

**RICE, REFUGEES,
AND ROOFTOPS**

BOOK ONE

GENESIS

**THE AIR AMERICA,
INC. HELICOPTER
PROGRAM- LAOS
1959-MAY 1962**

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CONTENTS

PREFACE	xii
INTRODUCTION	xx
CHAPTER 1. CIVIL AIR TRANSPORT/AIR AMERICA	1
CHAPTER 2. LAO HISTORY	15
Lao Military Regions	22
French Colonial Legacy	32
North Vietnamese Military Political History	35
U.S. Action	51
Haffner's Reconnaissance Missions	52
CHAPTER 3. H-19 HELICOPTERS	57
The Helicopter Program	57
Laos	59
Taking to the Field	62
New Blood	69
Military Region-4	71
CJ Abadie	78
CHAPTER 4. COUP	82
White Star	88
Confusion Reigns	91
The Pathet Lao Adversary	97
Air America Operations Relocate South	98
State Concerns	100
Sam Neua	110
The Conflict Resumes	112
October-A Crucial Month	114
CHAPTER 5. THE BATTLE FOR VIENTIANE	129
William Lair and the Thai PARU	130
Political Infighting	131
Lair's Ascendency	133
Strike While the Iron is Hot	135
Initial Movement North	137
Ugly Americans	142
CJ Abadie	141
Cranking up for Battle	147
Souvanna Departs his Post	154
CJ Abadie	159
Aircraft Flight Watch System	160

CONTENTS

Victory of a Sort	163
Washington Deliberations	164
CHAPTER 6. ADVANCED HELICOPTERS	167
Early Hazards Down South	170
CJ Abadie	172
Enemy Pressure and USMC Flapping	174
Another Flap	175
Laos	177
USG Reaction	179
CHAPTER 7. EARLY ROUTE-13 OPERATIONS	184
Taking the Offensive with AT-6 Planes	186
Implementation	189
Washington Speak	191
Media Meddling	193
CHAPTER 8. MEO PROGRAM	198
Vang Pao	198
Finding VP	203
Boosting the Program off the Ground	207
French Guerrilla Warfare	209
First Blood	211
Initial HUS-1 Loss	211
The Crash	214
RON	217
Replacement Aircraft	218
Agency Field Advisors Joe Hudacheck, Bill Young	223
The Curious American	224
Washington	226
Operations from Padong	229
Route-4	232
CHAPTER 9. NEW H-34 PILOTS	237
JJ McCauley	237
Kathy's Trip Upcountry	242
CHAPTER 10. TEMPORARIES-CANNON FODDER	247
Military Movement	247
Political Decisions	248
The Millpond Operation	250
Recruiting	257
Army and Navy Personnel	259
Early Birds	263

CONTENTS

Shirley	269
Going Abroad	272
Marine Movement	271
Intelligence Overview	277
Onward to Udorn	260
Initial Problems	284
MABS-16 Progress	289
Early Operations in Thailand and Laos	292
Local Management	297
Madison	302
Jackson Forney	303
J.J.	312
CHAPTER 11. THA THOM	315
CHAPTER 12. ADDITIONAL TEMPORARIES	323
Coble	323
Hiring	326
Udorn	332
CHAPTER 13. OPERATIONS IN ELEPHANT VALLEY	340
Initial Briefing	340
Second Briefing	342
The Jump	345
Errant Parachutes	346
Additional Damage	350
Assessment for a Potential Recovery	351
Aftermath	355
Upcountry	357
Initial Problems	360
Life in Town	362
CHAPTER 14. KIOU CACHAM	364
The Clergy	364
Special Forces	366
An Inadvertent Bombing Run	368
Hotel India	373
CHAPTER 15. THE DRUMS OF WAR CONTINUE TO BEAT	382
A Trip Too Far	382

CONTENTS

CHAPTER 16. VANG VIENG	393
Takhli B-26S	393
The Versatile Helio Courier	397
Stand Down	399
Don Courtney	401
MAAG	403
MADRIVER	405
Down the Tubes	406
Last Minute Maintenance	415
USG	421
Vientiane Exodus	423
CHAPTER 17. PADONG	427
Training Challenges	432
The Saga of "Dangerous Dan"	437
CHAPTER 18. CEASEFIRE	440
Incountry Situation	442
Ban Hin Heup	447
Ban Namone	453
Accounts from Negotiations	461
As Time Goes By	468
CHAPTER 19. LUANG PRABANG	474
Jim Coble	474
KMT	479
Persona	484
Fun in the Field	485
Excitement	489
Bert Palmer	499
Moberg	509
Big John	510
Lao Mess Nights	513
Hotel Romeo	516
Barbes	524
CHAPTER 20. PADONG' DEMISE	526
Malcom Bird	534
Action	541
Helios	543
Ban San Tiau	545
Moung Ngat	546
Jack Shirley's Way	547

CONTENTS

Hotel Kilo	549
VP'S Justice	556
American Casualties at Padong	557
Young's Walkabout	563
Abandoned	564
Nhot Mhu	567
Get Squared Away, Boy	569
Aftermath	570
CHAPTER 21. ADDITIONAL H-34 LOSSES	572
Hotel Whiskey	573
CHAPTER 22. MIDYEAR OVERVIEW	576
Overview	578
Time Off	581
Fifth Column?	583
Dependents	584
Hotel Hotel	586
CHAPTER 23. THE DIRTY SIX	593
CHAPTER 24. COMMAND ISSUES	604
CHAPTER 25. PHA KHAO	611
Hiring	619
Hitchman	621
"Welcome Aboard"	623
Down in the Weeds	626
Aftermath	632
The C-46F, B136 Disaster	634
CHAPTER 26. BAN NA	638
CHAPTER 27. LONG TIENG	642
Young's Recons	643
Anthony Poshepny AKA "Tony Poe"	647
USG	651

CONTENTS

CHAPTER 28. UDORN	652
Air America Takes Over	653
VPFO	654
Clarke's Trip Out of Town	656
The First Family	656
Sass Departs Southeast Asia	666
CHAPTER 29. A JOURNEY TOO FAR	667
Saga of Haver's Lake	671
CHAPTER 30. FALL OPERATIONS	676
Clarke's Concussion	681
Bird	688
Coble Departs Luang Prabang	692
Attopeu	693
Relocating	697
Ben Moore, Jr.	702
Spares	704
Hotel Charlie	706
CHAPTER 31. ODE TO A BURNING HELICOPTER	708
Clarke Goes Down	713
Coble	715
CHAPTER 32. A LEGEND APPEARS	717
Palmer	720
Drugs	722
Glutting Packs It IN	724
CHAPTER 33. WAYNE KNIGHT RETURNS	726
Moher and McCauley go Rogue	727
Knight's Feet Wet	730
Military Region-1	730
Continuing Checkout	733
Management	738
CHAPTER 34. KHA	739
CHAPTER 35. THE LAST OF THE MOHICANS	744

CONTENTS

CHAPTER 36. DECEMBER MILITARY AND POLITICAL SITUATION	748
Coble	751
CHAPTER 37. EARLY 1962	752
Nam Tha Operations and AAM Participation	753
Knight	754
Military Region-3	763
Escalation	767
LP	770
CHAPTER 38. UDORN	773
Improvements	774
Coble	775
New Pilots	776
"Red"	779
George	780
Upcountry Fun and Games	783
CHAPTER 39. DEATH ON THE PDJ	787
Hitchman	787
CHAPTER 40. UDORN	789
H-34 Powerplants	789
Iran	792
Ban Pha Khao	796
Sticky Wicket	797
CHAPTER 41. OPERATIONS	800
Phu Pha Thi	803
CHAPTER 42. MR-1	807
George	810
Politics	812
CHAPTER 43. BEAVERS	814
Washington	816

CONTENTS

CHAPTER 44. NAM THA	818
Hamblin	822
The Loss of Nam Tha	825
Aftermath	830
KMT	830
The Dooley Legacy	831
Punching Back	832
Consequences and Beyond	834
EPILOGUE	838
BIBLIOGRAPHY	842
GLOSSARY	847
INDEX	854

PHOTOGRAPHS

TOM MOHER	70
EARLY PAKSE AIR TERMINAL	72
C-46 CARGO PLANE	105
BILL LAIR AND PARU	132
LAO AT-6	188
MEO SOLDIER	206
MOUNTAIN TERRAIN	212
VANG PAO	213
C-124 DELIVERING HUS-1 TO UDORN	219
MARINES MANHANDLING HUS-1 FROM GLOBEMASTER	220
HUS-1 EMERGING FROM A U.S. AIR FORCE PLANE	221
JJ MCCAULEY	238
ED REID	262
TEMPORARY U.S. NAVY PERSONNEL	267
HUS-1 AT VANG VIENG	270
JOHN FONBURG	274
COMBS, CAMPBELL, AND ABADIE AT DON MUANG	282
RAISED THAI HOUSE IN UDORN	288
EARLY CREW TRANSPORTATION VEHICLE	291
CONSTRUCTION FOR MABS-16 AT UDORN AIRFIELD	293
MARINE TENT CITY	294
PORTABLE MILITARY WATER TANK	295

CONTENTS

COMPLETED RAISED PLATFORM OFFICE	296
VANG PAO AT VILLAGE WEDDING	298
MEO BRIDE WITH SILVER JEWELRY	299
PLUG-VP'S GUARD	300
YOUTHFUL SNOOPY	301
MADISON IN FRONT OF GP TENTS	304
AIR AMERICA DIGNITARIES FALL OF 1961	305
EARLY HELICOPTER MAINTENANCE IN THE OPEN	308
HUS-1 TOWED TO PARKING SPACE	309
HUS-1 ENGINE	320
TUK-TUK TRANSPORTATION	331
UDORN EARLY STREET SCENE	334
MAHPAKDI "HOUSEBOY"	335
THAI MONKS BEGGING	336
APRIL WATER FESTIVAL	339
LAO TROOPS LOADING AT LUANG PRABANG	344
ELEPHANT VALLEY	347
DAMAGE INCURRED TO HUS-1 DURING ROUTE-13 OPERATION	352
KIOU CACHAM	369
HOTEL BRAVO UNDERGOING FIELD REPAIR AT KIOU CACHAM	371
HOTEL INDIA WRECK	376
AIR AMERICA MECHANICS INSPECT HI DAMAGE	377
HAL NORFLEET AND OTHERS AT VIENTIANE	378
END OF DAY MAINTENANCE AT THAKHET	383
C-46 AIR DROPPING AT THAKHET	384
PARACHUTES WERE USED TO CUSHION LANDINGS	385
LOAD ABOUT TO TOUCH DOWN	386
SUPPLIES LANDING	387
LAO TROOPS RECOVERING CARGO	388
C-46 DAMAGED DURING AIR DROPS	389
AIR AMERICA B-26 AT TAINAN, TAIWAN	395
HELIO COURIER IN THE FIELD	398
LAO TROOPS AT VANG VIENG	411
TROOPS AT VANG VIENG APPROACHING A HELICOPTER	412
WOUNDED LAO SOLDIER REMOVED FROM HELICOPTER	414
SUPPLY SHEDS AT VANG VIENG	417
LOADING A HUS-1	415
HOTEL UNIFORM AT WATTAY AIRPORT	419
DELIVERY OF A TRANSMISSION AND ROTOR HEAD TO VANG VIENG	420
AT-6 PILOT DEPARTING VANG VIENG	422
MEO AND WHITE STAR AT PADONG	428
A PORTION OF THE PADONG TRAINING BASE	429
MEO VILLAGERS OBSERVING OPERATIONS ABOVE PADON STRIP	431
INSTALLATION OF A 4.2 INCH MORTAR	433
SOVIET MI-4 HELICOPTER	449
DESTROYED BRIDGE AT THE NAM LIK	450
ANOTHER VIEW OF THE NAM LIK BRIDGE	451
"HARD RICE" LOADED ON HELICOPTER AT PADONG	455
CEASE FIRE MEETING AT BAN NAMONE	457
JOHN COMBS PHOTOGRAPHS FACTIONS AT PEACE TALKS	458
PATHET LAO DELEGATE WATCHED H-34 LAND NEAR BAN NAMONE	459
ROYAL LAO AIR FORCE ALLOUTTE AT PEACE TALKS	460

CONTENTS

AIR AMERICA CREW MEMBERS LOOKING AT A SOVIET MI-4	462
PATHET LAO TROOPS MARCHING ON A ROAD AT THE PEACE TALKS	464
SOVIET MI-4 HOUND DEPARTING LANDING ZONE	465
PATHET LAO AND NORTH VIETNAMESE SOLDIERS AT REST	471
MEKONG RIVER AND MOUNTAINS IN LUANG PRABANG AREA	476
TRIBUTARY ENTERING MEKONG NEAR LP	477
STREAM AND WATERFALL LP AREA	478
JIM COBLE AND HIS HELICOPTER	480
FRED SASS AT THE LUANG PRABANG AIRFIELD	488
AIR AMERICA C-46 DEPARTING LUANG PRABANG AIRFIELD	490
A COLORFUL MEO CLAN IN THE HILLS OF NORTHWEST MR-1	491
BUDDHIST TEMPLE AT LUANG PRABANG	492
ARMY CAMP IN THE LP AREA	493
ARMY CAMP NORTH OF LP	494
LAO ARMY DEPENDENT HOUSING	495
H-34 UNLOADING AT KIOU CACHAM	502
FRED SASS, DOM GUCCHIONE, AND BERT PALMER AT LP	504
HOTEL ROMEO ENGINE CHANGE	519
WOODEN "A" FRAME BUILT TO ENABLE THE ENGINE CHANGE	520
FILIPPINO MECHANIC AND LAO GUARDS AT HOTEL ROMEO	521
MEO TROOPS WAITING FOR A RIDE	527
MEO PATROL	528
H-34 ENTERING WEATHER	533
SMOKY SEASON IN THE MOUNTAINS	535
FLIGHT MECHNAIC CARL DIGGS AND TROOPS AT PADONG	537
PARU DAJA ADULRAT AT VS-16	539
T-6 AGAINST MOUNTAIN BACKDROP	542
GRANT WOLFKILL, EMBASSY STAFF, AND PAT SULLIVAN	550
PADONG AREA	558
HOTEL WHISKEY NEAR "IPSENVILLE"	574
AREA OF THE HOTEL HOTEL CRASH	587
HOTEL HOTEL	590
STRIPPED SKELETON OF HOTEL HOTEL	591
FLOODED MABS-16 AREA-1961	595
MABS ROLLING STOCK SITTING IN FLOOD WATERS	596
RON CLARKE WITH THOMPSON SUB-MACHINE GUN	607
USMC R4D AT THE UDORN AIRFIELD	609
PHA KHAO AREA	612
GUCCHIONE AND SASS AT PHA KHAO	613
VANG PAO AND SASS IN THE FIELD	614
MEO PAY DAY	618
WEAPONS TRAINING AT PHA KHAO	616
MEO VILLAGERS AT A H-34	620
SASS WITH INJURED LOADER AT PHA KHAO	624
GOOCH AND SPECIAL FORCES INSTRUCTOR AT PHA KHAO	625
PHA KHAO AREA	636
EARLY LONG TIENG	644
BICYCLE TRIP SOUTH OF UDORN	657
WATER BUFFALO AND YOUNG HANDLER ALONGSIDE MAIN HIGHWAY	658
WET RICE FIELDS	659
NET FISHING	660
SAWMILL	661

CONTENTS

INSIDE SAWMILL	662
MAHPAKDI "HOUSEBOY" AND FAMILY	663
RON CLARKE AND HOUSEBOY'S FAMILY	664
SMALL THAI CHILDREN	665
WATER BUFFALO IN LAOS	670
OXEN AND CART	682
LAO SOLDIERS PREPARE OX MEAT FOR H-34 DELIVERY	683
SPECIAL FORCES TRAINING CAMP EAST OF SAVANNAKHET	684
WHITE STAR TRAINING CAMP	685
THATCH HOSPITAL BUILDINGS IN THE SAVANNAKHET AREA	686
LAO SOLDIERS MOVING AWAY FROM A H-34	687
H-34 CABIN SECTION	694
AIR AMERICA DOUBLE HANGARS AT UDORN FACILITY-1961	698
FALL 1961 AIR AMERICA FACILITY AT UDORN	699
1961 AIR AMERICA FACILITY AND PARKING RAMP	700
WET OPERATIONAL CONDITIONS AT THE AIR AMERICA FACILITY	701
WAYNE KNIGHT WEARING BUSH HAT	710
ROUGH SLEEPING QUARTERS AT PHA KHAO	714
CHARLIE WEITZ AND BILL PEARSON	718
PART OF WATTAY AIRPORT	721
DICK ELDER, HERB BAKER AND JJ MCCAULEY	729
DAN GARDNER, TOM MOHER, AND SUPOL	732
NAM THA VALLEY	759
BAMBOO FORT AND DEFENSES AT XIENG LOM	766
DICK ELDER	777
JERRY MCENTEE	785
LANDING ZONE AT PHU PHA THI	804
TRIBALS AT PHU PHA THI	805
SOUDERS, COX, WHITE STAR, AND HAMBLIN AT NAM THA	823

MAPS AND DIAGRAMS

THE PACIFIC CORPORATION	11
CORPORATION FLOW SHEET	12
INDOCHINA FOLLOWING THE 1954 GENEVA ACCORDS	16
EARLY LAO PROVINCES	24
LAO PROVINCES AND PRINCIPAL TOWNS	25
MILITARY REGIONS	26
MR-1 AND MR-2 PROVINCES AUGUST 1959	47
UPPER MR-2 SEPTEMBER 1959	50
VIENTIANE ARMY CAMPS	86
ROUTE-13 AND ROUTE-4 CONFLICT MARCH 1961	231
ACTION AROUND VANG VIENG AND THA THOM MARCH 1961	235
1961 DE FACTO CEASEFIRE LINE	446
STATIC BATTLE LINES OCTOBER 1961	469
LUANG PRABANG DIAGRAM	475
NAM THA AND BAN NAM MO JANUARY 1961	756
NAM THA JANUARY 1962	761
NAM THA ACTIVITY MARCH 1962	771
MR-1 AND NAM THA MAY 1962	829

CONTENTS

The Second Indochina War in Laos: ¹ Relegated to the dark corners of the Cold War, today, if one recalls at all, it is the rare individual, who might remember the Lao conflict as only a blip on the continuum of Southeast Asian history. However, the war provided a combat opportunity and superb challenge for an impressionable young man, one who felt cheated by not being included in South Vietnam's fledgling war.

In addition to presenting a once-in-a-lifetime experience for a naïve youth, as in a stranger-than-fiction scenario, the struggle's events comprised and provided extensive valid and reliable material to supersede and exceed the finest and worst aspects of any conjured war novel of half-truths. Moreover, the reader will come to understand that in Genesis and subsequent books, events that appear at times like pure fiction, actually occurred.

As described in the second book, *The Crotch*, I first learned about Air America through military "scuttlebutt" ² in late 1960, while stationed at the Jacksonville, North Carolina Marine Corps Air Facility's (MCAF) New River base. I gained

¹ Laos-possible derivation of the word. Mac Thompson Email, 10/25/04 contains an Email from Mary Flipse. "My Dad [former USAID representative Joe Flipse] always told me, 'the country is Lao, the people are Lao, and the whiskey is Lao.' I recall that 'Laos' with an 's' comes from the French 'les Laos' because there were so many different Lao peoples-lowland, midland, highland-that they didn't have just one name. In French the 's' is not pronounced, so it sounds like Lao.

For clarity, in context the Author will employ Laos, Lao, and Laotian interchangeably.

² Scuttlebutt: Slang for rumor or innuendo prevalent in military organizations.

PREFACE

additional information about the Company during an overseas tour while serving on Okinawa and on U.S. Navy carriers in the Far East. ³ Additional eyewitness observation and contact with Air America participants was obtained while stationed in Udorn, Thailand with the Third Marine Expeditionary Unit (3rd MEU), during the critical May-June 1962 Lao Nam Tha crises--a time of heightened war readiness. ⁴

For various personal reasons, I am extremely proud of my nearly twelve-year participation in the Lao conflict, and the so-called Cold War to thwart rampant communism. ⁵ However, the reader should understand that accounts contained in the multi-volume project are not particularly unique, or only applicable to the Author. Many living former Air America pilots could likely replicate and expand on much the reader will discover here.

The seeds for a book germinated in my mind while I was still flying helicopters for the paramilitary organization, Air America. Then, in the 1980s, I read the first book regarding Air America's history and participants, written and copyrighted in 1979 by English author, Christopher Robbins. Having a few issues with the product (Robbins interviewed some people who had not spent much time in the Theater), I vowed to produce a detailed and more illuminating account based on my personal experience. Further enhancing my determination to record worthwhile facts regarding Air America and its participants, was a 1990 movie

³ Company: The word for Air America and the associated elements will be capitalized to emphasize its importance.

