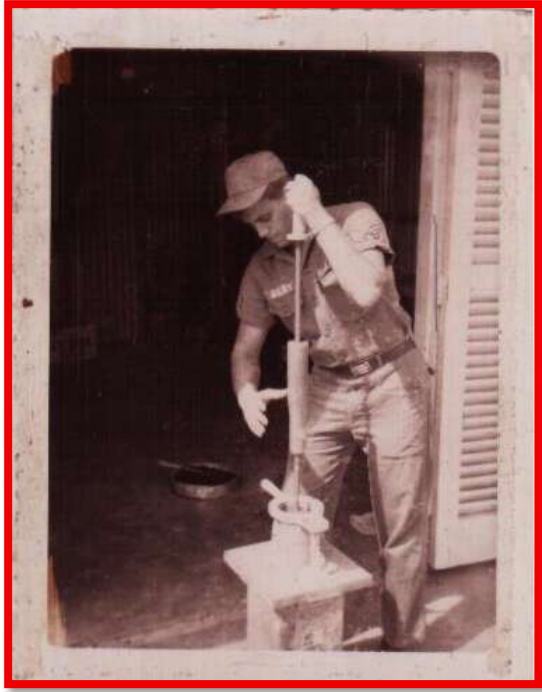
And then there were the moments of escape: beach cookouts, volleyball games, and the kind of laughter that only comes from people who know tomorrow might be harder than today.

A Young Artist in a Combat Zone



Bill didn't arrive at Phan Rang expecting to make history. He was a heavy equipment operator — a Dirtboy — trained at Greer Tech (like REOTS that some Dirtboyz have attended) seasoned on the rock crusher, and later hand-picked for the Airfields Division. His drafting skills, learned in high school, were about to change RED HORSE forever.

But his impact didn't stop at illustrations. During this same period, Bill helped establish what became the first Material Testing Laboratory in Vietnam — a capability RED HORSE had never had before. Working alongside a small team, he tested soils, aggregates, and asphalt mixes for the airfield projects that kept the mission moving. He even contributed to designing the asphalt for the first C-123 parking ramp in the country — a milestone that supported countless missions.

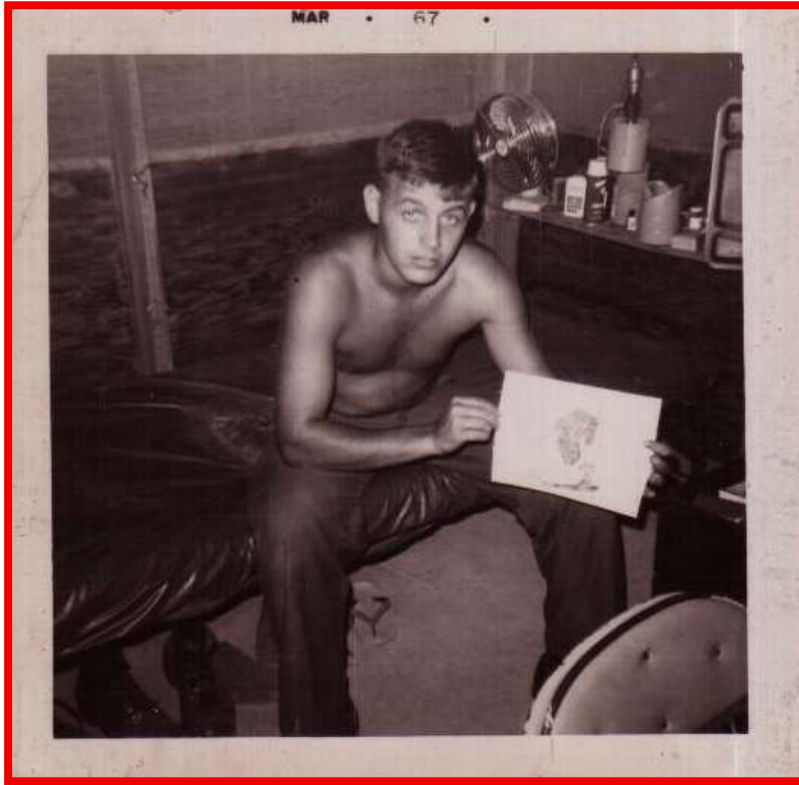


This wasn't glamorous work. It was technical, precise, and essential. The lab became the backbone of Airfields Division quality control, and Bill was right in the middle of it — a young Airman doing work far beyond his rank and unknowingly laying the groundwork for the famous love-hate relationship between the Dirtboyz and the EAs that still exists to this day. (Anytime you mix dirt, clipboards, and “per spec” conversations, sparks are going to fly.) Besides, without the right mix design or accurate compaction strengths, well... you're not RED HORSE — you're just the USN Seabees with better suntans.

One day, MSgt Massey approached him with another opportunity: Airfields needed someone who could draw — someone who could help the staff keep up with the rapid pace of construction projects because, let's be honest, some things never change... and not everyone was eager to get their boots dirty and go see for themselves. Bill accepted.

A few months later, the request came down from Colonel Meredith: “We need a logo.”

