

# The King of Country Music

by David A. Kent

The year was 1967, and like thousands of other Americans, I was serving my country in Southeast Asia. I drew a better assignment than many, stationed at a small Air Force radar base near the western Thailand city of Phitsanoluk. Our job was air traffic control, guiding the fighter-bombers and aerial tankers headed toward North Vietnam until they flew beyond radar range, and then bringing them (those that returned) back home again. Although it was better than running around Vietnam with a rifle, it was not pleasant duty.

The folks in Thailand are most friendly, but nevertheless we longed for the sights and sounds of home. Because I had some experience in theater I was given the titles of Special Services and Motion Picture Officer, although like any smart



young lieutenant I left day-to-day management of our modest movie theater to the sergeant. It wasn't a real theater, anyway, just a hall with a platform at the far end where the movie screen was rigged. You set your folding chair wherever offered the best view of the screen.

One group we came to appreciate was the United Services Organization, better known to generations of GIs as the USO. Of course, our tiny unit didn't qualify for visits from the big name performers like Bob Hope, but one day I received a message that we had been chosen for a visit by a performing troupe from Nashville's Grand Old Opry. I had no idea how we had been selected, and couldn't imagine that they would try to perform in our clearly

inadequate "theater."

The day soon arrived, and so did the troupe, about ten of them flying in on a small plane. It was the height of summer, with temperatures over 100, and humidity to match. We had no dressing room, but a restroom in the NCO club next door had a back entrance to the "stage," and we offered it to the performers. I walked to the front of the auditorium, and my heart sank. It was our busiest time, and most of the men were on duty "working" aircraft, or tending the radar and radios. There were at most 40 people in the hall, half of them local Thais who worked on the base or had friends there. Most of them didn't even understand English.

Show time! The stage door burst open and our troupe raced on stage and broke into song. Leading them was a tall lanky man who seemed equally skilled at playing a fiddle or a yo-yo. Taking their cue from him, the performers sang and danced and told jokes with endless enthusiasm. The jokes may have been corny, but the performers were having so much fun that soon everyone was laughing. The singing and dancing and joke telling went on for more than an hour, until the troupe had to depart for their next performance. We met them at the dressing room door, and by then they were exhausted, barely able to climb into the van for the trip to the airfield. The heat that didn't seem to exist on stage had taken its toll.

As the van pulled away, I turned to the sergeant, who clearly was a country music fan. "Who was the tall guy with the fiddle?" I asked. "Oh," he replied with a smile still on his face, "that was Roy Acuff!"