⁴ Much of this Marine experience will be addressed in the second book, *THE CROTCH*.

⁵ Because the Author eagerly participated in the "Cold War" struggle against Soviet world domination for decades, and harbored no respect for the communist ideology, the hated word communism will never be capitalized in this book or any ensuing works, except at the beginning of a sentence to maintain a semblance of correct grammar.

PREFACE

entitled *Air America*, starring popular actor, Mel Gibson.

Filmed in the northern region of Chiang Mai, Thailand, the scenes closely portrayed the beautiful forested mountains of Laos. Within reason, correct aircraft and paint schemes depicted a valid representation of Company assets. However, that is as far as the movie was historically correct. Although the movie script was revamped, gross revisionism by the script writer and director, requirements to create action scenes to titillate the general public skewed actual facts beyond comprehension. The movie's plot, intent more on light, senseless entertainment, rather than relating what actually occurred during the protracted war, inferred wholesale drug and gun running by renegade pilots. The film generally maligned our moral principles, mainly the heroic deeds attributed to the quick and the dead.

Furthermore, disregarding United States government actions during the stressful Cold War, while countries vied for supremacy over the other, the screenplay, adapted from the Christopher Robbins book, provided a flagrant disservice to *Air America* participants.

The Lao war was quite successful for twelve years, providing an effective buffer between North Vietnam and Thailand. This interim period allowed Thailand to train, equip, and build up military forces to a point where a formidable army was created.

Beyond what I recall, or personally experienced, in order to enhance reader interest and more effectively describe the era and events, I have drawn heavily on accounts, anecdotes, and photographs from numerous sources acquainted with the period. Depending on the information and preferences, I have attempted to document those deemed necessary to accord credit and adhere to U.S. copyright laws.

PREFACE

Since I was still actively flying in HMM-261, a Marine Corps HUS-1 helicopter squadron at the time, the gist of Book One deals mainly with a subject in which I did not actively participate--mainly the Department of Defense's temporary Air America helicopter pilot and crewmember program (code named Madriver).

I originally intended to write a single book to complement the late University of Georgia's Professor William Leary's projected book detailing Air America's history. Unfortunately, Bill Leary passed before his goal was accomplished.

I soon realized that twelve years of often-thrilling combat experiences could never be related in a few paltry pages. When one factors abundant history and numerous other events occurring within a single year, you have the material for a very long book. Over the years, my wife has jokingly referred to my writing as the "*never ending book.*" This statement is a fairly accurate description, because my goal is to set the record straight, no matter how verbose or long it takes.

The subsequent fourteen volumes will contain history, personal experiences, and diverse information encompassing the linear years through June 1974, when, with the United States Government (USG) overt and covert war in Laos over, Air America ceased operations, and I returned to America and a new life.

The books will deal mainly with a protracted, unconventional war in Laos, supported by allegedly non-combatant American civilians sponsored by USG, its vast military assets, and an imbedded web of diverse agencies within the U.S. Operations Mission (USOM), or the U.S. Embassy.

I was obligated to discard my original title, *The Night the Frog Ate the Moon*, when a contemporary writer published a similar term for his second book on the Lao war. A suitable title remained in limbo for some time until interviewing a

favorite peer, Mike Jarina, in Baghdad, Florida. Over the course of several interesting research sessions, Mike related that during his initial interview at Air America's Taipei, Taiwan central offices in 1965, his intelligence briefer interjected a sanitizing term for him to employ when asked by friends what kind of work he performed in Southeast Asia. Thus, the phrase *Rice, Refugees, and [Tin] Rooftops* evolved. I immediately realized these simple words adequately described our overt mission and would easily form an admirable substitute for my original title. Mike concurred. Of course, the reader must realize that despite the façade the innocuous title implies, the crews of Air America's flying machines hauled a full spectrum of "bullets, beans, and bandages" (a military term) to help support and prosecute the Lao war. ⁶

OUTSET

A brief overview of that early period in Lao history will help the reader relate to the profusion of events covered in this first work.

Early in the struggle, long before the U.S. military entry into South Vietnam in 1965, and the succeeding massive troop buildup, the Lao war had waxed and waned through periods of conflict, political uncertainty, and balance of power schisms. At first, the conflict remained at a relatively low intensity level. It generally consisted of minor skirmishes in which Western sponsored and trained Meo guerrilla forces wielded archaic flintlock rifles, or cumbersome World War Two weapons that dwarfed the diminutive troops. However, as mounting pressure to react and escalate the war sequentially increased, both sides introduced modern and highly lethal weapons. Indeed,

⁶ Mike Jarina has passed.

PREFACE

at times in the early seventies, it appeared that our relatively modest war in Military Region Two (MR-2) had morphed into a far more intense regional conflict, even exceeding the one in South Vietnam.

Combined force efforts in Laos eventually complemented and augmented USG military actions in Vietnam, tying up substantial North Vietnamese divisional assets, and creating a theoretical buffer zone between Vietnam, Thailand, Burma, and Cambodia. Disparate indigenous tribal forces, employed as U.S. surrogate warriors, largely conducted the major combat aspect of the war and suffered the bulk of casualties.

The Royal Lao Army (RLA) participated in military operations to a lesser degree than the tribal forces. Because of perceived or actual ineptness, this army was generally tasked to protect the lower Mekong River basin and larger towns. However, with clandestine U.S. Air Force (USAF) ground support in the early years, Royal Lao Air Force T-28 pilots (augmented by Thai and Air America pilots) did much to help thwart annual North Vietnamese Army (NVA) dry season thrusts in the country.⁷

In order to minimize the requirement for scarce American military assets, and preserve the illusion of Lao neutrality demanded by the Geneva Accords, the U.S. State Department assumed a leading role in implementing the erroneous, and often referenced, "Secret War" that was no secret to anyone except the American people.

Accordingly, with the Kennedy Administration's official sanction (and that of two succeeding administrations), three Lao Embassy Ambassadors (advised by subordinate military attaches) assumed overall control as Commanders in Chief of the multi-year

⁷ Within USG multi-agency message traffic, the term Viet Minh (VM) was still employed to describe the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) or People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN).

PREFACE

holding action. They were often sarcastically referred to by frustrated American military brass in Saigon as "Field Marshalls."

Department of Defense service personnel supplied war assets from friendly Thai bases (mostly Udorn), where they established and conducted control and accountability under a modicum of secrecy. Of particular interest, in order to circumvent political considerations and international agreements, for the first time in the history of American foreign policy, Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) field contract officers, called Case Officers, advised a large and protracted irregular guerrilla military campaign against superior enemy forces.⁸ At first assisted by elite paramilitary Thai police units (called PARU), these Case Officers conducted training, dispensed advice, and planned missions for sizable numbers of active tribal guerrilla fighters. Both Thai and Americans fought, were wounded, and died for the cause.

With few navigable all-weather roads, because of harsh mountainous terrain covering more than half of Laos, the Agency utilized proprietary aircraft organizations like Air America, Inc. and Bird and Son (later Continental Air Services) to haul the necessary provisions and personnel to support refugees and ongoing guerrilla operations. As a result, bona fide American civilians mainly implemented and conducted a major war.

Recruited as civilian paramilitary assets, some individuals, including the Author, remained in the Theater for more than a decade. Air America fixed wing and helicopter crews, maintenance personnel, and associated support people (called "third country nationals" or TCN) represented a broad spectrum

⁸ Case Officer: This title will be capitalized in respect for the men who served in that capacity.

PREFACE

of nationalities. These individuals labored relentlessly to implement and maintain USG policy in the Theater. Over time, events led to casualties within flight departments, but losses never approached the proportions generated within the South Vietnam meat grinder.

Today, nearly sixty years after my initial involvement in the Theater, I still marvel at what a handful of dedicated Americans and allies, employing mostly antiquated equipment and possessing few assets, accomplished against highly experienced, motivated, and formidable world class North Vietnamese Army divisions.

The era fostered a successful clandestine triumph, perhaps the greatest long-term, cost effective operation ever achieved by a U.S. Government intelligence agency. All this was accomplished while implementing a constrained USG policy--one whose breadth and scope will likely never again see the light of day.

HRC

INTRODUCTION

On 8 March 1965, a U.S. Marine Battalion Landing Team, representing the first Americans overtly committed as the first ground combat troops introduced to the Vietnam War, splashed ashore at Red Beach north of Danang. For years prior to this landing, Air America aircraft crews had supported country wide clandestine war-related missions in Laos.

Before implementing a political decision to exit Laos in 1974, American civilian assets had conducted the most sustained and successful semi-clandestine paramilitary campaign in United States history. The program was initially conceived by presidential administrations as a minor holding operation, one deniable by the United States Government (USG) and easy to walk away from at any time. However, as an important adjunct to the war in neighboring Vietnam, it too escalated into a high intensity conflict in some areas. Still, constraints on warring parties tended to prevent this conflict from spilling over into adjoining countries. ¹

Over the extended era, Lao operational decisions and requirements reached top levels of the United States Government (USG), which involved efforts from major governmental agencies and their personnel. For example: The Central Intelligence Agency, at the behest of Washington officials, conceived ideas, monitored daily situations, planned operations, selected and provided competent Case Officers to work with military leaders of indigenous mountain tribes, and directed civilian air

¹ Roland A. Paul, *"Laos: Anatomy of an American Involvement,"* Foreign Affairs 49.2 (1971) 543.

INTRODUCTION

operations.

The Department of Defense funded much of the Lao military program, provided advisors and materiel to the Royal Lao Army and other forces, and conducted the air campaign.

United States Aid for International Development (USAID) worked hand in hand with the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in Military Region Two implementing an enormous refugee relief effort, without which the native population never would have backed our cause.

Lastly, because of political restraints and international agreements, John F. Kennedy and subsequent Presidents delegated State Department Ambassadors to actually manage the war from the United States Embassy post in the administrative capital of Vientiane, Laos.²

One can only express amazement and marvel that tangible details of American participation in the prolonged war remained largely unknown to a majority of the American public until major disclosures in 1969.

The period included in this initial book attempts to explain a brief segment of the often-confusing political dialogue occurring during the 1959-1962 Cold War era in Southeast Asia. Also intertwined in the account are various political aspects, military actions within the Lao theater, personal eyewitness accounts involving the helicopter program, and selected men of Air America Inc., who, by participating in the experience, helped shape Lao and also American history.

Hopefully this book will pique the reader's interest to read the subsequent fourteen accounts pertaining to the Second

² Vientiane: Translated as the City of Sandalwood, Peter White, "Report on Laos," *National Geographic* August 1961: 241. Oden Meeker in *The Little World of Laos* (New York: Scribner, 1959) 77, Meeker refers to Vientiane as "The Place of Sandalwood."

INTRODUCTION

Indochina War in Laos.

HRC

Today, many individuals consider Civil Air Transport (CAT), the fixed wing forerunner of Air America, as derived from the China based American Voluntary Group (AVG)-better known as the "Flying Tigers," created by President Roosevelt early during World War Two. ¹ In retrospect, one can easily speculate that material for popular U.S. newspaper cartoon strips of the day, like Milton Caniff's *Steve Canyon*, Roy Crane's "Buzz Sawyer," and others, emanated from some of CAT employee's rumored exploits. ²

Following the cessation of World War Two hostilities, during October 1946, Claire Chennault and Whiting Willauer, along with Washington-based Thomas Cochran, created an aviation company partnership in China with headquarters in Hong Kong with the express purpose of conducting refugee relief for the China National Relief and Rehabilitation Agency in China. Called CNRRA Air Transport (CAT), using U.S. government aircraft, the first "official" flight commenced in January 1947. Initially profitable, CAT provided medical and other humanitarian supplies to the Mainland backcountry, supporting Nationalist Government policy. Civil war soon shaped the fledgling commercial airline operation into a paramilitary entity in supporting General Chiang Kai-

¹ Acronyms: Abbreviations like CAT, AAM, USG, CIA, DOD, JCS, and others will be liberally employed in this and all books. Refer to the glossary for explanations.

² For a concise history and eyewitness narratives of Civil Air Transport's Far East operations and the years preceding the formation of Air America refer to: William M. Leary, *Perilous Missions: Civil Air Transport and CIA Covert Operations in Asia* (University of Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1984) Felix Smith, *China Pilot: Flying for Chiang and Chennault* (Brassey's: Washington-London, 1995).

shek's effort to thwart a communist takeover of the country.³

However, increasing communist influence and control in the north ultimately restricted CAT's ability to supply and maintain Nationalist support in that region. A year later, without renewal of the yearly contract, CNRRA failed and CAT officially became Civil Air Transport. With the company no longer profitable, during the spring of 1949, General Chennault sought critical financial assistance for CAT from his Washington contacts. Recognizing the potential of a Southeast Asian based airline to prosecute USG policies for clandestine purposes, the newly established Central Intelligence Agency's Office of Policy Coordination (OPC) forwarded Chennault's ideas to the State Department as part of a plan to save China.

"In the summer of 1949 when General Chennault was in this country, the heads of our then Far Eastern Division sought out the general, and through him met Mr. Corcoran, to see if CAT would be available to help in the support which Agency policy was then giving to Nationalist troops on the Mainland of China. Our men were informed that CAT could do this job but that General Chennault and Mr. Corcoran had decided that it would be necessary to liquidate CAT because so much of its flying territory had been occupied by communists that it was no longer possible to run the line at a profit. We urged them to hold the airline together because of the potential usefulness to this country of its fleet of planes, its trained pilots and its capabilities from an operational point of view...[the Agency people] got an enthusiastic and cooperative response from General Chennault and Mr. Corcoran...

Through summer and early fall, they held the airline together although its losses were substantial.

On 1 November 1949, to protect the United States Government, a short-term agreement was signed between USG and Civil Air Transport. The initial agreement that extended to 31 January 1950 was negotiated by Colonel Stilwell and approved as to legal form by Mr. Houston.

³ Communist: Because the Author spent much of his early life attempting to ward-off the spread of this flawed ideology, except as appearing in the first word in a sentence, the word will not be capitalized or accorded normal grammatical rules.

The agreement had dual purposes:

1. *To subsidize CAT by underwriting its operating losses so that it would be available for government use.*

2. *To finance the establishment of a new operating base at Sanya Basin on the southern end of Hainan, a site chosen by government...*

In an attempt to maintain CAT as a viable entity, the general agreement was tailored to provide up to half a million dollars to finance the base for CAT and necessary funding for hazardous missions as directed by CIA. In return for the monetary input, CAT would agree to provide first priority to CIA designated cargoes and persons for a finite period. A \$200,000 advance helped bolster the struggling company's finances and allowed the first operational flights for the CIA. Hence, toward the conclusion of the China ideological conflict in 1949, the CIA financed and utilized the airline for secret flights (referred to as black flights) into remote areas of China to support anti-communist elements.

Active missions were conducted in support of the Chinese Nationalist Army. As per the November agreement, CAT was to be reimbursed at round trip commercial rates, reduced to the extent that CAT was able to carry cargo to help pay for the flights.

However, the effort proved too little, too late to save China from the communist steamroller. Additionally, *"CAT's principal activity was supporting the retreat of the Nationalist Armies. Its bases, offices and records were being moved from place to place as the battle line retreated."*

Following the downfall of Nationalist China, Chiang's December relocation to Taiwan, and impounding of the majority of the CAT fleet in Hong Kong, future prospects appeared bleak for the airline. Furthermore, CIA analysts estimated that Taiwan would not survive the communist onslaught.

Looking optimistically toward future operations that required equipment, international clout, and especially funding, in late November 1949, Chennault, Willauer, and others separately acquired assets of airlines incorporated as Chennault Air Transport, S.W. (later Civil Air Transport South America-CATSA) in the loose business world of Panama. Three weeks later, Civil

Air Transport, Inc. (CATI) was incorporated under the liberal business laws of Delaware. As an American company, CATI operated as CATSA's agent to secure impounded China National Aviation Corporation (CNAC) and China Air Transport Company (CATC), previously acquired by promissory notes from the Nationalist government. The original CAT, now a partnership was then incorporated in Delaware as CAT, Inc. in early January. The assets of Civil Air Transport were simultaneously transferred to CAT, Inc.

"On 31 January when the agreement [with the CIA] expired, we continued to use the airline which continued to support the war and to fly government agents but no money was provided to keep it going. It ran into debt and Willauer, Chennault and others on the ground chipped in their own money from time to time to keep the planes flying."

For several months, CAT's financial problems failed to improve. By early 1950, management had relocated CAT's tangible assets, flight operations, and four-story headquarters to Taipei, Taiwan. Maintenance facilities moved to Tainan, Taiwan and had expanded to 200,000 square feet by November 1962. Then virtually bankrupt, CAT still valued by USG as a plausible resource to implement clandestine projects in East Asia, continued operations courtesy of periodic infusions of CIA subsidy payments. At a time of disturbing worldwide communist ideological gains during the emerging "Cold War," Agency planners, with State, Department of Defense (DOD), and the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) concurring, recognized an increasing and continued requirement for unrestricted airlift to counter commie inroads into free world nations. Despite CAT's substantial financial drain on the fledgling Agency's coffers (over a million dollars), the CIA decided to exercise an option to purchase the company for the mentioned strategic reasons.

"On 24 March, we entered into an option agreement under which we had the right to purchase the airline and to apply against the purchase price certain subsidies which we agreed to advance...this subsidy was treated as a loan in this agreement and was to cover current liabilities which had mounted..."

As a 7 November 1962 memorandum to Assistant General Counsel Marvin Evans from the Managing Director explained:

"...in 1950, the Agency purchased all of the assets of Civil Air Transport, a partnership that had been operating on the Chinese Mainland. This purchase was proposed and sponsored by the Far East Division, DDP, and was principally for the purpose of denying the Chinese communists the aircraft and other assets of Civil Air Transport. The Chinese communists were at that time completing their takeover of the Mainland...At the outset, operational use of aircraft and personnel was of secondary importance, but the continued political instability of the Far East has provided sufficient target for the Agency to have determined during periodic reviews that the continued operation of the project was desirable."

In a convoluted legal maneuver, calculated as a cover for United States Government covert ownership and to obscure the actual identity of the purchaser, on 8 July 1950, Willauer was informed of a third party's decision to purchase CAT, Inc. In order to relinquish the company name and to implement and ease the transfer of assets and liabilities, the CAT name was changed to the Willauer Trading Corporation and assets were transferred to a third party (CIA lingo "cut-out"). Then, on the 10th, CIA lawyers under General Counsel, Larry Houston incorporated two Delaware companies called the Airdale Corporation and CAT, Incorporated. Airdale was formed to operate as the holding company for CAT, which in turn would purchase the Willauer assets and Airdale would acquire all the stock of CAT. On 21 August 1950, with all necessary paperwork and purchase completed, assets of Willauer were transferred to CAT, Inc. Within two days, Airdale was capitalized; the third party as OPC agent assigned rights to Airdale. Then Airdale acquired substantially all CAT and the associated aviation services company, Asiatic Aeronautical Company. In turn, Airdale, in exchange for all CAT's operating company stock, transferred these functionaries back to its subsidiary, CAT Incorporated. To ensure CIA policy matters remained strictly in house, directors of both corporations were assigned from the CIA Office of Finance. Following the transfer process, nothing changed overseas, as employees and

company logos remained the same. ⁴

With the advent of the Korean War in 1950, CAT's infrastructure was revitalized to aid in USG's overt and covert participation in the war. When the Chinese entered the war, CAT's clandestine operations took precedence over normal airline operations. As a top-secret memorandum in June indicated, "*CAT had changed from a purely commercial venture to almost purely a government operation and long-range plans were being formulated for continued use of CAT as the government's operational instrumentality [in Asia].*"

As the CAT-CIA mission evolved to more clandestine operations, hoping to minimize supervisory problems generated by great distances, communications problems, and festering differences between Washington and the Far Eastern arena, the first changes in top field management and corporate structure occurred. To better manage CAT from Washington, OPC's overseer role was switched to the Deputy Director for Administration (DD/A). Enabling Airdale to function as a "cut-out" for the ownership arrangement between CAT and CIA, an inactive board of directors was selected. An active Board of CAT, Inc. directors was comprised of high-ranking Agency types.

With field operations still in turmoil and conflict, yet another change was made. Career officer, Alfred T. Cox was tapped as President General Manager, and a director of CAT in January 1953. When State asked CIA to supply pilots in the French Indochina War, Cox complied without hesitation.

To lessen demand on his time monitoring CAT, the Agency Deputy Director employed George A. Doole, Jr., an Air Force training classmate, who, as a

⁴ If the reader encounters difficulty following the various nomenclatures and Company name changes effected during this period, he or she is not unique. This technique was contrived and utilized by the finest legal minds and most competent attorneys the Agency could obtain at the time in order to obscure USG control of the "airline" from the public, foreign governments, and potential competitors.