The Birth of Chargin' Charlie



The request wasn't formal. It wasn't a tasker, a memo, or something accepted with thoughts of promotion. In true RED HORSE fashion, it was simply:

"Bill, can you come up with something?"

Within an hour, he had the vision:

- A red horse
- Sitting on a bulldozer
- Carrying an M-16
- In a combat zone
- Doing what Dirtboys do best

He gathered what supplies he could — paper, pencil, a ruler, crayons, stencils, tape, scissors, spray paint. Within two days, the drawing was complete.

He showed it to Sgt Goff. Then Sgt Massey. Then Chief Hocevar. Then Capt Currin.

All approved of it without a single change — either because they genuinely loved it, or because they were too timid to voice their own opinion. Either way, the design stood on its own.

When the Colonel saw it, he had only one question: “How fast can you get this painted on the jeeps?”

The first vehicle to wear the logo was the commander’s jeep — or as we might call it today, the squadron’s gator: **RED HORSE ONE.**



A Symbol Takes Flight



Bill's photos from the Airfields Division show the kind of work happening around the same time the logo was born — steel frameworks rising from bare ground, cranes swinging loads into place, dump trucks and dozers reshaping the landscape. The unit was growing, evolving, proving itself.

And the horse grew with it.

Before long, the sketch was everywhere — on equipment, on signs, on patches, on anything the unit touched. It spread not because it was ordered, but because Airmen saw themselves in it — and earned the right to throw RED HORSE pride at everyone after proving what they could do with that horse hanging over their shoulder.

Shout out to the Penny Short, the 554 — the squadron that proved RED HORSE wasn't just built on concrete and steel, but on stubbornness, sweat, and a healthy dose of "CAN DO, WILL DO."

Legacy, Rediscovery, and Reflection



After leaving the Air Force in 1968, Bill had no idea what became of RED HORSE. Hard to imagine now, but there were no computers, no internet, no easy way to stay connected.

Then, years later, a friend called him: “Didn’t you say you were in RED HORSE?”

He sent Bill a photo of a NASCAR truck — #17 — with the RED HORSE logo on the hood.

Bill was stunned.

It was the first time he had seen his design outside Vietnam.

That discovery led him to reconnect with the 820th RHS, specifically MSgt David Sommers, and eventually the RED HORSE Association now the RED HORSE and Prime BEEF Association. He learned that his creation — even with later alterations — had become a defining symbol of the Air Force’s most elite engineering unit.

He attended the 50th, 58th, and 60th anniversaries, meeting generations of RED HORSE men and women who served under the logo he drew at age 20. The 60th Anniversary is where I had the opportunity to meet Bill. Once I heard he was the person who created the logo, I had to talk with him and get the story straight from the source.



What He Hopes Young Airmen Know

“Chargin’ Charlie” was born 59 years ago. Bill was just a kid — 20 years old — sitting in a hooch in Vietnam with crayons and a vision.

He hopes today’s Airmen understand:

- The pride behind the logo
- The current and generational missions it represents
- The people who lived in the early days of RED HORSE
- The legacy they now carry forward

He is proud. He is grateful. And he is still, after all these years, a true Horseman.

Closing Statement

For nearly six decades, RED HORSE Airmen have carried a symbol born not in a design studio, or with the help of A.I. but in a combat zone — drawn by a 20-year-old illustrator with crayons, stencils, and a vision that captured the spirit of a brand-new unit finding its identity. What Bill Ackley created in Vietnam was more than artwork; it was a declaration of who we were, who we are and who we intend to be.

Today, “Chargin’ Charlie” remains one of the most recognizable emblems in the Air Force — a living reminder that heritage is built by the hands of real people, in real places, under real pressure. Bill’s story, preserved in his own words, reminds us that legacy isn’t accidental. It’s crafted, carried, and renewed by every generation that steps into the mission.

And let’s be honest: plenty of Air Force Civil Engineers may never say it out loud, but if they weren’t assigned to RED HORSE, many quietly wished they had been. That reputation wasn’t built by accident — it was earned by the men and women who wore and still wear the hat, lived the mission, and showed the rest of the Air Force what being in the HORSE truly means.

As you finish this article, I invite you to explore the full interview that follows. It offers a rare opportunity to hear directly from the man who gave RED HORSE its face — a story of opportunity, improvisation, pride, and the unexpected journey of a logo that has outlasted wars, conflicts, and humanitarian missions to become the identity of the entire Air Force engineer community, whether people admit it or not.

Interested in Joining the RED HORSE & Prime BEEF Association?

If you're interested in becoming a member of the RED HORSE & Prime BEEF Association (RHPBA), we welcome you. Membership is open to all engineers and anyone who has served in or supported a RED HORSE or Prime Beef unit. We proudly include the many non-traditional Civil Engineer AFSCs that were or currently assigned Squadrons that make our mission possible — no one is overlooked.

Active Duty, Guard, Reserve, Veterans and Retirees are all encouraged to join our community. For more information, please visit: <https://rhpba.com>

If you have any questions, feel free to contact me directly at jason.nieves024@gmail.com.

TO THE HORSE!