Like other government departments or entities, it would be counterproductive to conceive of either the Central Intelligence Agency or Air America, Inc. as mutually exclusive from the United States Government (USG). Both organizations were created and functioned solely to implement covert USG policy. Former Air America helicopter pilot, Allan Cates spent years composing his work, *The Hidden Air Force*. This and many of his other poignant writings making a credible case of what should have been, but certainly was not, obvious to the layman.

former Pan American Airways executive, had gained substantial airline business experience to administer and manage CAT from Washington, D.C.

During the fall of 1953, at an important meeting attended by high-level Agency types, a question was broached by Larry Houston inquiring if CIA needed to own CAT to fulfill the Agency's role in the Far East. The question was bumped to Director, Allen Dulles, who wisely mandated that:

"CIA was to retain and maintain CAT as an Agency instrumentality to be continually available for utilization in the national interest."

During his eighteen-year tenure, George Doole wore many corporate hats. On 1 July 1954, Doole assumed the title of Chief Executive Officer, General Manager, and overt Vice Chairman of the CAT Board. He insisted on a strict chain of command, while levying a heavy hand in most decision-making. Under his tough-minded policies, the company flourished, became self-sustaining, and ultimately a highly profitable organization.

By the mid-fifties, the Delaware holding company's subsidiary, CAT Incorporated, to conform to Chinese law, created two Chinese companies licensed for business by the Taiwanese government. Civil Air Transport Company Limited (CATCL) was incorporated 19 January 1955 in the Republic of China. CATCL, with supposedly sixty percent Chinese majority ownership, was to serve as the Republic of China's designated commercial flag carrier. By February, the company obtained the necessary international and domestic charter licenses. Replacing CAT Incorporated, previously flying under the name Civil Air Transport, the newly named company began operating routes the following month. CAT continued as a scheduled airline operation until a tragic accident occurred in 1968.

The company's maintenance arm, American-owned Asiatic Aeronautical Company Limited (AACL), was incorporated on 19 January 1955. AACL also began operations in March. The company purchased the Tainan, Taiwan aircraft maintenance facilities and CAT Inc.'s Chinese registered aircraft. The company generally held all corporate assets overseas. Under a "services contract" and "charter agreement," AACL provided equipment and employees for CATCL and CAT Incorporated flight operations. Financing was provided and activities

generated through joint venture contracting with CAT Incorporated.

Before final formation of the new companies, Cox, unhappy about losing field authority, expressed displeasure with headquarters' new policy, corporate structure, and management of the proprietary. Therefore, he was terminated at the end of 1954.

Hugh Grundy, then Vice President for Aircraft Technical Services at Tainan, Taiwan was immediately elevated to Company President on 1 January 1955. Grundy, an individual who followed orders without question, filled the corporate mold perfectly, and all opposition from the field ceased. Deemed an excellent manager, superiors credited Grundy with maintaining the aging C-47 and C-46 fleet in ongoing operations.

Grundy's appointment allowed superiors at Agency Headquarters to impose their will on field management. The overall objective of the Far East policy *"was to create an air support vehicle, operated as a commercial airline on self-sustaining basis, which could serve as the best possible cover for clandestine operations."*

"By the end of 1955, the lines of authority and communication within the Agency on CAT operations were well established.

Colonel L.K. White was responsible for preserving the CAT's commercial cover and assuring its business was conducted on an efficient basis..

The Deputy Director of Plans (DD/P), Frank Wisner, was responsible for presenting requirements and making recommendations for the development, utilization and exploitations of facilities and personnel of CAT in the interest of the Clandestine Services..

As Chief Executive of the commercial organization, operating out of a downtown office, George Doole was responsible for executing plans, policies, and courses of action formulated by the Executive Committee.

Hugh Grundy, President of the field organization, was responsible to Mister Doole for implementing the approved plans, policies and courses of action transmitted to the field.

A CAT Project Officer provided liaison between Doole and CIA for coordination within the Agency of all administrative and management matters

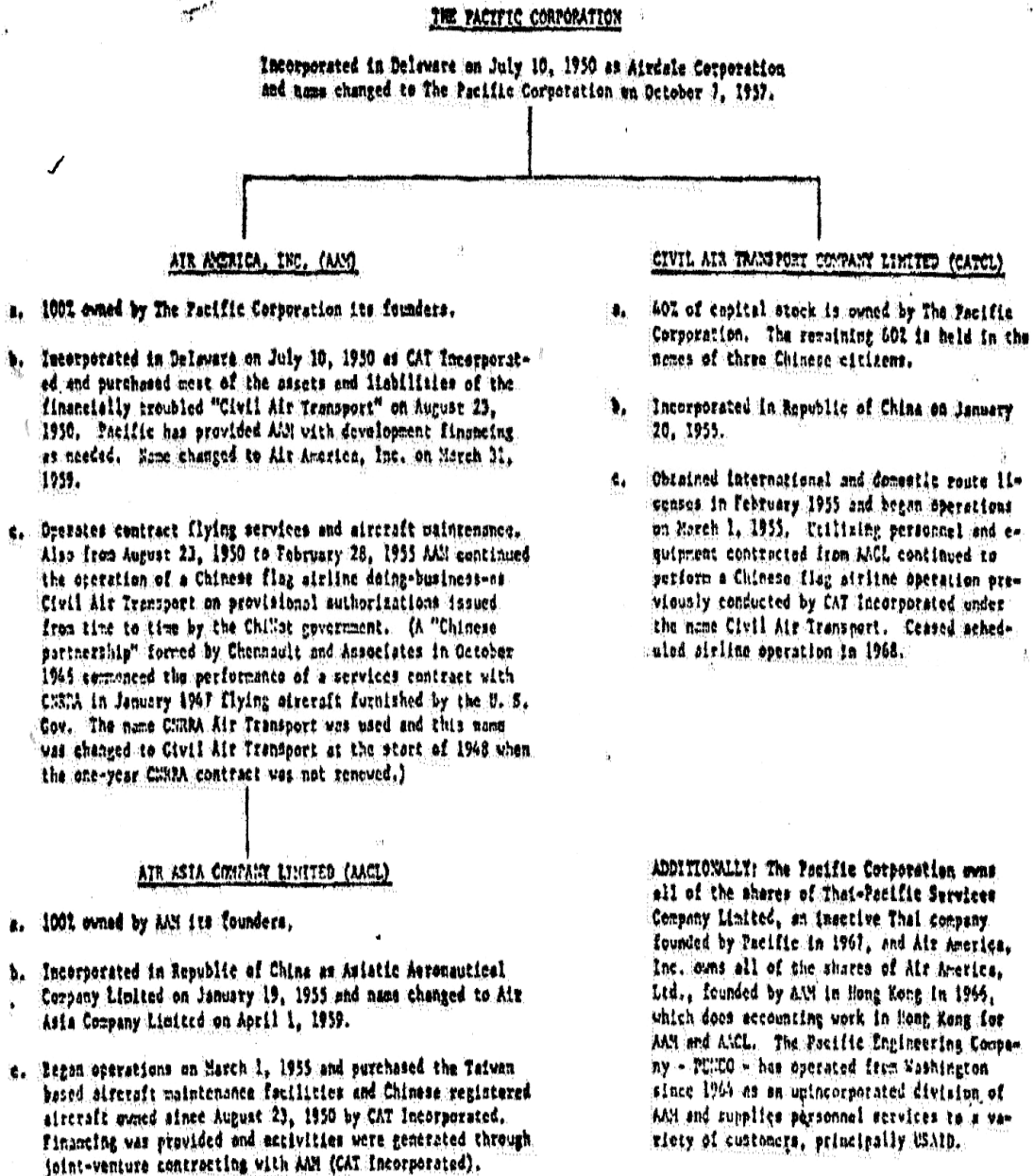
and Agency actions related to them."

Within a few months, the ultra-tight organization and tendency to make all policy decisions in Washington caused some dissatisfaction among principals.

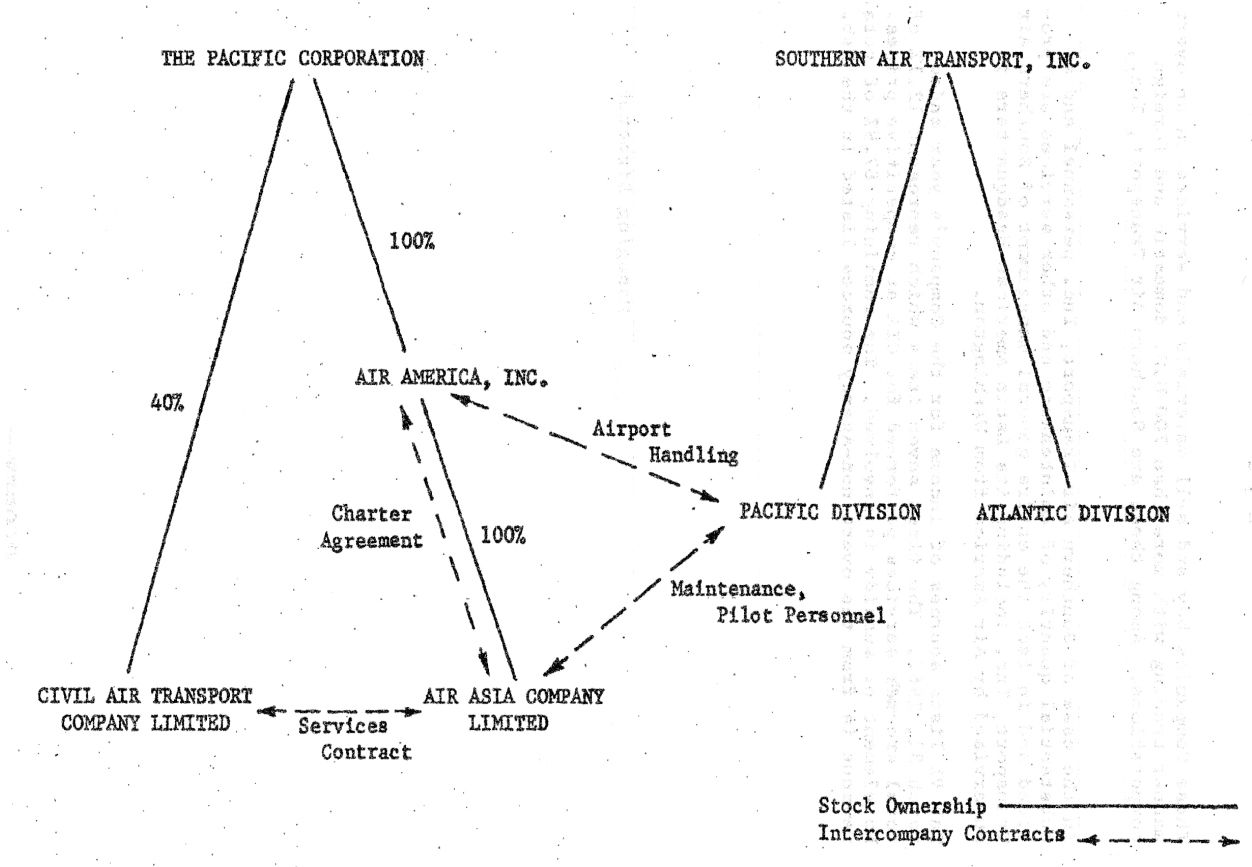
To confuse the issue, promote additional cover, and achieve Agency goals, Airdale Corporation's name was legally changed to the Pacific Corporation by 7 October 1957.

"The top Company in this project is the Pacific Corporation..., which was organized under the laws of the State of Delaware on July 10, 1950. Although its articles of incorporation are broad enough to authorize it to engage in practically any business activity, it was formed particularly for the purpose of overtly acquiring the capital stock of Air America, Inc. Air America..., a Delaware corporation also organized on July 10, 1950 in turn was organized [although still called CAT] to overtly conduct and to carry on, directly and through domestic and foreign subsidiary and affiliated companies, a scheduled Chinese flag airline, contract U.S. and foreign flag airlift, and contract maintenance engineering activities in the Far East and other parts of the world."

Reflecting contemporary Agency requirements during rapidly changing world events and attempting to produce a distinction between similar company names, Civil Air Transport, Inc. management changed the Chinese subsidiary, Asiatic Aeronautical Company Limited's name to Air Asia Company Limited (AACL). About the same time, as the airline was no longer subsidized by CIA funds and to reflect commercial respectability among its peers, on 26 March 1959, CAT Incorporated was renamed Air America, Inc. Regardless of similar company names or confusing acronyms, bookkeeping was similar and from top to bottom, all employees worked for CAT Incorporated-Air America, Incorporated. With the exception of later "bailed" (loaned from military inventories) U.S. military aircraft provided for the Southeast Asian Theater, and the few in the inventory of CATCL, Air Asia owned and leased all aircraft. Thereafter, the frustrating name changes ceased and the company (s) functioned as a respected and convenient cover for multifaceted Agency air operations, while flying



Early Pacific Corporation organizational chart delineating subsidiaries.
Courtesy of Al Cates.



Agency generated flow sheet depicting control and the functioning of air support activities.

coveted International Air Transport Association (IATA) routes throughout Southeast Asia.

Throughout the nineteen fifty decade, Civil Air Transport, Inc. proved a valuable U.S. Government asset, providing credible cover for increasingly important covert operations and critical air support in Korea, Burma, China, Viet Nam, Tibet, Indonesia, Thailand, Laos, and other volatile or sensitive locations throughout Asia.

In May 1960, the Pacific Corporation purchased Miami, Florida-based Southern Air Transport (SAT). The acquisition was implemented to satisfy new USAF certification requirements to bid on and obtain U.S. military contracts in the Far East. A SAT Pacific Division was subsequently established at Tachikawa, Japan replacing Air America, which had previously fulfilled the contracts.

"...personnel and substantial quantity of maintenance and other services are provided and in fact the entire general management of Southern Air Transport, including its Latin American headquarters is supervised by Air America from Washington."

During 1960, the rapid build-up of Air America assets continued unabated. President Hugh Grundy, in a rare disagreement with his immediate superior, George Doole, strongly objected to this. He judged that hiring an excessive number of pilots and crewmembers would focus undesirable attention on the company, and possibly compromise the actual nature of the business. However, citing increased commercial requirements, escalating Agency and U.S. Operations Mission demands in Laos, Chief Executive Officer (CEO) George Doole and headquarters prevailed. Then, on 9 March 1961, virtually underwriting and assuring Air America's continued existence as a paramilitary organization, at a time of seriously deteriorating conditions in Laos, President John F. Kennedy directed Central Intelligence Agency headquarters to manage and conduct clandestine operations in Laos. Already functioning in the country, Air America continued to expand, providing essential air services to Lao forces and

implementing USG policy throughout the extended conflict. ⁵

⁵ Segment Sources.

Professor William Leary; Author's copy of the *Summary of the History of Air America, from the Official "Secret" History* Prepared by the Central Intelligence Agency.

Dave Hickler files found in the Air America archives at the University of Texas, Richardson, Texas.

Alan Cates Email, containing Agency representative Jim Glerum and Air America President Hugh Grundy's recall of the Company's Corporate Chronology, 03/03/05.

The Pacific Corporation organizational flow sheet.

Air America, Inc. history document from the Association of Former Intelligence Officers Written by former Company attorney Larry Houston, provided by Captain Jesse Walton and published in the *Air America Log* as *A Bit of History*, 8.

Review of Air Support Activities memorandum from the Managing Director to Marvin L. Evans, Assistant General Counsel, 11/07/62.

Central Intelligence History, Civil Air Transport, 01/02/52.

"On operational grounds, it [CAT] has been one of the most successful projects CIA has undertaken. It was invaluable to the [U.S.] Army in sustaining our early operations in Korea. It is still considered essential by the Army for Korean operations and in addition has won the commendation of the Joint Chiefs [of Staff] in other specific missions it has accomplished."

The Kingdom of Laos was arguably the least developed country in Southeast Asia by the mid-Twentieth Century. During the protracted "Cold War" era that included decades of the fifties, sixties, and early seventies, Laos represented an international blender and crises pool for world superpowers involved in the struggle for regional domination. Soon after the 1954 French military defeat in the dreaded and bloody valley of Dien Bien Phu, Vietnam, concluded an eight-year war and fifty years of foreign domination, nine nations convened in Geneva, Switzerland, to consider the ultimate disposition of the former French Indochina colonies of Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam. After considerable wrangling, agreements eventually dangled the hope of a stabilized Indochina. Neutralizing Laos and Cambodia, dividing Vietnam at the 17th parallel, and holding Vietnamese reunification elections in 1956 provided compromises to engender this end.

In Laos, a cease-fire and a provision requiring entrenched communist forces to vacate Phong Saly and Sam Neua provinces constituted other protocols of the agreement. This never occurred. However, dissatisfied with overall results at the conference, U.S. and South Vietnamese representatives declined to sign the final agreements, but, with no better options, chose to honor them. Without U.S. cooperation, such agreements would never sustain a lasting peace.¹

Regaining independence following cessation of Indochina hostilities, Lao delegates participated in the Geneva Conference as a sovereign nation. However, before long, evidence surfaced that the 1954 Geneva Accords created new problems for the strategically-located and newly-unified Kingdom of Laos.

According to information contained in the purloined Pentagon Papers, representatives of the United States Government (USG) failed to sign the treaty

¹ Committee on Government Operations, U.S. Aid Operations in Laos (Washington: Government Printing, 207.546, 1959) 7.



Indochina and Southeast Asia following the 1954 Geneva Accords agreement. Topography was harsh, with high mountain ranges dividing much of the almost indistinguishable border regions between Laos the two Vietnams.

Arthur Dommen, 109.

"sustaining communist domination of territory" ² because John Foster Dulles, Secretary of State in the President Dwight Eisenhower Administration, harbored doubts about committing the country to a preordained failed policy. Soon after the Geneva agreement signing, a majority of French forces and civil administrators departed Laos. This produced a serious power vacuum at a critical time in world history when communist-sponsored wars of national liberation overtly fostered worldwide instability. Furthermore, saddled with a fledgling army, no trained administrators, engineers, technicians, or professionals, Laos was ill equipped to survive as a viable nation. Consequently, beside internal feuding and serious power struggles within the country, vested foreign interests meddled in Lao affairs and vied to shape its destiny for decades. ³

Early in the 1950s, Eisenhower administration officials recognized that lodged deep within the innards of this power vacuum, a serious potential existed for a domino-like effect, with all countries of Southeast Asia collapsing and eventually succumbing to communist control.

China's hostile actions during the Korean War, and potential ramifications of Chinese communist hegemony throughout the entire region, alarmed and stimulated USG into providing aid to weak nations south of the Chinese mainland. Southeast Asia policy advisors in some Washington venues focused on the perceived communist intentions to cobble together Laos, Cambodia, and North and South Vietnam into one entity. They believed that leaders in Peking theorized that this vast area, along with Thailand, would provide additional fertile land to produce the necessary rice staples to feed an overpopulated mainland. Then, having achieved this goal, the eventual control of strategic seaports and South China Sea lanes would follow. Singapore, followed by an easy conquest of India and Pakistan would complete the

² Marek Thee, *Notes of a Witness: Laos and the Second Indochina War* (New York: Random House, 1973) 353.

³ LaFantasie, Ed in Chief, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1956-1960* volumes. 25-26, part 2, Laos, Microfiche Supplement (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1993).

Department of State Telegram, Durbrow to Secretary of State, 04/27/59.

Chinese and Soviet sphere of influence. ⁴

Reluctant to commit limited military forces to Southeast Asia so soon after a difficult negotiation leading to the Korean War armistice, the United States Government, following termination of the First Indochina War and formation of a North Vietnamese communist state, undertook other long-term commitments to stabilize the regional situation. As one of the first measures--an appeasement to friendly Thailand and a tangible declaration to all nations that Southeast Asia constituted an area of concern--USG, supported by President Eisenhower and Secretary of State Dulles, helped form and supported the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) in September 1954. However, participating countries of the United States, France, Britain, Pakistan, Thailand, the Philippines, Australia, and New Zealand failed to establish either a viable joint command or a cohesive military force, which limited the organization's ability to function adequately. ⁵

Part of the Dulles military containment plan against communist advances in Southeast Asia involved a politically unified, anti-communist, independent Laos equipped with a standing army of 25,000 men. ⁶

Against this end, the United States Government, assuming the task of supporting the Lao economy vacated by the French, entered the Lao Theater through internal international agencies: United States Operations Mission (USOM/Laos) and later with the U.S. Aid for International Development (USAID). By January 1955, when Laos assumed independence, a USOM economic unit functioned in the administrative capital of Vientiane to assist Lao government stability and maintain internal security. Assistance included payments for food, clothing,

⁴ Senator Mike Mansfield et. al, "The Vietnam Conflict: The Substance and the Shadow," Report to the Committee on Foreign Relations United States Senate (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1966) 30.

⁵ Hugh Toye, *Buffer State or Battleground* (London: Oxford, 1968) xv, 99.

⁶ Arthur Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), 225.

equipment, and Royal Lao Army (RLA) salaries. At a later point, the Central Intelligence Agency either controlled or influenced both in-country agencies for the first time since their inception.⁷

Also, for the first time, USG sanctioned what would become a huge civilian undertaking unparalleled in U.S history. Under State Department guidance, with an ambassador closely overseeing military functions, and the CIA, which possessed a huge source of back-door-funds and amoeba-like proprietary entities, for years USG supported a paramilitary war in an allegedly neutral country. Additionally, USG managed to generally conceal Agency participation and other covert activities in the Lao war from the world media and the American public until 1969. Eventually, the Department of Defense (DOD), employing assets from various U.S. military branches contributed funds, advisors, out-of-country logistical supply, and massive air power--none possible without the use of several major bases in neighboring Thailand.

Under the auspices of humanitarian necessity, Civil Air Transport aircraft and personnel, with Central Intelligence Agency guidance, followed USOM into Laos. Toward the end of 1955, in response to a severe countrywide food shortage, USOM/Laos contracted CAT's services to airdrop emergency relief supplies. Staging C-46 planes at Udorn, Thailand's grass strip (the concrete airstrip had not been built yet), the operation marked Civil Air Transport's initial entry into the Lao scene. As USG gradually increased support for the Lao government, USAF representatives augmented CAT contracts to satisfy the country's growing logistical needs.

The powerful Dulles brothers--Foster as head of the State Department, and Alan as CIA leader--and other high-level shakers and movers within the Republican administration, were cognizant of the threat from China to the strategically positioned and historic Lao buffer zone. They jointly developed a comprehensive

⁷ John Prados, *President's Secret Wars: CIA and Pentagon Covert Operations from World War Two through Iranscam* (New York: Quill, 1986) 292.
Nina Adams and Alfred McCoy eds, *Laos: War and Revolution: The CIA's Laotian Colony* (New York: Harpers & Row, 1970) 380-381.

master plan to utilize considerable covert action and still appear to adhere to international treaty constraints.⁸

Before entry into the neglected Indochina Theater, United States influence in the region had been minimal compared with more vital roles assumed in Taiwan and the Philippine Islands.

As a segment of a plan to expand the Royal Army, funding under the Mutual Security Program became a reality. Protocols agreed to by parties involved in the 1954 Geneva Accords negotiations clearly stipulated that no foreign military troops, except for a limited number of French military advisors specified under the Geneva Accord, remain on Lao soil. Despite declining to sign the original treaty, USG, seeking to satisfy world opinion, initiated a ruse to circumvent that particular requirement in the Accords. By December 1955, employing civilian attired "technicians," and taking advantage of a loophole in the system, USG embedded a Programs Evaluation Office (PEO) within the Vientiane-based USOM operation to administer the Lao Military Assistance Program (MAP). Starting small, the Department of Defense (DOD) staffed the quasi-clandestine organization with civilians, and then later reverted to retired or non-uniformed military personnel who functioned to oversee requirements and equitable distribution of military equipment, and to manage the Lao army logistics buildup in the larger Mekong River towns.

Largely because of both American and French apathy and mismanagement of supplies, the initial plan did not function well. Therefore, before Brigadier General John A. Heintges assumed command of the PEO in November 1958, he had, during a fact-finding mission, assessed and forwarded recommendations to Washington as to what actions could be implemented to improve the logistical situation and fighting capability of the Lao military. His proposals included deployment of Army Special Forces training advisors and a substantial enlargement

8. The Eisenhower years were generally characterized as ones of doing nothing policies. However, there much was accomplished by covert action.

of the PEO.⁹

General Heintges also recommended a program to enhance military mobility within the country. Except for a few substandard roads and seasonally navigable rivers, landlocked Laos experienced an acute communication and transportation deficiency. Obviously, planners had to address substantial airfield and road improvements to achieve an infrastructure upgrading. Therefore, planners proposed Bangkok-based Naval Mobile Construction Battalions-Seabees (NMCB) for the task.

The first U.S. Naval construction office for Southeast Asia opened in the Thai capital during December 1955. Titled Officer in Charge of Construction, Contracts, Bureau of Yards and Docks Thailand, (OICC Thai), in addition to Thai projects, the office eventually managed contracts for military assistance programs in South Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia.

Little Seabee activity occurred in Laos until March 1957, when engineering and building aid flowed into PEO coffers for planning and contracting construction of military camps, supply depots, and hospitals.

In 1958, when Admiral Felix B. Stump retired and became chairman of the Pacific Corporation Delaware holding company, Vice Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral Harry Donald Felt opted for the U.S. Naval Station Pearl Harbor, Hawaii-based Commander in Chief Pacific (CINCPAC) slot. In 1958, he reported to his superiors in Washington: The Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Secretary of Defense, and President Eisenhower. Heading the largest military command in the world, and working with a staff of 240 U.S. Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marine Corps officers, Admiral Felt enjoyed broad powers during his unprecedented six-year tenure.

Other military commands existed in Honolulu, all subordinate to Felt. Pacific Air Forces (PACAF) provided planes and crews to repair and man the equipment; Commander in Chief Pacific Fleet (CINCPACFLT) contained the First (San

⁹ Segment Sources:
U.S Aid Operations in Laos, 9.
Shelby Stanton, *Green Berets*, 16.
Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 17, 20.
Arthur J. Dommen, *Conflict in Laos* (New York: Prager, 1964) 102-103.
Douglas Blaufarb, *Organizing and Managing Unconventional War in Laos, 1962-1970*
Rand Studies 1972, 3.

Diego, California) and Seventh Fleets. The Seventh Fleet was charged to provide an adaptable and mobile first strike carrier force to address hot spots anywhere in Southeast Asia; U.S. Army Pacific (USARPAC) depended on PACAF and CINCPACFLT to deliver its forces to designated areas. ¹⁰

Implementing a mission charging the admiral with "*supporting and advancing USG policy and interests within the Pacific Command area,*" the Pacific CIC directed that advisors be provided to the PEO and FAL (an early term for the Lao Army) to implement road, airfield, and bridge infrastructure and repair.

By March 1959, a small team of Seabees deployed to Laos, but an immediate requirement for essential equipment repairs temporarily curtailed the construction program. By September, a larger Seabee unit arrived to begin work grading Wattay Airport and strategic roads outside of Vientiane. Despite arriving during the monsoon season, the Seabees and local contractors had built or upgraded half a new 6,500-foot runway, taxiways, drainage, lighting systems, and road projects by year's end. They also erected a housing compound for PEO and USOM employees four miles north of town. ¹¹

LAO MILITARY REGIONS

In addition to the deficiency in communication infrastructure that discouraged contact with national leaders, other major problems in Laos seriously required resolution. Numerous and diverse ethnic groups, comprising various religions, were scattered throughout the entire country. Living in primitive villages, they generally distrusted each other, and little national unity existed

¹⁰ For purposes of this book regarding the Second Indochina War, Okinawa, the Philippines, and Thailand played a very heavy role in CINCPAC's operation.

¹¹ Edward Marolda and Oscar Fitzgerald, *U.S. Navy and the Vietnam Conflict: From Military Assistance to Combat 1959-65* Vol 2 (Washington D.C.: Naval Historical Center, Department of the Navy, 1986) 24, 25, 80-*By Sea, Air, and Land: The Era of Growing Conflict, 1959-1965*. Chapter 2 (Washington, DC: Naval Historical Center) (www.history.navy.mil/seairland/chap2.html).

Richard Tregaskis, *Southeast Asia: Building the Bases, the History of Construction in Southeast Asia* (Washington: GPO, 1975) 20, 21.

Robert Futrell and Martin Blumenson, *The United States Air Force in Southeast Asia: The Advisory Years to 1965* (Washington: Office of Air Force History, 1981) 46, 65.

in the country. This was the case even among majority Lao, who followed the Theravada Buddhist religion. From any aspect, the hodgepodge population and grossly underdeveloped country first required cohesion to encourage any future attempt at serious nation building. To help attain this goal, government officials consolidated five military regions (MR) from the existing sixteen and widely dissimilar original twelve provinces. By partitioning sectors along historical, ethnic, and geographical boundaries, U.S. officials anticipated that for the first time in history, through the medium of a larger more mobile Royal Lao Army, integration might substantially improve Lao society.

MILITARY REGION 1 (MR-1):

Located in heavily mountainous northwestern Laos, and bordered by Thailand, Burma, China, and North Vietnam, the Mekong River military headquarters existed at the Royal Capital of Luang Prabang, originally called by its lengthy Sanskrit name, the Place of the Hundreds of Thousands of Cobras.

Governed by relatives of the King, the large area encompassed Phong Saly, Houa Kong (Nam Tha), Luang Prabang, and Sayaboury Provinces. More than two dozen ethnic groups lived in this vast region.

Transportation and communications facilities (LOC) throughout Laos were inadequate even under the best of conditions. Few roads could be utilized by motor vehicles all year, and this was further restricted or rendered impossible during the rainy season. Consequently, ponies, animal-drawn carts, and human labor provided the means to move cargo over trails in the mountainous outback. Even this method of transportation was limited during the rainy season.

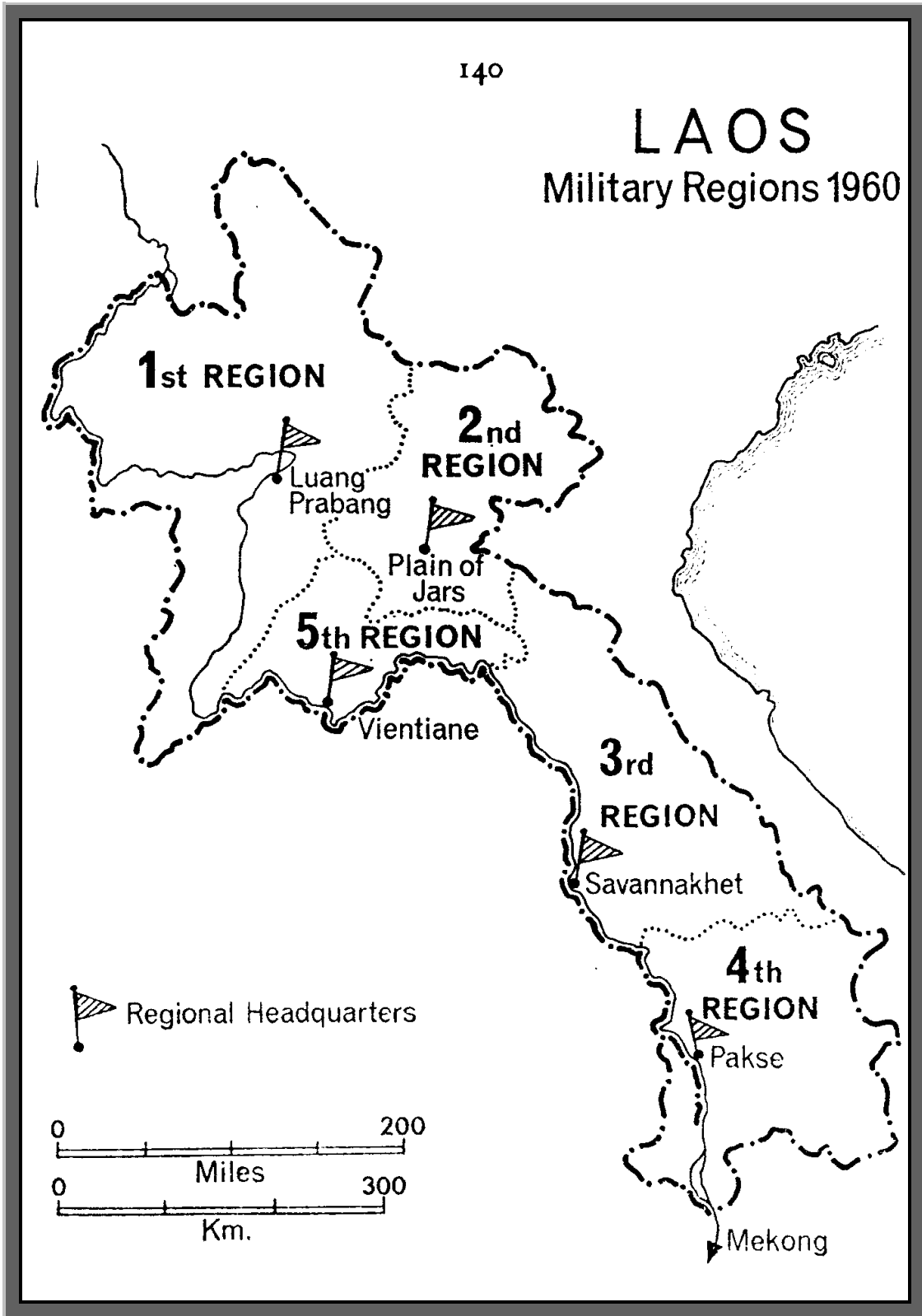
A single road, Route-13 "connected" the Royal Capital to Vientiane. Mostly surfaced with laterite--a reddish clay and low-grade iron ore composite--over 247 miles, the road varied from two lanes to a single-lane track. It was judged a fair-weather route, but with landslides, potholes, and rising rivers impeding traffic, the annual rainy season often closed the road to vehicles for long periods.



Early Lao Provinces.
CIA Map.



Lao Provinces including principal and minor towns. Dommen, 33



Major Lao provinces divided along geographical lines were combined to form five military regions.

Dommen, 140.

MILITARY REGION 2

Located in the mountainous area north of Vientiane, the territory included the two provinces of Houa Phan (commonly known as Sam Neua), and Xieng Khouang. The predominant direction of the mountains was northwest-southeast. In both provinces, many mountains exhibited sheer sides and elevations ranging from 3,000 to 6,000 feet. The tallest mountain in the country, Phu Bia, soared to over 9,000 feet. Prevailing river valleys were narrow, and some presented impassable gorges. Secondary ridges branching from main massifs created spurs and valleys that fostered difficult ground movement. Small limestone plateaus and karsts with impressive scarps dotted the area.

Also generically known as Meo Country after majority hill tribes, the region included the historically strategic Plain of Jars (PDJ) containing various important lines of communication (LOC). Ringed by rugged mountains hugging the Plain's perimeter, the rectangular area generally lay in the center of Xieng Khouang (old Tran Ninh) Province. Beside the road system, the area's military importance related to sizeable areas of semi-level terrain that provided acceptable sites for airbases. The plateau averaged 3,500 feet above sea level. The regional headquarters, originally located at Xieng Khouang Ville, moved later to Long Tieng.

Route-7, sub-sections and byways formed the principal Plain of Jars road system. Joining Route-13 at the Sala Phou Khoun junction, Route-7 wound generally east across the plain through the wide Ban Ban valley, into the mountains leading to Nong Het, and into North Vietnam. Route-6 ran generally north from the Ban Ban Valley toward the provincial capital of Sam Neua, but would only support light vehicles for thirty-five miles. A rough-surfaced road proceeded from the Route-7-Route-4 junction at the Xieng Khouang Plain of Jars airfield for eighteen miles along a moderately-sided valley to Xieng Khouang Ville. From the provincial capital, Route-4 was only passable by vehicular traffic for about twenty-two miles toward Paksane. Many of these roads were selected for improvement, but weather and wartime conditions impeded progress.

Mainly because of the proximity of North Vietnam, the presence of strategic areas like the Plain of Jars, government aggressiveness (by Meo guerrillas), and a

direct approach to the Lao administrative capital of Vientiane, early action in Military Region Two and over the years far exceeded that in any other military region.

MILITARY REGION 3

The central portion of the narrow Lao panhandle--less than fifty miles wide in some portions--contained two large provinces: Khammouane (Thakhet) and Savannakhet. South of the northern highlands, flowing in a northwest-southeast direction to the southern border, lay the Annamite chain with mountain elevations from 4,000 to 8,000 feet. The predominant upper range and its sharp, pinnacle limestone structures around the Thakhet area presented formidable barriers to ease of movement.

With military headquarters situated on the Mekong River at Savannakhet, the provinces shared a common border with both Vietnams, but predominately North Vietnam in the sparsely populated eastern area, where the Ho Chi Minh logistical trail system later assumed such importance and emphasis during the Second Indochina War.

Military Region Three contained portions of poorly maintained macadam or graveled roads that terminated at, or actually penetrated, mountain border passes. Most military action centered on contending factions vying for the eastern road junctions. Perhaps the most strategic French colonial road, Route-9, terminated at Savannakhet after crossing mostly flatlands for 162 miles from the border near the Vietnamese 17th parallel demarcation line. Flowing generally east past Seno, Dong Hene, and Moug Phalane, it entered river valleys around Tchepone, snaked by Lao Bao and into Quang Tri, South Vietnam. Generally, a fair-weather artery and largely impassable in the remote areas during the rainy season, many destroyed bridges prevented vehicle passage without fording.

Variouly described from good to poor road conditions, Route-12 wound from Thakhet eighty-seven miles through hairpin turns and steep gradients to Nhommarath and toward Mugia Pass, where it became impassable for anything larger than carts at the border.

Route-8 served as a fair-weather road from Nhommarath to Nape Pass, although twenty-miles from Nhommarath, a wide stream impeded traffic when at flood stage.

MILITARY REGION 4

Bordering North Vietnam, Cambodia, and Thailand, this sector included six provinces in southern Laos: Saravane, Attopeu, Champassak, Vipikhamthong (Khong Sedong), Khong Sedong (Pakse), and Sithadone (Khong Island). The river town of Pakse housed the military regional headquarters. Throughout recent history, until final consolidation of the realm at Luang Prabang, people referred to this area as the Kingdom of Champassak. The former ruler, Prince Boun Oum Na Champassak, relinquished all rights to succession, but retained royal status and regional control of military and political affairs.

Sloping gently upward from the east of Pakse town, the prominent and stunning Plateau de Bolovens thrust upward toward the heavens. Marking the second significant plateau in the country, and inhabited by a few hardy stone-age people who took advantage of its relative inaccessibility by invaders from the hostile east, the 4,000-foot area played prominently in the history of the region. On the western side of the Bolovens, a relatively short all-weather macadam road from Pakse to Paksong was the only sign of permanent civilization. From Savannakhet, a continuation of the dirt National Highway-13 ran through the jungled provinces to the southern border at Kong Island. Offshoot trails and tracks connected villages throughout the lowland areas.

MILITARY REGION 5

Located south of Military Region Two, below a flat, swampy, and marsh-covered flood plain seventy miles long and twenty to forty miles wide, the military administration of Vientiane and Borikhane provinces originally came under the control of Military Region Two headquarters in Xieng Khouang. With the advent of a shooting war and Xieng Khouang Ville no longer a realistic location, officials reformed Military Region Five. Military headquarters relocated to the Mekong River bank town of Vientiane, where a central command exercised loose control over the other regions.¹²

Despite these measures, a summary of particularly uncomplimentary reports prepared for the House of Representatives in 1959 painted a dim picture of USG efforts

¹² Oden Meeker, *The Little World of Laos* (New York: Scribner, 1959) 78.
Peter White, *The Border of Paradise*, 242.
Central Intelligence Geographic Intelligence Memorandum, Laos, CIA/RR-GM-59-2, 09/23/59.

to support and bolster Laos since assuming that task in 1955. It stated in part:

"The decision to support a 25,000 man army--motivated by a Department of State desire to promote political stability--seems to have been the foundation for a series of developments which detract from that stability.

Given that decision, the minimum size of the necessary aid program was inexorably established at a dollar value far beyond the estimated rate at which the Lao economy could adsorb. From this grew intensive speculation in commodities and foreign exchange, productive of inflation, congenial to an atmosphere of corruption, and destructive of any stability, political or economic.

With so much of the aid available for Laos earmarked for support of military forces, little attention was paid to [civil] programs which might reach the people of the villages. The aid program has not prevented the spread of communism in Laos. In fact, the communist victory in last year's election, based on the slogans of 'Government corruption' and 'Government indifference' might lead one to conclude that the U.S. aid program has contributed to an atmosphere in which the ordinary people of Laos question the value of the friendship of the United States.

The army, which was too large for the economy to handle, was inadequate to perform its appointed mission. Against a much smaller force, it was unable to enforce communist compliance with the Geneva agreements, which required evacuation of the two Northern provinces and their return to the control of the central government. The presence of troops throughout the country may have assisted generally in the maintenance of order, but one may properly question, weighing all factors in the balance, if this was the most effective device.

The inability to remove the communists from the northern provinces by diplomatic pressure or military force led to a compromise solution which admitted communists to the government and which established the communist party, Neo Lao Hak Sat, as a legal, above-ground political party.

Recently (January 1959), the Cabinet was given 'extraordinary powers' by the National Assembly, which was thereupon dissolved. In effect, this means that for a year the Cabinet exercises dictatorial powers. One of its first acts was to purge itself of communist members. Other actions since indicate that some housecleaning is underway. In

the interim, however, the communists, being 'legal' have acquired a certain amount of prestige in the countryside which will be difficult to destroy.."

The report concluded by stating:

"...needed reforms are many in number, and are required at all levels of the aid program in Laos." ¹³

A long-lasting peace in Laos never came to fruition. Constantly thwarted by assassinations, coups, and extra-governmental intercession, political solutions sought through coalition governments invariably failed. Fluctuating territorial control, akin to the childhood game of musical chairs, characterized the early Lao conflict. Pathet Lao (PL) troops, aided by North Vietnamese "advisors," the Royal Lao Army (including the Meo forces), and neutralist factions formed the adversarial opponents.

Soon after seizing power in North Vietnam, one of Ho Chi Minh's early directives created a Tai-Meo northwestern autonomous region along the entire Tonkin border with the Lao northern provinces of Phong Saly and Sam Neua. Subsequently gaining the rapport and support of ethnic Black Tai and Meo tribes living along the border areas, North Vietnamese army cadres (for a long period referred to in the West as Viet Minh) recruited, trained, supplied, planned insurgency operations, and directed a small guerrilla force of these people who became known as the Pathet Lao (literally translated as the Land of the Lao). This faction had roots in a resistance movement established to counter French forces that reentered Laos in 1946 following Japanese occupation, although positive existence of the Pathet Lao was not officially acknowledged until 22 March 1955. Later, the group became the armed branch of the political Neo Lao Hak Sat Patriotic Front Party (NLHX), ostensibly led by royal Prince Souphanouvong, and a few remnant Free Lao resistance followers left from the Japanese occupation and opposition to French reoccupation of Laos. The communist-dominated movement began as a low-level insurgency in the late 1950s, escalated into a temporary

¹³ U.S. Aid Operations in Laos, 50-51.

crisis in 1959, and then an alleged civil war in late 1960. ¹⁴

For a multitude of reasons, mostly the struggle for domination between communist and anti-communist nations, many outside principals, other than USG, exhibited considerable interest in the Lao quagmire, and the country developed into a fertile proving ground for expansion of the Second Indochina War and an extension of the Cold War.

Chinese communists (Chicom), not overtly expansionistic since secession to power in 1948, harbored suspicions of USG intentions in Southeast Asia, especially after the Taiwan Straits flap. Indicating that they would resist any U.S. involvement with respect to positioning U.S. ground bases or troops in Laos, the hostile Peking government threatened to introduce their own troops. Given the nasty Korean experience, this distinct warning constituted a plausible and unpalatable deterrence.¹⁵

Beset with disparate communist ideologies, the Soviet leaders under Nikita Khrushchev attempted to counter Chinese influence in Laos. Consequently, they created their own niche by supporting what they perceived as a war of liberation. For a time, countering USG-Air America supply efforts, the Soviets provided aid in the form of massive cargo airlifts to Pathet Lao and Neutralist elements. However, wary of becoming militarily involved on the ground in Southeast Asia and bumping heads with the U.S., they displayed restraint in this support.

FRENCH COLONIAL LEGACY

The French, as minor players after the Accords signing, despite a lengthy, colonization and benevolent rule of the country, in contrast to Vietnam, never developed Lao infrastructure to any significant degree. They departed the country leaving few adept leaders, only seasonally good roads, no railroads, no noteworthy industry, and a gaggle of diverse people with no purpose of Lao national unity.

¹⁴ Marek Thee, *Notes of a Witness: Laos and the Second Indochinese War* (New York: Random House, 1973) 360.

Arthur Dommen, *Conflict in Laos*, 70, 72, 74.

Ogden Meeker, 107-108, 110.

Foreign Relations United States 1956-1960, Laos, Microfiche Supplement, 1993, 43.]

¹⁵ Report of Senator Mike Mansfield et al, "Vietnam and Southeast Asia," Committee on Foreign Relations United States Senate (Washington: GPO, 1963) 2, 19.

French engineers built only seasonably passable roads from Vietnam to Luang Prabang, Sam Neua, and Savannakhet. Nominally constructed for military purposes, they were not interconnected. Part of the undeveloped or neglected road network stemmed from a lack of an overwhelming economic requirement, and substantial geographical obstacles present in a considerable portion of the country. Indeed, because of high ranging mountain chains that included extremely rugged terrain, natives measured distances in days of walking, not miles or kilometers. Impenetrable jungles, swollen streams, turbulent rivers, and a harsh tropical environment fostering numerous deadly endemic diseases all combined to curtail infrastructure development and sustain a primitive Laos. Furthermore, with little knowledge of a functional central government, backcountry self-sufficient people merely struggled for survival. Moreover, devoid of any concept of a cohesive nation, and striving to protect their identity and way of life, scores of ethnic tribes populated an estimated half of the country. These people, highly suspicious of others not from immediate clans, or extended families, inhabited isolated, but carefully selected areas of preference. The Lao and many tribal Tai units settled in valleys and lowlands. Other populations lived systematically on the mountainsides (Lao Theung or Kha tribes at lower levels; Meo and Yao at higher elevations) to live more securely at higher altitudes. Indeed, like the American peddler, in many cases, the rare itinerant trader dealing in sugar and salt and other scarce commodities constituted the remotely situated peoples' sole contact with the outside world.

Besides presenting dissimilar peoples, further attempts for Lao national unity were curtailed by the lack of common cultures, including languages (except for French), established writing systems, and religions. ¹⁶

Consisting of high mountain chains, a cordillera, the lengthy and largely theoretical Vietnamese-Lao border was porous only at a few prominent divides or river crossings. Additionally, fixed geographical borders were virtually impossible to ascertain from either air or ground levels, and were rarely respected

¹⁶ Hugh Toye, 59.

Joel Halpern, *Geographic, Demographic, and Ethnic Background on Laos* (Amherst: University of Mass. 1990) 4-5, 7.

by either side.

For hundreds of years, diverse cultures contested Indochina territory from both east and west sides of this cordillera, and at times settled much of what would eventually become known as northeastern Laos, the focal point of this first book.

Vietnamese historical influence and subdivisions of Lao territory proved convoluted and evolved from ancient periods, when the extensive Annam Empire (then controlling much of present-day Laos) annexed the Xieng Khouang principedom in 1832. Originally called Tran Ninh, Xieng Khouang became an important northeast region where farmers tilled rich soil on the Plain of Jars plateau, and accessible crossroads promoted market town trade. In 1887, the French formed the Indochinese Union of Cochin, China, (southern Vietnam), Annam (central Vietnam), Tonkin (northern Vietnam), and Cambodia. However, the Xieng Khouang area remained under Annam state control until the powerful French military entered Laos in 1893. Thenceforth, they established the Protectorate of Luang Prabang to ward off incursions by both Siamese and Annamese interlopers, and began assembling the buffer country of Laos. Two years later, to counter Siamese and Vietnamese designs on the region, they attached Xieng Khouang to Laos.

Likewise, Houa Phan Province (more commonly known as Sam Neua) northeast of Xieng Khouang endured many changes in cross border monarchs and allegiances over the centuries. Originally called Hua Phan, Setthathirath, then King of Lan Xang, seized the area in the 1500s. After Lan Xang split into three kingdoms (Luang Prabang, Vientiane, and Champassak), Hua Phan became part of the Luang Prabang protectorate. With Siamese influence waning, following an 1893 treaty, French authorities divided Hua Phan into two entities to more easily and administratively manage the huge territory. They attached Sam Neua town and other districts to Annam; and Moung Het, Moung Son, and Hua Muong districts to Laos. Following migration of people from the Annam-administered areas, in 1903, a French decree attached all border districts to Laos, later naming Sam Neua the

capital. Until later years, only a rough trail connected Sam Neua to lower Laos.¹⁷

Like French expatriates, Vietnamese people indirectly colonized Laos. During the colonial era, French administrators encouraged Vietnamese citizens to migrate from densely populated coastal centers and settle in uncongested fertile areas within Savannakhet Province, and on the flats and rolling hills of the Plain of Jars in Xieng Khouang Province. Furthermore, because of perceived Lao indolence, and to better facilitate Lao government management, thousands more aggressive Viets entered the country as civil servants. Indeed, so many migrated west that before the Japanese invasion of Indochina, Vietnamese comprised majority populations in many larger river towns.¹⁸

NORTH VIETNAMESE MILITARY-POLITICAL HISTORY

The Vietnamese time line history recorded:

"In March 1945 Japan proclaimed the end of Indochina's colonial status, removed the Vichy administration from office, and recognized indigenous regimes. In Annam [the northern region] the Emperor Bao Dai proclaimed an independent State of Vietnam. With the surrender of Japan in August 1945 Bao Dai transferred his authority to a government headed by Ho Chi Minh and became an advisor in that government. France quickly regained control in Laos and Cambodia, and by an agreement of March 1946 with the Ho Chi Minh government, recognized the Republic of Vietnam as a free State having its own government, parliament, army, and finances, and forming a part of the Indochinese Federation and the French Union. The entry of Cochinchina [in the south] into the Republic of Vietnam was to be determined by a plebiscite. Discussions with the Ho government eventually broke down and Ho Chi

¹⁷ Arthur Dommen, *Conflict*, 335, 336.

Hugh Toye, 198.

Joel Halpern, James Hafner, and Peter Kunstadter *Tribal People of Laos* (Christiansburg: Dalley Book Service, 1990) 3.

John Henderson, *Area Handbook for Thailand* (U.S. Government Printing Office, 1971) 30. Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York: Penguin, 1984) 88.

¹⁸ Hugh Toye, 44-45, 73.

Arthur Dommen, *Conflict*, 338.

Minh's forces [the Vietminh or Viet Minh] commenced an armed insurrection against the French. During a temporary truce Ho demanded a degree of sovereignty that France was [not] willing to concede.

In December 1946 full scale war commenced."

Following the stunning 1954 Viet Minh military success at Dien Bien Phu over Vietnamese French rule and consolidation of control in the north, leaders of the rigid, uncompromising North Vietnamese communist party under the guidance of the vaunted leader Ho Chi Minh, ¹⁹ focused attention on reuniting the South with the North. Not content with an independent or potentially western-oriented country along their lengthy border, while emphasizing their designs on South Vietnam, Hanoi leaders temporarily envisioned protracted military solutions in Laos.

"The Lao Ministry of Defense asked the High Command of the People's Army of Vietnam [PAVN] to develop a plan to continue to help Lao build and consolidate its armed forces...

On 20 June 1954, the Geneva Conference signed an agreement ending military action in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. The Conference also issued a joint statement on the restoration of peace in Indochina.

On 16 July 1954 Comrade [Thanh]...acting on behalf of the Central Committee, the General Party Committee, and the High Command, announced the decision to form a Vietnamese advisory group, ²⁰ codenamed 'Group 100,' to assist the Pathet Lao Army [the fighting arm of the Neo Lao Hak Sat (NLHS) political organization] during this new phase. ²¹ Comrade...Man, a Party member since 1930 who had commanded troops in combat on the Central Laos front during the early

¹⁹ Born Nguyen Sinh Con (Cung).

²⁰ Such advisory groups were common in military organizations. Before the official start of the Vietnam war for the U.S., the U.S. Military Assistance Group (MAAG), the Army Security Agency (ASA), the Temporary Equipment Recovery Mission and other groups, both official and unofficial, served in Vietnam from 1950 through 1964. They supported French efforts to retake its former colony following World War Two and then backed South Vietnam's efforts to deflect the Viet Minh and North Vietnamese after the French were defeated in 1954...The men gathered intelligence, trained soldiers, transported Catholic refugees out of the north, flew reconnaissance, took casualties...

Ken Olsen, *Vietnam's Senior Class*, *The American Legion Magazine*, 31, April 2015.

²¹ NLHS: Sometimes seen spelled Neo Lao Hak Zat (NLHZ); Sat will be used.

years of the resistance war against the French and who was at this time the Political Commissar of the 316th Division, was appointed to serve as Chief of the advisory group and secretary of the Group 100 Party Committee...²²

By 25 July 1954 almost all of the advisory cadres were gathered for departure...

Before the group left to travel to our friends' country [Laos], Comrade...Thanh and Group Commander...called on Uncle Ho to visit with him and to brief him. Uncle Ho instructed them...'When we help our friends we help ourselves.' Uncle Ho's words of advice meant that by helping the Lao revolution and the [Pathet Lao] Lao army grow to maturity we would be helping to increase the fighting strength of the three fraternal nations on the Indochina Peninsula.

On 23 July 1954, Comrade Kaysone Phomvihane, the Minister of Defense of the Lao resistance government issued an order directing that the ceasefire agreement be implemented throughout Laos. Lao main force, local force, and guerrilla militia forces and Vietnamese volunteer forces throughout the country strictly followed the ceasefire order.

More than 10,000 Lao Issara troops and patriotic youths representing every class of the population and all Lao ethnic minority groups said farewell to their homes and families.

Overcoming all obstacles created by the terrain, the weather, and enemy action, they successfully completed the regroupment to Houa Phan [Sam Neua] and Phong Saly provinces exactly on schedule and according to plan. Implementing the Geneva Agreement on 16 December 1954 Vietnamese volunteer units completed their withdrawal from Laos three days ahead of schedule.

In early 1956, because of the critical and savage fighting in the two provinces where friendly forces regrouped [Phong Saly and Houa Phan], the Group was reinforced by additional cadre and technical personnel, increasing its strength to 330 personnel.

During mid-1957, the fighting in the two provinces quieted somewhat, and a

²² 316th Division: This unit's base headquarters was located in the Northwestern Military District of North Vietnam. It was largely composed of border peoples encompassing Meo, Tai, and other tribal units.

number of cadre and technical personnel were slowly withdrawn back home to receive new assignments. A total of forty-eight advisory cadre remained with the Group until the mission was completed. These included three regimental-level cadre and seven battalion-level cadre, while the rest were company-level cadre plus a small number of platoon and squad-level cadre carrying out specialized technical tasks...

In the face of the difficult situation faced by the Lao Revolution, in early May 1959 the Party Politburo assessed the situation in Laos and the relationship between the Lao Revolution and the Vietnamese Revolution. The Politburo decided to intensify the national liberation struggle in South Vietnam and to actively support the Lao revolution's effort to attain victory...To implement the Politburo decision on the status of the Lao revolution, the Current Affairs Committee of our Central Military Party Committee decided to quickly assemble a number of cadre who had formerly served with Vietnamese volunteer forces or with Group 100 in Laos and organize them into many elements to go out to greet the 2nd Battalion and other Pathet Lao cadre and enlisted men fleeing to our border...

[Also] in early May 1959, the Current Affairs Committee of the Central Military Party Committee appointed Major General Le Chuong as the Commander of the Vietnamese Cadre Group assisting the Lao working alongside the Party Central Committee of our Lao friends...

To assist our allies in late June 1959 the Central Military Party Committee directed the Northwest Military Region and Military Region 4 to send a number of company or battalion sized units to attack enemy outposts near the border. In addition to mounting attacks against enemy forces, our units were also responsible for conducting propaganda operations among the civilian masses to recruit agents, rebuild organizations, and develop foothold areas for use in larger operations in the future. To keep these activities secret, all units involved, both Lao and Vietnamese would operate under the guise of being elements of the 2nd Pathet Lao Battalion.

On 18 July 1959, Pathet Lao units returned to the battlefield in three [border] sectors. The primary sector, from southeast Sam Neua to southwest Xieng

Khouang, was the responsibility of 2nd Pathet Lao Battalion...The secondary section from Moung Xon [Son] in northern Sam Neua to Phong Saly and Luang Prabang as far as Xieng Ngan was the responsibility of the 4th Pathet Lao Battalion...

The supporting sector, from north of Route-8 to Route-12 [in Military Region Three] in Khammouane province was the responsibility of one company from the 1st Pathet Lao Battalion. All battalions were accompanied by a [Vietnamese] advisory team and a radio communications team...In Houa Phan province [upper Military Region Two] we liberated all of Moung [Son] district, half of Xieng Kho district, and a number of villages in Moung Sam district. We also completely liberated eight villages in Moung Khoa, Moung Mun, and Moung Nga districts of Phong Saly province [upper Military Region One]; three villages in Sop Sang district of Luang Prabang province, the Sam Che area in Xieng Khouang province; and the Cam Cot an Borikhane areas of Bolikhamsay district and three villages in Mahaxay District in Khammounan Province..."^{23 24}

Total conquest of historically coveted Laos had to await the outcome of the integration of the two Vietnams. Hanoi, with one of the world's most formidable armies, without annexation, but largely through international agreements or de facto RLG default, already possessed enormous tracts of Lao territory, including Sam Neua, Phong Saly Provinces and portions of other border regions. Consequently, cautious not to encroach on the populated floodplains, and possibly trigger military response from Thailand or America, Hanoi leaders restrained their

²³ Transliteration of Lao names by post war Vietnamese writers or the American translator was difficult, and may not coincide with actual names used during the period.

²⁴ Merle Pribbenow, Agency linguist and translator of North Vietnamese military history, 04/04/14. Nguyen Hoang Lam, et. al. *History of the Vietnamese Volunteer Groups and Vietnamese Military Specialists in Laos 1945-1975: Group 100-Military Advisors Group 959, Military Specialists*, 10, 14-15, 21, 116, 120. (Hanoi: People's Army Publishing House, 1999); Courtesy of author Robert D Sander's extensive research archives.

Author Note: Because of the extended time period since the Second Indochina War and the publication of this work, and the proclivity for some authors' agendas to spin a favorable slant on history, not all the material presented can be judged valid and reliable, but it constitutes the only history we have to explain the era from the opposite side.

military forces and initially relied on low grade guerrilla actions. Furthermore, through either military pressure or lack of RLA resolve to defend territory, they enjoyed almost complete control of the sparsely populated eastern panhandle border areas. This afforded them unrestricted use of an old logistical foot trail system. Developed over time and employed as a lifeline to surrogate Viet Cong forces in South Vietnam. The trails—generically coined "The Ho Chi Minh Trail" by Westerners—provided invaluable military lines of communication (LOC) to the south.

Following centuries of war and relocation, a majority of people residing in northeast Thailand (Isan) claimed Lao roots and spoke the Lao language. From early Indochina days, Thai government officials maintained close ties with their ethnic and cultural Lao brothers, and endeavored to maintain the country's status as a friendly and non-communist neighbor. However, border instability continuously proved a concern to Thai leaders and offered cause for tangible involvement throughout periods of increasing communist hostility. Thailand demonstrated this inclination for intervention early, aiding Royal Lao forces along the riverbanks of Thakhet (literally foreigner's landing), during two Viet Minh incursions in 1953 and 1954.²⁵ After creation of the Southeast Asian Treaty Organization whose headquarters was ultimately located in Bangkok, Thai officials incorrectly assumed that the organization's multinational forces would serve to defend Laos. Within a year of formation, despite numerous entreaties for SEATO members to intervene in Lao hostilities, Thai leaders realized that no concrete help would evolve from the relatively ineffectual organization.

By early 1959, the political and military situation in Laos had grown progressively unstable. Attempts in the late 1950s by neutralist Prime Minister Prince Souvanna Phouma to establish a three-party coalition Government of National Union, and integrate all warring groups into one single army, never achieved any modicum of success.

Catering largely to personal interests, elite families from various regions aligned with Nationalists, Independents, Democrats, or National Union supporters,

²⁵ Ogden Meeker.

and rarely agreed on political solutions for the country. The rise of a strong rightist government faction, mistrust, struggle for power, and internal internecine struggles, combined with pressure and support from Western and communist interests, prevented any lasting peace or stability in the country. Further muddying the Lao situation, Hanoi's leaders secretly decided to pursue a land war in South Vietnam to unify the country. Toward this goal, they formed Group 559 to protect and significantly enlarge the logistical trail system in eastern Laos.

With the political process crumbling in Laos, it became increasingly obvious to more realistic western planners that a full-scale civil war would soon erupt. Foreseeing adverse events in Indochina, CINCPAC and staff formulated an operational contingency plan-OPLAN 32(L) 59. Military success of the battle plan hinged on rapid air deployment of U.S. forces into the only two primary Lao hard-surfaced airfields capable of handling large cargo aircraft. Consisting of PSP inter-locking steel matting, the landing sites included the former French airbase located at Seno, east of Savannakhet,²⁶ and at Wattay Airport, six kilometers west of Vientiane, Laos. CINCPAC's proposed strategy intended to counter only a small-scale insurgency and to ensure Lao stability.

Implementing Marine Corps sea-borne components of the plan, leaders forged a portion of the Seventh Fleet into a permanent Joint Task Force 116 (JTF-116). Additionally, assisting in prevention of potential enemy intervention and to improve the decaying infrastructure, several detachments from Seabee Naval Mobile Construction Battalions labored to refurbish strategic roads and French-built Wattay Airport.

Under the new government of Phoui Sananikone, two Pathet Lao battalions programmed to integrate into the main army revolted in May and escaped to the border areas. Government forces attacked the rebels, but results were dismal. Instead, ANL garrisons were attacked and surrounded.

By July, to consolidate "liberated areas," the Pathet Lao, supported by

²⁶ Seno Airfield: Named for the four French cardinal compass headings-Sud, Est, Nord, Ouest.

elements of the North Vietnamese Army, attacked selected areas, advancing in Military Region Two on the Plain of Jars, Sam Neua, and Paksane, and in the Bolovens Plateau in the south. To counter the threat, Naval Joint Task Force-116 readied for possible intervention.

The following Central Intelligence Agency information bulletins describe the Lao situation and tend to accurately portray a renewed increase in hostilities and measures enacted to counter the state of affairs as of 07/29/59.

"The Laotian Government's military position in Sam Neua Province in northeast Laos is threatened by a sudden onslaught of attacks on remote army outposts by dissident elements of the former communist Pathet Lao movement. Reports on the fighting are still sketchy but several of the small outposts reportedly have fallen, and the government fears an enemy attempt on the [remote] town of Sam Neua, where the airfield provides the principal access to this remote and mountainous region.

The government is taking steps for prompt reinforcement of the two infantry battalions, comprising some 1,200 men, which at present are scattered throughout the province in units of platoon strength. Anti-government guerrilla forces in the province are believed to number upwards of 1,000 men, and include pro-communist local tribesmen plus elements of the recently defected Pathet Lao battalion and probably some cadres from nearby North Vietnam. Ambassador Smith in Vientiane considers it likely that these attacks have been instigated and supported by the Vietnamese communists, but direct evidence of this is lacking.

Prime Minister Phoui Sananikone has termed the situation 'grave,' but he does not believe the fighting in Sam Neua heralds full-scale civil war throughout Laos, Phoui believes the enemy's primary purpose is to take possession of Sam Neua, and later Phong Saly province-the two former Pathet Lao strongholds.

The government has shown concern over the possible resumption of armed dissidence since May when the [PL] battalion, assembled at Plaine des Jarres in Xieng Khouang Province, refused to be integrated into the Royal Laotian Army and escaped from its encampment. At that time Prince Souphannouvong and other leaders of the Neo Lao Hak [Z] Sat (NLHS or NHLZ)-the political party formed by the

Pathet Lao after the 1957 unification agreement-were briefly placed under house arrest. Phoui in reaction to the Sam Neua fighting now plans to place the NLHS leaders under close arrest. This would be further provocation for a full-scale return to guerrilla warfare by the [Pathet Lao] veterans who, together with Hanoi, have warned that continuation of the government's repressive measures against the party would have this result.

The attacks may be a reaction to the government's increasing efforts to press its counter subversion program against communist influence at the grass roots...this development will throw the Phoumi government off balance and hamper orderly implementation of an invigorated training program for its 25,000-man army."

The following day Agency dialogue relating to the trouble in upper Military Region Two continued:

"Laotian Army reinforcements, consisting of four infantry companies, are expected to arrive by 30 July in Sam Neua Province, where widely scattered units of two government battalions have come under attack by communist partisans and several outlying posts have been lost in recent days. A parachute battalion is being held in reserve for commitment if needed. Laotian Army Commander General Ouane appears confident that order can be restored, but the low capability of the national army is a serious obstacle, and the army apparently lack firm information on enemy locations and intentions.

The U.S. military attaché in Vientiane was informed on 28 July that rumors were sweeping the town of Sam Neua that a force including North Vietnamese is moving on the town from the east. The attaché's sources allege that the defense force had dwindled to a dozen men. These reports are unconfirmed.

The government, meanwhile, has acted quickly to implicate North Vietnam and the Laotian communist-front organization-the Neo Lao Hak Sat...in these attacks. A 29 July communiqué charges that the 'well-armed and organized' dissident units in Sam Neua Province are under Hanoi's command. The NLHS [political] leaders, who by now apparently have been arrested in [Vientiane], were threatened with harsh punishment for 'collaborating with foreigners.' Recently NLHS chief Prince Souphannouvong protested vigorously against government repression of his party,

which he claimed enjoyed 'solid' foreign backing. He threatened a full-scale return to guerrilla warfare unless alleged government persecution ceased.

Laos' open condemnation of North Vietnam is designed to undercut the expected upsurge in communist propaganda which has been accusing the government of collaborating with the United States to rekindle the civil war in Laos and start a new Indochina war." ²⁷

Since the first line of defense against communist inroads in Laos was deemed the Royal Lao Army (then referred to by the French as the Armee Nationale Laotienne or ANL), a high-level Washington decision set forth provisions to immediately increase the army manning level to 29,000. The Department of Defense had previously recommended a comprehensive reform of the ANL. A proposal to introduce a U.S. Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) to replace the Programs Evaluation Organization (PEO) was scrubbed as overtly violating the protocols of the 1954 Geneva Accords. In addition, the French charged with ANL combat training under the Accords objected. The problem was finally resolved with French advisors retaining their mission and allowing USG to provide technical and logistical military training.

To facilitate military expansion, and implement the Heintges Plan, Okinawa-based U.S. Army Special Forces personnel entered Laos. Twelve eight-man Field Training Teams (FTT) and a control team garbed in civilian clothes, under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Arthur D. "Bull" Simons, quietly slipped into Laos. They ultimately positioned at the major towns of Luang Prabang, Savannakhet, Pakse, and Vientiane. Supported by Royal Thai Army interpreters, the effort was initially known as the Lao Training Advisory Group, Programs Evaluation Office (LTAG), and later as White Star. ²⁸

Early in August a CIA Bulletin reported:

"Laotian Premier Phoui states that recent field reports have convinced him the situation is even more serious than he had previously thought. He has received

²⁷ CIA Daily Bulletins, Situation in Laos, 07/30/59.

²⁸ Shelby Stanton, *Green Berets at War: U.S. Army Special Forces in Southeast Asia 1956-1975* (Novato: Presido, 1985) 17-18.
Foreign Relations United States (FRUS), 1956-1960, Laos Microfiche Supplement, 1993, 45.

word from the governor of Nam Tha [Houa Kong] Province [northwestern Military Region One] of the reported arrival of regular Chinese communist forces along the frontier where previously only border security detachments had been noted. Several points on the border were reported by the governor to have been occupied recently by approximately 500 regular Chinese communist troops. Late word from the governor of adjacent Phong Saly Province has reinforced Phoui's belief that regular forces of the North Vietnamese Army are involved in the current fighting. Three towns in this province have been occupied by Vietnamese company-size units, according to the governor, who has the reputation of being a reliable observer.

There is no reliable evidence available to substantiate or disprove either the reported Chinese activity or the participation of [North Vietnamese Army] regular forces.²⁹ The Chinese communists maintain about 136,000 troops in the Kunming Military District, which is adjacent to Burma, Laos, and North Vietnam. Peiping may have initiated small-scale troop movements to increase the apprehensions of Laotian officials. The North Vietnamese have about 20,000 troops deployed along the Laotian border. These units could give substantial support, both in the form of materiel and direction, and it is likely this type of assistance is being clandestinely extended to the former [Pathet Lao] guerrillas.

[Communist] bloc propaganda is attempting to place the onus on the United States for the situation in Laos. While categorically denying Vietnamese communist complicity in the fighting, Hanoi alleges that a 'military build-up' is taking place in Laos which is 'part of a U.S. plan for war preparations in Indochina and Southeast Asia.' Moscow is charging that American policy, by converting Laos into a U.S. military base within the 'zone of action of [Southeast Asia Treaty organization] SEATO,' is to blame for the 'threat to the peace'..."³⁰

"The Laotian Army's demonstrated weakness during the initial phase of the insurgency in northeastern Laos may have further undermined the government's tenuous authority in the affected areas. In some instances, army units panicked and abandoned the local populace with little or no resistance. The army's performance

²⁹ These reports were typical of the entire war.

³⁰ CIA Bulletin, Laos, 08/04/59.

will disillusion government sympathizers and revive memories of the Viet Minh invasions of 1953-1954, when the Laotian Government was forced to abandon Sam Neua and was unable to re-impose its authority until November 1957.

Poor training and inexperienced leadership limit the Laotian Army's capabilities, and in addition the communists may have had some success in subverting military personnel, especially the village militia. The Laotian field commander in Sam Neua is reported to have said he could not rely completely on the loyalty of his forces.

The U.S. Army attaché in Vientiane reports that 114 men out of a total of about 750 in recently integrated former [Pathet Lao] battalion encamped near [Luang Prabang] escaped on 8 August...and are heading onward Sam Neua Province. Laotian Army officials are attempting to maintain secrecy over this development, but when it becomes known it will further reduce the army's rapidly dwindling prestige and probably embolden communist cadres to risk new acts of violence against the regime.

In Thailand, Marshall Sarit reportedly is concerned over the Laotian situation. And reinforcement of border police in the northeast has been authorized. South Vietnam reportedly is planning to send a study mission-redacted-to Laos for contingent planning on the defense of southern Laos in the event of an all-out communist offensive in Laos sponsored by North Vietnam.

On 12 August, a Chinese communist Foreign Ministry spokesman in a strong statement declared that tension in Laos could be reduced only by the withdrawal of all American military personnel and arms, the abolishment of all 'U.S. military bases,' and the return of the International Control Commission. Peiping warned that all activities of the U.S. and Laotian authorities 'violating the Geneva agreements, creating tension in Indochina, and further to menace China, will certainly be firmly opposed by the Chinese Government and people.' Peiping also denied the competence of the United Nations to deal with the Laotian situation on the grounds that the UN played no part in negotiation of the Geneva agreements."³¹

Within two weeks the Agency disseminated further information regarding the Lao situation:

"The U.S. army attaché in Laos points out that the Laotian Army



Lao provinces of Military Region One and Military Region Two impacted by hostilities during early August.

CIA Map, 08/04/59.

has not yet demonstrated any offensive strength and the initiative remains with the communist forces. This enables present communist forces, which are operating in small units and scattered groups to build-up sufficient strength to take individual Laotian army posts.

The consensus of American officials in Vientiane is that if the Laotian communists exert their full potential for revolution throughout the country, the Laotian Government would at best be able to hold only certain strong points. Large areas, including all of the territory contiguous to communist China and North Vietnam, would pass under communist control.

Redacted-the morale of top-level Laotian officials is quite good. They are confident of handling the present situation and feel they can rely on international assistance in the event the situation becomes more serious. However, morale is extremely poor in some fighting units, and two Laotian companies are believed to have deserted. The poorly informed population in the provinces is highly susceptible to rumors and propaganda spread by communist partisans. By mid-August, the people in several of the central and southern provinces had been shaken by rumors that the communists were on the outskirts of the provincial capitals.

On 25 August, the North Vietnamese Foreign Ministry issued a public statement on the Laotian situation, repeating its accusations that the U.S. and Laotian governments are solely to blame for the current crisis. The statement asserted that as a signatory of the Geneva agreements and a country neighboring on Laos, North Vietnam 'cannot remain indifferent...to a situation which **directly threatens the security** ³² of North Vietnam and peace in Indochina and Southeast Asia.' Rejecting any thought of UN action, Hanoi again called for reactivation of the ICC and strict adherence to the Geneva agreements as the only solution to the present grave situation..." ³³

³¹ CIA Bulletin, Situation in Laos, 08/13/59.

³² This was a buzz phrase the communists used to justify continued meddling in Laos.

³³ CIA Bulletin, Situation in Laos, 08/26/59.

Fighting escalated in upper Military Region Two:

"The heavy communist attacks in northeastern Sam Neua Province which began on 30 August may signal stepped-up operations to seize control of the province. The attacking force, which the U.S. Army attaché estimates may have totaled three battalions, seized a number of lightly garrisoned Laotian Army posts along the Nam Ma River. Communist units contained a heavy percentage of North Vietnamese soldiers and that these units were supported by 81mm and 120mm mortar fire. These claims are unconfirmed. The Laotian commander in northern Laos says that the attack on Moung Het [north of Sam Neua town near the North Vietnamese border] was supported by artillery fire from the North Vietnamese frontier, although this may have been confused with mortar fire.

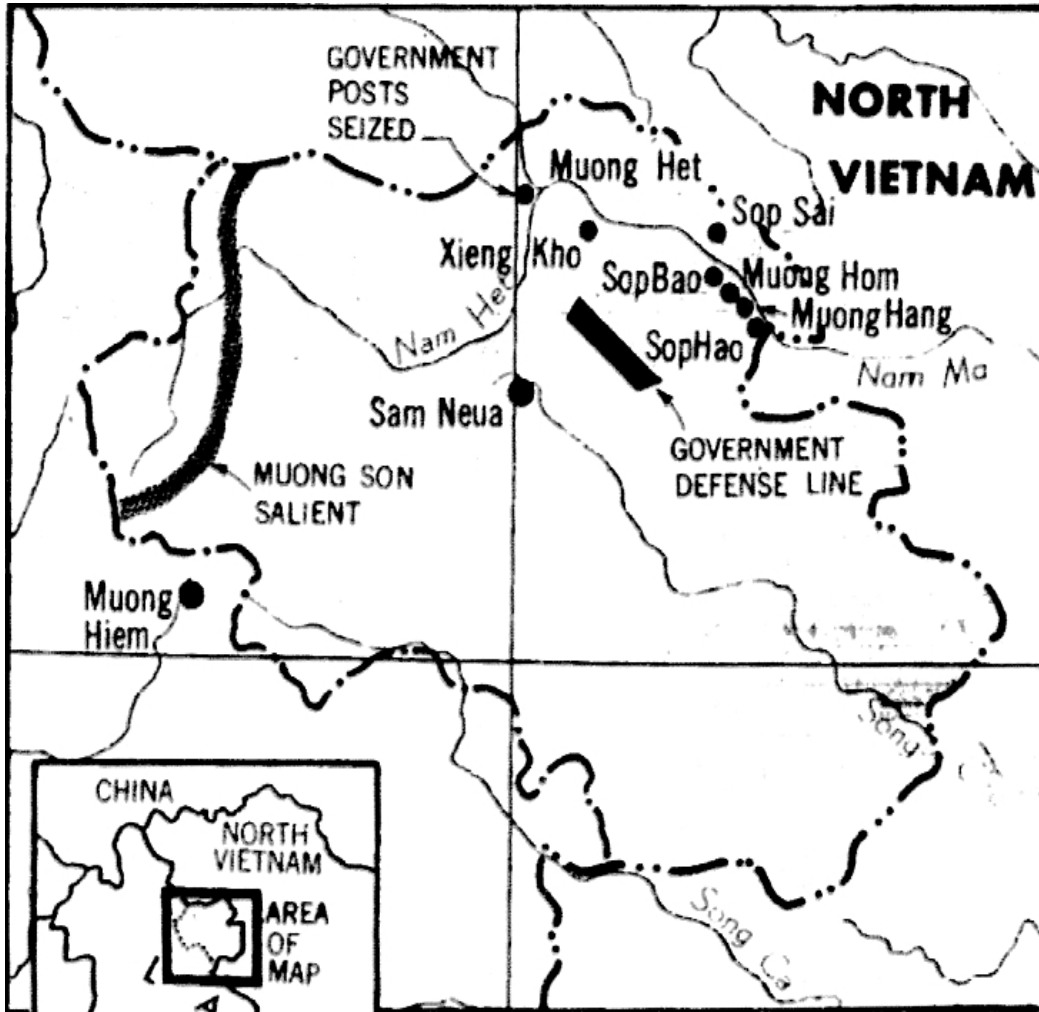
The attacks came at a time when the Laotian Army was initiating offensive operations against the communist-held Moung Son salient in western Sam Neua. The immediate communist objective may be to spread out Laotian Army forces and reduce the pressure on Moung Son. However, the attacking forces would appear to be of sufficient force to press southward and threaten Sam Neua town, the provincial capital. Laotian military officials stated on 2 September that rebel forces had penetrated to within eighteen miles of that town. Government troops have set up a defense line northeast of the provincial capital. [The line had been established along Route-6 from Sop Hao north to Moung Het.]

Meanwhile, communist partisans are threatening Moung Heim...[located in the valley south of Moung Son], and a post in southern Xieng Khouang Province reportedly is under communist control.

The [Soviet] bloc countries remain firm in their demand for the recall of the International Control Commission to Laos and continually accuse the U.S. of deliberately engineering the present crisis..." ³⁴

Attempts to corrupt and sway normal citizens' opinion of the Lao situation continued during September:

³⁴ CIA Bulletin, Laos, 09/03/59.



Upper northeast Military Region Two where the brunt of heavy fighting occurred.

CIA Map, 09/03/59.

"Several newspaper correspondents in [Vientiane] report being approached recently by 'some young Laotians' peddling the line that the current rebellion in Laos is strictly an internal affair set off by elements opposed to the Phoui Sananikone government. A number of journalists have also received a letter from a 'Lao citizen' attributing the crisis in Laos to the sabotage of the Geneva agreements by the royal government acting under American pressure. The letter claimed that the communist partisans have developed into a genuine popular army determined in its struggle against the 'despotic' Phoui government. Charges of North Vietnamese involvement were derided and doubt cast on the ability of the United Nation mission to stop 'this murderous war.' The letter concluded with a reiteration of the communist prescription for resolution of the crisis-the reactivation of the International Control Commission for Laos.

The American Embassy in [Vientiane] believes the letter may forecast the general line the communists hope to taken connection with the UN fact-finding subcommittee and may herald a flow of Neo Lao Hak Sat-or North Vietnamese-inspired 'citizen petitions,' a normal communist tactic...

On 17 September, Hanoi made public a statement attributed to a spokesman of the central committee on the NLHS which declared that the [United Nations] decision on Laos would open the way for further U.S. interference, enlarge the 'civil war,' and lead to war in Indochina. Recent suggestions that representatives of the UN investigative subcommittee remain for some time in Laos were attacked. Although the NLHS spokesman reiterated charges that the UN action is illegal, the statement concluded with the hope that the UN would 'take positive measures to settle the Laos issue on the basis and within the framework' of the Geneva accords." ³⁵

U.S. ACTION

Toward the end of August, increased fighting between Pathet Lao guerrillas

³⁵ CIA Bulletin, Communist agents propagandizing journalists in Laotian Capital, 09/19/59.

and the Royal Lao Army forces in Sam Neua Province motivated United States plans to increase logistical support for the RLA. This aid specifically included anti-communist tribal guerrillas waging their own war against the Pathet Lao.

Displaying low visibility, politically acceptable under the Accords, senior civilian CAT pilots flew cargo plane support missions. Unable to collectively activate ineffective and fractious SEATO forces, Washington considered sending Thai, South Vietnamese or U.S. troops into Laos. However, reacting to the latest round of hostility in Sam Neua Province, minimizing the risk of fostering a wider war, USG unilaterally ordered the 7th Fleet and JTF-116 into the South China Sea as a show of force. Covering an enormous area, the unit's formidable mission included protecting sea lanes of communication, moving naval units to hot areas, and deploying troops onshore to aid allies. This action marked the first of numerous and identical flaps to occur over the next few years.

The modern gunboat strategy proved effective and the military situation cooled appreciably. However, at year's end, contention between younger and older conservative Lao politicians led to a coup that ended the Phoui government. It was replaced by a caretaker anti-communist group with new elections slated for April 1960.³⁶

HAFFNER'S RECONNAISSANCE MISSION

Fleet Marine Corps units based on Okinawa were traditionally tasked to instantly react and address Southeast Asian brush fires at any time. This was called "flapping." Therefore, in late 1959 and early 1960, Marine Commandant David M. Shoup was intensely interested in gathering current intelligence regarding operational conditions his overseas mud marines might encounter in Laos. In what became an extraordinary and potentially dangerous reconnaissance mission, he dispatched Marine Colonel Loren Haffner to gather information on the entire

³⁶ Edward Marolda and Oscar Fitzgerald, *The United States Navy and the Vietnam Conflict, From Military Assistance to Combat 1959-1965*, Volume 2 (Washington, D.C.: Naval Historical Center, 1986) 7.
Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS), 1956-1960, Laos 1993, 45, 46.

country. Haffner had previous Southeast Asian experience and familiarity in the region. As part of CINCPAC's Military Assistance Program (MAP), he had traveled to both North and South Vietnam during the First Indochina War.

To cover his actual snoop and poop mission, ³⁷ Haffner overtly posed as a scientist-artist, and recorded comprehensive notes everywhere he ventured. After checking into the Vientiane (Victor-08) PEO headquarters with a Marine major attached to the group, he obtained a thorough briefing regarding the political situation. The following morning, he joined an Army attaché traveling to Phong Saly (Victor-15) in a short takeoff and landing (STOL) Helio Courier. While en route, a single round from a native home-crafted, flint-lock firearm destroyed all communications capability.

After spending a night partying with the province's neutralist leader, the colonel persuaded the attaché to drop him at the government's Fourth Military District Headquarters at Khang Khay (Victor Site-08), located on the northeast portion of the sprawling and rolling hills of the Plain of Jars.

Something of a history buff, Haffner recalled that a French regiment had garrisoned beside the strategic Xieng Khouang PSP airfield in the geographical center of the Plain of Jars during the 1953-54 First Indochina War. Calculated to draw Viet Minh forces into battle, where they would be slaughtered on the open plain, the French unit constructed formidable defenses consisting of pill boxes, barbed-wire barricades, artillery barrage zones, and interlocking fields of fire. A squadron of World War Two Corsair fighter planes and a tank battalion were also available to support the infantry. However, the enemy failed to take the bait, preferring instead to attack the Dien Bien Phu garrison from the cover and concealment of surrounding hills. ³⁸

While at Khang Khay, Haffner contacted another Marine major from MAAG Thailand who was also investigating the current Plain of Jars situation. During

³⁷ Snoop and poop: U.S. Marine Corps lingo for clandestine movement.

³⁸ Known as the Xieng Khouang Airfield (Victor-22) at Ban Ang, depending on who controlled the Plain of Jars, the strip and area continued a choice strategic plum for both sides during the protracted Lao War. We used this location to good advantage during our 1969-early 1970 occupation of the Plain of Jars.

his stay, he met Colonel Kham Khong and Captain Kong Le, two RLA officers, who would act as principal players in future years. While there, he had occasion to fly over Route-7 to Nong Het (Victor Site-03) close to the North Vietnamese border. Apparently, his cover held, and after a short time, he made friends with Corsican pilots who maintained an airline in the country, and whose planes conducted the region's drug trade.

A German farmer staying at the local hotel indicated that he was traveling to Sam Neua in Houa Phan Province and offered Haffner a ride in his Jeep. Since it was the dry season, they managed to bump along Route-7 at a reasonable pace into the Ban Ban Valley, where they intercepted a rarely used Route-6. Turning north, they entered the foothills and then mountainous terrain that greatly slowed progress. After reaching Houa Moung (Victor Site-58), a cloudburst rendered the road impassable and discouraged "farmer" Karl from continuing the journey. Recalling the primary purpose of his mission, Haffner elected to continue north on foot. It took him five days to reach Sam Neua, but while enduring the effects of insects, leeches, lack of food, and sickness, he gained valuable firsthand knowledge regarding the countryside and hardships involved in travel.

Sam Neua, the small regional center of Houa Phan, lay in a well-watered high valley surrounded by towering mountains. Substantia-looking mud-walled and thatch-roofed huts, and a few sturdier buildings from French colonial days, dotted the area. As in most of Southeast Asia, Chinese expatriates appeared to own and operate most of the area's commercial enterprise. After resting briefly, during the course of daily fact gathering walk-about, he was able to plot numerous roads and trails leading into the market town from the not-too-distant North Vietnamese border. He noted that a small air strip (Victor-04) that could accommodate aircraft up to the size of C-47s. While still examining the airfield, "scientist" Haffner met a Corsican friend about to depart in a small plane for a lengthy trip to the Mekong River town of Ban Houei Sai (Victor-25) in northwestern Houa Hong Province. Deeming this a perfect opportunity to visit an area bordering Thailand, Burma, and China, he talked his way onboard the opium plane.

En route, the pilot stopped at Nam Bac, a large, agriculturally productive area, and lying in a broad valley eighty miles north of the Luang Prabang Royal

Capitol, and recently reclaimed from the communists. After the drug runner retrieved a sack of opium balls, he continued northwest to Ban Houei Sai.

While the pilot boated across the Mekong River to conduct business in Chiang Khong, Thailand, Haffner casually walked around the small Houei Sai market town. Except for an old French fort on a hill, there was not much of interest. While sightseeing, he noticed a C-47 heading north. Upon his return, the pilot informed Haffner that his aircraft was going to Mounng Sing, location of Doctor Tom Dooley's hospital, and a site close to the Chinese province of Yunnan. He agreed to transport Haffner there for a hundred dollars.

The pilot landed on the hard surface macadam runway (Victor-42), unusual in a country generally consisting of only dirt strips. Equally unusual, a macadam road twisted into a valley and terminated. While there, Haffner visited the hospital and met the legendary Doctor Dooley.

Within two days, Haffner purchased a ride on a Lao C-47 flying to Luang Prabang (Victor-54). There, he introduced himself, revealed his official status, and stayed in the U.S. Army Special Forces team house, one of several code-named White Star Teams scattered throughout Laos.

Thus far during his travels, he had not encountered dense forests and jungle except visually from the air. Therefore, to include such an experience in his report, he decided on an abbreviated cross country walk to the east. Beginning at a town on the Mekong, he began the thirteen-mile trek. Following footpaths, he planned to intersect a friendly hilltop tribal village and to eventually reach Xieng Ngeun, located on Route-13. After a day and night, he reached the Meo village, where he spent another day and night partaking of native hospitality and observing their work ethic and lifestyle. Leaving his new friends, he took an erroneous compass heading and became disoriented for a time. Directed back on course by men in a lumber camp, he intersected Route-13, but not at the Xieng Ngeun destination. With enough adventures to last a long time, and sufficient information about the jungle, he then rode an elephant back to Luang Prabang.

Through a Field Training Team (FTT) Special Forces soldier, he learned that the American Ambassador was curious about his journeys into remote corners of the country. Therefore, he arranged to return to the administrative capital on a

three-day riverboat trip with a newspaperman and several Lao passengers.

In Vientiane, he attended a U.S. Embassy function. When the ambassador inquired who he was, Haffner openly admitted that he was a Marine colonel conducting a sensitive mission. Revealing his true status opened the door to USOM transportation. He used this opportunity to fly to Savannakhet (Victor-39) and Pakse (Victor-11). With White Star assistance, he journeyed to Seno (Victor-46), where he met resident French officers. One kindly individual offered to take him to the Tchepone crossroads valley (Victor-38) on Route-9. Following five days in the south, having accumulated sufficient information, he returned to Vientiane.

Within two days, he boarded an AIRA flight to Bangkok. After assembling the copious notes gathered during his trek, he returned to the Continental United States (CONUS) by way of Okinawa and Hawaii. At each location, he briefed U.S. Marine and Navy commands regarding details of his visit. After two months in the field, he then delivered a final report to Headquarters Marine Corps in Washington.

The comprehensive report concluded that Marine forces would not encounter any problems in Laos not previously confronted in the Pacific during World War Two. In Haffner's estimation, USG could fight in Laos and win. In the event of war, he recommended extensive use of U.S military helicopters to support field

operations, particularly during the rainy season. ³⁹ ⁴⁰

³⁹ Loren Haffner, *Reconnaissance in Laos* (Washington: Marine Corps Gazette, Volume 76, #2, 02/92).

Colonel Haffner retired in 1962 after thirty years military service. He then served two tours in Laos with USAID, the last billet as Director of Field Operations for the entire country.

⁴⁰ Author Note: As revealed in Chapter Three, at the behest of high-level Washington planners, steps were already underway to introduce a small number of "bailed" helicopters into Laos, with Air America crews and mechanics to service and fly them. This was the beginning of the American rotor wing assistance to the Lao government.

The Author culled selected portions from the following publications to assemble this abbreviated segment of Lao history. However, the list is not limited solely to these authors and is more closely refined in the footnotes:

Arthur J. Dommen, *Conflict in Laos* (New York: Praeger, 1964).

_____, *Laos, Keystone of Indochina* (Boulder and London: Westview press, 1985).

Hugh Toye, *Laos: Buffer State or Battlefield* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968).

Roger Hilsman, *To Move a Nation* (New York: Doubleday, 1967).

Norman Hannah, *The Key to Failure* (London: Madison Books, 1987).

Charles Stevenson, *The End of Nowhere: American Policy Toward Laos Since 1954* (Boston: Beacon, 1972.)

Utilizing Sikorsky H-19 helicopters in the Lao environment was not without precedent, for Royal Thai Air Force personnel, using two H-19 helicopters, had flown FAL support missions for a time in early 1956. ¹

By 1959, to support missions in the rural setting, American planners eventually sought the innumerable advantages of the versatile helicopter crewed by civilian American pilots to provide a necessary tool in supporting USG Lao policy. Nevertheless, acute growing pains proved the rule, not the exception.

During July and August 1959, communist guerrilla activity significantly increased. This contradicted a National Security Council report citing progress in strengthening Lao political leadership, improvement of relations with other Southeast Asia neighbors, and training the government army. Without actual proof of their frontline involvement, the Operations Coordinating Board members believed that North Vietnamese supported the Pathet Lao attacks. ²

THE HELICOPTER PROGRAM

During August "Dog Days" in Taipei, Taiwan, Air America President Hugh L. Grundy summoned the Vice President of Operations (VPO), Robert E. Rousselot, to his office and handed him a message from Central Intelligence Agency headquarters. Without explanation, the message instructed the Taipei office to immediately dispatch a number of Company pilots to the Kawasaki plant located at Kobe, Japan, for initial helicopter training in the Kawasaki-manufactured Bell 47G-2 aircraft. Lacking tangible evidence to corroborate his assumptions, the VPO presupposed future Lao operations required helicopter support. He was correct, but mistakenly assumed that the unusual request comprised a one-time-only operation.

At this time, Air America owned no helicopters, nor did they employ pilots

¹ Kenneth Conboy with James Morrison, *Shadow War: The CIA's Secret War in Laos* (Boulder: Paladin Press, 1995) 17.

² Marek Thee, 359.

possessing helicopter qualification or experience. Therefore, Rousselot selected three skilled and experienced fixed wing pilots from the Air America-Civil Air Transport-Southern Air Transport system for transition. They included old timers Dale Williamson, Gordon V. Smith, and Art Wilson. From the beginning of the project, the conscripts were less than enthusiastic with the notion of flying unfamiliar helicopters. Relatively new aircraft in world aviation, most airplane pilots judged the machines essentially more difficult and complicated to operate, and considerably less forgiving during emergency situations than their reliable airplanes. Their discomfort and concern with the proposed assignment was heightened over management's unrealistic observation that a rotorcraft was just another flying tool. Further disturbing the trio, management expected them to be checked out, proficient, and ready to depart for field work within a few weeks. To prepare for the daunting task, the men attended an accelerated ground school from 31 August to 10 September 1959, and then received twenty-six to thirty flight hours compressed into less than a two-week period. Interestingly, they discovered that two of their Japanese instructors had fought as fighter pilots during World War Two. ³

During this period, to afford the men opportunity to accrue additional flight time in type, and to increase their helicopter proficiency, CAT purchased a Bell-47 model and positioned it at Tainan, Taiwan. Late in October, Rousselot, stressing a necessity to implement the helicopter program, directed Williamson, the most enthusiastic and experienced Bell helicopter pilot in the group, with sixty hours in type, to cross train Herb Liu.

The four men continued to fly regular DC-4 and C-46 missions and trained casually in the Bell 47 G-2 until early November. At that time, headquarters Taipei received yet another urgent message from Washington ordering the men to be immediately upgraded to larger rotorcraft. To fulfill this requirement, the pilots subsequently journeyed to Johnson AFB, Japan, to attend initial ground school and

³ Bill Leary Notes: Bob Rousselot, Eddie Sims Interview.
Gordon Smith *Air America Log* Volume 17-2 p 15-16.
Dale Williamson eulogy *Air America Log*, Volume 15-1 pg 4.

receive fifteen to twenty hours flight training in the three-bladed Sikorsky H-19B (civilian designation S-55) helicopter. Herb Liu's H-19 instructor pilot, R.C. Smith, later joined the program in Vientiane. Curious as to Herb's employer, R.C. was told, "A small American company he was probably not aware of." ⁴

Later, the fledgling H-19 pilots journeyed to Clark AFB on the Philippine Island of Luzon for advanced H-19B training. While there, the Department of Defense arranged transfer of four mothballed USAF H-19A helicopters to the Air America inventory. At the same time, these ships were bailed to Air America under U.S. Air Force contract number 33(600)-40818 from the United States Air Force Logistic Command, Wright Patterson AFB. ⁵ While mechanics labored to resolve major problems, and prepared the unused hangar queens for flight, the men conducted Bravo model training in the cool northern mountains of Baguio. Although flying without payloads, the pilots obtained a more realistic feel for the machine's capability and gained valuable experience at elevations consistent with their projected future work environment. ⁶

LAOS

By the final days of 1959, a significantly calmer military situation prevailed in Laos. Pathet Lao guerrilla units dispersed to the safer border regions, and the RLA reentered Sam Neua Province. Over the following three months, RLA units reestablished government control in approximately half of previously lost districts. The Rightist faction, under American-backed leadership of strongman Major General Phoumi Nosavan, controlled political events in Vientiane.

Employed as a powerful deterrent in Indochina, the Seventh Fleet adequately demonstrated to friendly world governments USG intentions to preserve the peace.

⁴ R.C. Smith *Air America Log*, Vol 17-1 p 11.
Gordon Smith, p 16.

⁵ Bailed: Aircraft released and transferred to Air America from U.S. military stocks.

⁶ Gordon Smith.
Professor Joe Leeker, *Air America in Laos 2-military aid*, p 9,
(utdallas.edu/library/collections/speccoll/Leeker/laos2.pdf).

However, actual sea borne operations fostered an awareness to concerned naval staffers of a seriously under-strength Task Force, one unable to sustain any long-term military contribution. Obviously, the unit required immediate upgrading to a more advanced state that would effectively project superior combat strength, and force a positive settlement in low-key military disputes. ⁷

Despite purported government gains, the country remained unstable:

"Recent reports indicate that communist influence and activity in Laos are more widespread than the government has admitted. The communist Pathet Lao insurgents seem particularly active in propagandizing and organization the rural populace in Luang Prabang Province, a large percentage of whose population consists of tribal minority groups who have long resented Vientiane's neglect of their simple needs. Other areas heavily infested by the communists include portions of [Vientiane] and Xieng Khouang provinces and the southernmost province of Attopeu.

The U.S. Embassy agrees with the Cambodian ambassador's comment that the real calm exists only in towns, that is considerably less in adjacent villages, and that it is virtually nonexistent in most of the rest of the country. The Cambodian envoy compared unfavorably the effectiveness of government propagandists with that of the communists, who he claims are active in one degree or another in almost all of Laos' villages. He implied that the government was losing the loyalty of the minority groups virtually by default, whereas the insurgents enlist their sympathies by small gifts of salt and other basic necessities.

These impressions would seem to be borne out by the recent experience of a [United States Information Service] USIS-led team travelling in tribal villages in Xieng Khouang Province and adjacent parts of [Vientiane] Province. Despite the prior assurances of the government that there was no probability of danger from Pathet Lao forces in the area, the team found the villagers under constant threat of reprisal and subject to intense communist propaganda. The team itself encountered uniformed [Pathet Lao] elements in one village and, while unmolested

⁷ Edward Marolda, 40.

by the communists, decided to abandon its tour in anticipation of danger ahead." ⁸

Government offensives intended to control or gain territory continued:

"A Laotian Army security sweep which will ultimately involve 5,000 troops began on 7 March [1960] in Laos' three southernmost provinces. This operation, which will last several weeks, is the most ambitious of a number which have been undertaken throughout the country since January in preparation for the National Assembly elections on 24 April. The several columns of troops participating in the operation will cover towns, villages, routes of communication, and areas of known or suspected communist insurgent activity.

Laotian officials hope that the operation, in addition to making the area more secure for the elections, will strengthen the government's control over an area where communists have been particularly strong. Army, police, and civil administrative elements will be permanently stationed in the numerous sub districts where such units have not yet been assigned. One of the central government's fundamental problems in its struggle with the communists has been its inability to make its presence felt in the thousands of isolated villages throughout the country. Vientiane's tentative efforts to rectify this weakness were interrupted when the communist rebellion began last summer.

The army is reportedly coordinating its cleanup campaign with the South Vietnamese Army, which is engaged in operations against Vietnamese communist guerrillas on the other side of the border. The arrangements for cooperation, which are said to include the right of hot pursuit, could add further fuel to Hanoi's propaganda attack on the governments in [Vientiane] and Saigon.

The operation probably will improve security conditions in the towns and larger villages. No appreciable inroads on insurgent hard-core strength are likely to be made, however, since the communists will probably have ample time to fade into the countryside, where they will retain a substantial capability for limiting the vote in the coming election or of delivering it to favored leftist candidates." ⁹

⁸ CIA Bulletin, Laotian Security Situation, 02/29/60.

⁹ CIA Bulletin, Laotian security sweep in southern Laos, 03/15/60.

Elections were held amid accusations of government chicanery. Despite the purported cheating, the leftists elected several candidates:

"The escape of Prince Souphannouvong and 15 other jailed Neo Lao Hak Sat (NLHS) leaders in the early hours of 24 may will give the [Pathet Lao] insurgency a strong boost, as well as constitute a serious loss of face for the Laotian Government. The government now is relieved of the need to carry out the long-deferred trail of these pro-communist leaders, but this advantage is outweighed by the danger of having them at large again and by the embarrassment the army must suffer over their escape from the supposedly heavily guarded prison in Vientiane.

Souphannouvong and his party will probably try to reach the [PL] command post, which is believed to be located somewhere in the Laos-North Vietnamese border area. Because of Souphannouvong's considerable national prestige, his name will add weight to [PL] directives and propaganda pronouncements. The [PL] command structure will also be strengthened by some of the other escapees, who are reported to be key members of the clandestine communist inner core of the NLHS.

In the past few months, the [PL] insurgents have de-emphasized military operations in favor of propaganda and subversive activities in the hope of influencing the recent national elections. With these elections now out of the way and with the likelihood that the new government to be formed shortly will be dominated by the militantly anti-communist Committee for Defense of National Interests (CDNI), the insurgents may step up their guerrilla attacks." ¹⁰

TAKING TO THE FIELD

Representatives of Air America, Inc. and the Program Evaluation Office of the United States Operations Mission Laos (PEO/USOM/Laos) signed contract number ICA-39-007 on 14 January 1960. The contract included provisions for helicopter missions, maintenance, and training in Laos. Agreement details specified hiring four American pilots, one American operations manager, one chief mechanic, twelve mechanics, and five other personnel, to provide support for the program.

Therefore, with a firm International Cooperation Agency Contract signed to

¹⁰ CIA Bulletin, Escape of jailed pro-communist leaders in Laos, 05/25/60.

provide helicopter support for Laos, in two shipments during the middle of March and the first week of April, handlers loaded four "bailed" (deleted from the Air Force inventory and loaned to Air America) U.S. Air Force H-19 Alpha model helicopters through front clam shell doors of a USAF Douglas C-124 Globemaster at Clark Field, Luzon. From there, with a maximum range of over 2,000 miles, cargo aircraft ferried the disassembled, crated ships, components, and field equipment to the large military airbase at Seno. Laos, where a joint Lao-French facility was equipped with hangars and multi-star-shaped pierced steel planking (PSP) runways.

The Savannakhet Plain contained an undulating region approximately one hundred miles long and eighty miles wide, which stretched between the Mekong River and the Annamite Mountain chain that defined the Lao-Vietnam border. Located on this plain, sixteen miles northeast of Savannakhet, the Seno airbase collocated with the junction of Routes-9 and 13. There, under the apt supervision and guidance of Air America's head crew chief, Abe Rivero, one of several experienced Filipino mechanics dispatched from Tainan for the Lao project, and mechanics Ben Sabino, Rick Decosta, and Blacky Mondello methodically re-assembled all aircraft. Identified as Hotels-One, Three, Eight, and Nine, only a single black number appeared on each clamshell door, which contrasted to the normal silver USAF paint scheme. ¹¹

During April, mechanics rolled the first ship from the hangar to conduct ground and flight checks. Upon pronouncing the helicopters airworthy, designated Chief Pilot Dale Williamson ferried the first H-19A north to the Air America base at Wattay Airport, near Vientiane. Topped off with fuel and 300 pounds of spare parts, in the high heat and humidity of the worst month in Laos, Dale found difficulty climbing above 800 feet until the fuel burn allowed a higher altitude.

Helicopter work commenced almost immediately for the PEO, under the auspices of the United States Operations Mission (USOM)-sponsored International

¹¹ Joe Leeker, Military Aid, 9.
CJ Abadie Emails, 08/27/03, 08/28/03, 09/09/03, 09/10/03.
Videotape. CIA/RR-GM-59-2: Laos, 09/23/59.
Douglas C124C "Globemaster 2" <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/systems/aircraft/c-123.htm>.

Cooperation Agency (ICA) contract. After re-assembly and subsequent flight clearance, the remaining aircraft followed H-1 into service. Captain Gordon Smith described his two hour and forty-five-minute ferry flight to Wattay Airport as a "white knuckle variety." ¹²

Initially trained to operate H-19Bs, but then obligated to fly the more unstable "Alpha" models, caused consternation and imparted little confidence within the pilot group, one long accustomed to operating reliable and sturdy equipment capable of performing any mission. Due to insufficient and quality training, plus the vital necessary experience in the complexities of helicopter operations, two pilots conducted most of the flying. Liu, the least experienced in rotorcraft, mainly performed ferry flights.

G. V. Smith, like the rest of the group, "*could see what loomed on the horizon.*" Fearing the outcome, soon after delivering his ship to Wattay Airport, Smith forwarded a defiant message to Bob Rousselot. He plainly stated that he "would not fly in the H-19 program for less than double the 10,000-dollar insurance benefit and triple salary." Reacting to the ultimatum, the VPO recalled him to Taipei for termination. This satisfied Smith, for if he had merely resigned, he would have had to assume all repatriation expenses. In contrast, termination without prejudice at the behest of the Company covered his household goods and family shipping expenses. Despite his bold decision to withdraw from Air America, Smith was allowed to rejoin the Company fold within two years. ¹³

During April, Indochina's warmest month, pilots discovered that the Curtis Wright R-1300, 700 horsepower engine was grossly underpowered, which severely limited the helicopter's ability to produce useful work. To compensate for a weak power plant, without a Flight Mechanic, and to favor two weak nose gear assemblies, the aviators carefully rolled off runways carrying only 400-pound

¹² Gordon Smith, *Air America Log* Volume 17-2, p 16, Volume. 20-3 p 9.
CJ Abadie Notes.
Bill Leary Notes.

¹³ Gordon Smith, *Air America Log* Volume 20-3, p 10.

payloads. ¹⁴ Naturally, high terrain operations, unless an emergency, proved totally out of the question. Consequently, realizing deficiencies in pilot proficiency and the antiquated equipment, Customers restricted the H-19 to personnel transportation in low, flat areas surrounding Pakse and Savannakhet and to leaflet drops to remote villages touting rightist candidates in connection with April's political elections. ¹⁵

The caretaker government's overwhelming advantage of air support resulted in an easy victory over the Neo Lao Hak Sat, the legal political arm of the Pathet Lao. Seasoned politician Tiao Somsanith assumed office in June. However, actual government power resided with the Committee for the Defense of National Interests (CDNI) political movement composed of younger army officers, bureaucrats, politicians, and supported by influential Defense Minister, General Phoumi Nosavan. ¹⁶

For a time, anathema to professional maintenance types, one H-19 became a permanent parts bin, used to scavenge scarce or unavailable parts necessary to ensure airworthiness of the other ships.

In general, the airplane pilots never felt comfortable flying H-19s, an element essential for proper helicopter operation. This lack of confidence surfaced when they faced the terrifying and demanding emergencies inherent in all reciprocating single engine helicopters. (As piston engines fail at a predetermined period, insurance companies universally base their premiums on this statistic.) During these critical situations, the pilots, relatively inexperienced, equipped with only the basics of helicopter emergency procedures, and lacking the feel and automatic response required for success, often reverted to inherent fixed wing tendencies, which compounded the problem. During serious helicopter emergencies such as an engine or tail rotor failure, survival equates to

¹⁴ Flight Mechanic: Known as a crew chief in the military, out of respect for their work and courage, the Author has chosen to capitalize Flight Mechanic.

¹⁵ Customer: An individual the pilot in command was assigned to work. This could be anyone, but generally was an Agency type.

¹⁶ CJ Abadie Interview.

Bill Leary Notes.

U.S. Foreign Relations (FRUS), 1956-1960, Laos, 1993, 44, 46.

seconds, requiring immediate and decisive action. This is in contrast to emergency procedures for pilots of multi-engine planes, where a pilot often has time to consult the checklist or flight manual. For this reason, periodic, repetitive, and competent emergency procedure training is all-important for the helicopter pilot to maintain proficiency.¹⁷

The inexperienced pilots would not wait long for their initial moment-of-truth. On 26 May, Williamson, while med-evacating a seriously injured Lao soldier and his family from a remote outpost forty miles northeast of Seno, experienced an engine failure near the hamlet of Na Nhom. His muffed autorotation into the jungle resulted in substantial aircraft damage. Unscathed during the crash, all parties returned to the outpost, where they spent the night. After Helio pilot Ron Sutphin identified Williamson's location, Art Wilson retrieved him. Based on reported Pathet Lao guerilla activities within the area, and with little capability to recover wrecks, with a Customer's recommendation, interested parties subsequently elected to abandon Hotel-Three.¹⁸

By 3 June, with only three H-19s remaining in the inventory, Wilson shared the proverbial barrel with Williamson. While flying Hotel-One north of Vientiane, he experienced his first terrifying helicopter emergency. Wilson was no stranger to adversity. While flying missions for the French in a C-119 over Dien Bien Phu, he had sustained a 37mm hit to the plane's left tail boom. Displaying uncommon courage, he and his crew completed the drop and returned to the CAT base.

This time he was not as lucky. Lacking a line of sight, and unable to establish radio communications with anyone at Wattay Airport, he crash landed, and walked away wearing the cherished rubber flip flop footwear that he always wore in the cockpit. Making his way over trails and through brush and swamps, and with the help of friendly natives, he ultimately discovered the north-south Route-13 and thumbed a ride to the base. This time, with the ship located within a reasonably safe area, mechanics restored the relatively undamaged aircraft to an airworthy condition.

Beginning with this incident, Art Wilson provided the grist for many Air

¹⁷ As piston engines fail at a predetermined period, insurance companies universally base their premiums on this statistic.

¹⁸ Joe Leeker, *The Aircraft of Air America*.

America legends. Firmly doubting his survival that day without the precious flip-flops, a stubborn and amusing Wilson continued to fly in similar footwear throughout his long career with the Company. Despite repeated attempts by Regional Chief Pilot Fred F Walker and the VPFO to persuade him to wear conventional boots, he never fully conformed to Company policy. Assuming a semblance of convention, he overtly circumvented the ban by wearing unlaced boots to the aircraft.¹⁹ But, once inside the cockpit, he reverted to his footwear of choice. Pilots who worked or deadheaded with him reported never observing him fly in boots. Over time, the colorful Wilson became a prime Company legendary figure, forever sporting the moniker, Shower Shoes Wilson.

Another much-talked-about episode arose in the career of this folklore character. After returning to C-47s for a short time in 1961, Wilson displayed a playful personality, especially while flying VIPs-very important persons. During this period, he flew high level USOM, USIS JUSMAAG-MAG, and Thai military officials to various river sites. In addition to gathering information about the areas, the inspection trips anticipated bolstering field team morale.

Wilson held more than a little disdain for persons who, simply because they commanded a title, believed that they were hot shots. Therefore, he devised a strategy to shake up the high mucky-mucks. On long flights to the south, he secreted empty beer cans in the cockpit. After takeoff, with YP Chow as copilot, every ten minutes passengers observed the cockpit door opening forty-five degrees and an empty can rolling down the aisle. Before long, a substantial number of cans accumulated in the cabin section. Naturally, the bizarre acts caused consternation and ire among passengers, especially those who knew the Air America pilot restriction about drinking. Some could scarcely wait for Wilson to land so they could file an official trip report with Air America concerning his actions.

This form of entertainment continued for several trips. On one flight, after four cans bounced into the passenger compartment, an irate colonel stomped to the cockpit to complain. As he started to talk, Art casually turned around, informed

¹⁹ Bill Leary. Art Wilson flew thirty-six Squaw missions over Dien Bien Phu between March 13 and May 7, 1954; Fred Walker flew twenty-one missions.

the military man that no one invited him to the flight deck, and to please return to his seat. The flustered colonel complied, but later filed a scathing report about the unorthodox activities. As his antics embarrassed local management, and they contemplated terminating him, he reluctantly explained the details of what he considered a harmless prank. Management, sharing a measure of mirth in Wilson's actions, and because of his popularity, tenure, and elevated hero status, secretly harbored sympathy, but those in upper echelons forbade him to continue the game. However, the select few already aware of the game encouraged him to continue the charade. Reveling in the notoriety and fun, Wilson continued rolling empties for a short time, until increasing management harassment and serious threats of termination forced him to cease the activity.

Long afterward, people spoke in awe about the insane Captain who flew C-47s in shorts and shower shoes, and drank upwards of two cases of beer during a flight. Many claimed that they had actually observed this, and swore to its authenticity. Embellishing the story, some individuals indicated that he drank five or six cases, or that following takeoff, with the landing gear barely in the wheel wells, a can of beer soared into the cargo compartment. People continued to be unable to comprehend his actions for, at the end of a flight he always exited the cockpit sober. Legend offered by way of explanation that, as a bundle of nerves, and to get through the day, Wilson drank. However, further confusing the issue, they observed him to be in total control of his faculties while performing cockpit duties, but after leaving the plane and entering the Company truck for a ride home, he passed out.²⁰

From commencement of the helicopter experiment, even before the memorable H-19 incidents, Customers and pilots alike were cognizant that other more sophisticated equipment and proficient military-trained helicopter aviators were required to successfully execute Lao missions, particularly expansion of

²⁰ Tom Moher Tapes, obtained from Professor William Leary through Frank Stergar and Anthony Byrne, 11/93.
Fred Sass Email.
Warren Erickson, *The Secret War in Laos-and How I Got There (Air America Log, Volume 22 #1, 1st quarter 2005.*

operations into the mountainous regions of Military Region Two. They continuously lobbied Air America management to obtain the powerful Marine HUS-1 models, those configured with lift-enhancing four blades, and engines producing more than twice the shaft horsepower of the H-19s. However, various Lao factions within the politically-sensitive connotations and framework of Lao neutrality considered that the HUS-1 displayed all the negative undertones of an aggressive Marine combat helicopter. Therefore, for a time, upper management and Washington types ignored and rejected all upgrade recommendations because of the lack of deniability.

NEW BLOOD

Finally, after the two H-19 accidents and continued pleas from the Vientiane station to improve the program, planners recognized the necessity of employing better-qualified helicopter pilots. In June, Bob Rousselot conducted two consecutive nightly recruiting meetings at Futema, Okinawa, attended by flight personnel from Marine helicopter squadrons HMR-261 and HMR-362. Soliciting individuals for the Lao theater, the VPO affected a businesslike approach as he briefly described the job. He noticeably omitted any mention of danger or hostile fire during operations. ²¹

Following the meetings, volunteers Thomas A. Moher (DOH 6/6/60), Mike (Red) Weinberg, and Charles R. Bade, squadron members of HMR (L)-261 who were slated for rotation to New River, North Carolina, volunteered to man the three H-19As. After hasty discharges in Okinawa, they joined Air America as bona fide civilians. ²²

Arrival of the three young replacements in Vientiane thrilled the remaining old timers. After transitioning the Navy-trained helicopter pilots to the H-19s, the original group departed Vientiane displaying broad smiles. They relished the opportunity to escape a bad situation, sometimes referred to as a death wish program, and revert to their beloved stiff wing aircraft. Moreover, top tiered trough-feeders in Taipei shortly learned a lesson: listen to the troops. With phase-out of the original helicopter pilots and recommencement of low-level

²¹ Jack "JJ" McCauley Letters, 1/15/91, 1/28/91.

²² Marines designated the H-19, HRS-1. They were used as training vehicles at Ellison Field during the Author's training there. A HRS-1 squadron was also based at the Marine Corps Air Facility New River, N.C in 1960 when the Author arrived in the "Fleet."



Captain Tom Moher

missions, both Company management and the Customer soon acknowledged that the experienced helicopter pilots more effectively accomplished required tasks. Indeed, with the helicopter experiment in jeopardy, over time, these new men probably contributed to long term helicopter usage and support in Laos. Despite personnel changes, H-19 maintenance and safety factors continued to be a distinct concern, as the old Sikorsky aircraft still displayed an affinity for rice paddies. Consequently, following roads when possible, became a normal procedure to provide for safer forced landings. This became standard operating procedure (SOP), particularly while ferrying ships to and from Vientiane for sixty-hour periodic inspections at the Company's Bangkok Don Muang Red Cap maintenance facility, located on the Royal Thai Air Force side of the Don Muang complex. The necessary three-and-a-half-hour one-way trip consumed considerable non-operational flight time.²³

During this period, the "rotor heads" resided in a six-house USOM compound located on the main road north of Vientiane. They generally flew two aircraft, with the third usually in maintenance. Alternating duties, crews operated one helicopter in proximity to southern Mekong River towns, and the other in the Vientiane area. Salaries amounted to 1,200 dollars per month with no additional remuneration, regardless of where they operated or the number of hours flown. While not enormous, this sum represented almost twice their Marine Corps salary. With the departure of the original Tachi pilots, Charlie Bade assumed senior helicopter pilot status by default, but the pilots actually reported to Regional fixed wing Chief Pilot, Fred Walker, an old timer who flew the "Hump" in World War Two and joined Civil Air Transport in 1948.²⁴

MILITARY REGION-4

Far removed from the administrative capital of Vientiane, the Pakse market town served as the south's trade center. Providing access to large waterways, and

²³ CJ Abadie Interview, 08/21/02.
Frank Stergar Email to Author via Jesse Walton and G V Smith, 01/07/98.

²⁴ Erickson, 9.



The early rustic Pakse airport terminal during the rainy season in southern Laos.
Wayne Knight Collection.

transportation arteries developed by the French, the river town served to foster economic contact with ethnic populations on a portion of the 4,000-foot-elevation Bolovens Plateau, and along Route-13. In addition, Pakse possessed one of the best macadam-topped airfields, and one of only three higher grade schools in the country.

²⁵

Pakse was also a preferred work area for White Star and supporting Air America assets. As with earlier operations, because of an abundance of low terrain more conducive to H-19A operations, early missions continued in the flat southern area around Pakse. Similar in nature to other river communities in many ways Pakse was regarded by westerners as a quiet, peaceful town. However, the small town differed from others by its well-patronized tax-free shops, including a wine shop where one purchased excellent French wines, an exchange shop, food shops, and several drink shops that served Beer La Roux. The pilots discovered that the brew contained a formaldehyde preservative, and judged the ingredients potency by the next day's headache. ²⁶

Besides accommodating the Military Region Four army regional headquarters, a French military mission and U.S. Special Forces Field Training B Team also billeted in the town. To enhance rapport, consolidate the secret nature of the American presence, and for convenience, individual pilots often remained overnight (RON) at the team house.

Two of the American soldiers here were Pete Orr, described by pilots as a sharp, intelligent Captain possessing a gravelly voice, and "Pappy," a short, skinny, white-haired sergeant. These characters, clad in baseball hats, khaki shirts, and shorts, barely concealed their military calling. A potential for violence was etched deeply in their faces. Orr and his men trained the vaunted Lao Tiger Battalion. At first glance, these "elite" troops appeared to be excellent. However, during their first brush with combat, without competent field officers to command respect and lead

²⁵ John Prados, *The Blood Road* (New York: Wiley & Sons, 1999).

²⁶ CJ Abadie Email 01/29/99.
CJ Abadie Interview.

them, they became unglued and fled.

In conjunction with U.S. Special Forces and Agency political aims, H-19 missions consisted of pamphlet drops from 500 feet, medical type people-to-people programs, and recruitment of indigenous people from the countryside to monitor the area situation. Desiring to interact with inhabitants of remote villages and collect on-the-spot intelligence, American soldiers established a rural medical program.

One interesting mission entailed a journey to a northern village suspected of communist leanings. Soon after landing in a rice paddy outside the village, curious Buddhist monks arrived and circled the helicopter. The village chief, wearing two hats as the local shaman, followed. He hunkered with the rest of the entourage, and then, to impress his uninvited guests, he rolled a few small bones on a blanket and encouraged bonze chants. After the initial ceremony, the team medic erected his medical table and prepared for a land office business, but preferring to remain in the background, hardly any villager opted for consultation. Only the very sick or dying stepped forward.

To help facilitate critical intelligence gathering, all teams carried the new technology Polaroid Land Camera and packs of film. From experience, they discovered that in remote twilight zones instant photos awed the spirit-ridden rural inhabitants. Hoping to impress, perhaps cow, the squatting villagers staring sullenly at the ugly helicopter and "round eyed" guys, Captain Orr casually aimed his camera in their direction and snapped the shutter. Then, mumbling for added effect, he snatched the cover paper out and placed the camera on the ground. With the flair of a conjurer, he liberally sprinkled dirt on the paper, and followed with more mumbo jumbo gibberish. Enjoying the theatrics, he flashed the paper toward the sun for sixty seconds. Then, extracting the photo, he displayed the developed pictures of the monks. One can only imagine the enormous effect on the impoverished brains of a gullible and superstitious people. Dumfounded, they shouted, pounded on the ground, and generally went wild with approval. Through an interpreter, solicitation of numerous character photos consumed the next two hours and achieved the desired rapport. The exercise provided a classic case of photography transcending language and culture.

After gaining the villagers' favor with western-style magic, sick call proceeded satisfactorily. Responding in kind to the excellent relations, villagers

revealed that the area constituted a staging district for a Pathet Lao company. Before leaving for Pakse, the Americans were cautioned by the now friendly and concerned citizens to be especially vigilant whenever reentering the area.

Orr and newcomer Moher's association developed into fast friendship, and on occasion it exhibited playful tendencies. To issue mission instructions, Orr often climbed the right side of the H-19 to hand Moher a written assignment. Finally, Moher advised the captain that it would be more expeditious and safer to pass Flight Mechanic Punzalan the note, or send it up to the cockpit from the cabin section. Orr countered that his method provided more fun. Therefore, to teach an object lesson, one day, with Orr hanging from a handhold, Moher took off and circled the field until Orr's prodigious cursing prompted him to land. ²⁷

Other H-19 missions carried Air America pilots far into the hinterlands to the provincial towns of Saravane and Attopeu. Operation Brotherhood, one of several established field hospitals or medical clinics staffed by Filipino doctors and nurses throughout the country, conducted business in Attopeu town. ²⁸ Pilots serviced countryside outposts with payrolls, and occasionally inserted or retrieved indigenous intelligence teams trained to monitor the areas. Flights to the extensive Boloven Plateau east of Pakse entailed duties much like those in other areas: hauling personnel, paymasters, Customers, Lao Army officers, rice, and wounded. At the time, amid constant enemy and friendly movement, no well-developed RLA defensive outposts existed. Hampering operations on the Plateau, low weather often permitted only a partial ascent along the narrow, paved road (Route-23) before encountering cloud barriers. On such occasions, pilots cautiously modified the route along the Plateau's southern perimeter to arrive at east rim destinations.

Roy Moffit, a Program Evaluation Office "civilian" floater, supplemented U.S. Army personnel in the area. An expert in languages, tribal customs, and mores, he extensively worked the eastern Bolovens Plateau.

Pilots and Special Forces personnel regarded visits to Frenchman Jean Cadeaux's prosperous farm at Houei Sai, near Paksong, as pleasant, entertaining, and certainly a

²⁷ Tom Moher Tapes.

EW Knight Email, 05/17/00.

²⁸ Attopeu: Translated as the city of Buffalo Dung, White, 242.

culinary delight. The hospitable individual served venison steak, head lettuce, tomatoes--according to Moher, the best tasting since his duty on Okinawa--delicious rare fruits, and lemonade. Cadeaux, an elderly retired French Army officer of mixed Oriental-European parentage, had lost his Vietnamese wife and part of his family during the First Indochina War. After serving in two traumatic wars, he desired nothing more than a peaceful life and the means to care for his farm.

An immensely interesting conversationalist, following dinners, Jean waxed philosophical concerning the communist threat in Southeast Asia. With an expatriate's keen insight, he foretold the impossibility of stemming the communist tide then flowing through Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. He further stated that major factors contributing to the success of the movement included extreme poverty, lack of national identity, and poor communications within Indochina. He emphasized the harsh training and discipline Vietminh handlers firmly instilled in other country allies, such as the Pathet Lao, compared to the "it doesn't matter" Lao Army attitude made it almost impossible to counter the burgeoning ideology. Attempting to rebut their host, his American guests argued their points merely from a Western mentality, but, in comparison to Jean's logic, these invariably appeared weak.

Since the specious Bolovens Plateau abounded with various animals, many times the desire for sport constituted the express purpose of a trip to the farm. Renowned as exceptional hunters and guides, Lao Army officers occasionally sought Jean and his surviving son's services. During these hunting forays, Tom Moher, a New York City boy unaccustomed to the joys of hunting, remained in the lovely house admiring Plateau trophies.

Some exceptionally large and extremely dangerous animals roamed the remote areas. One, the Gaur, an enormous and aggressive Cape-of-Africa type buffalo, might attack humans for no apparent reason. Normally, this increasingly rare species avoided humans, but, on occasion, indigenous tribal hunters encountered a herd and culled a bull for its prized meat and magical power. In addition, because of its diminishing numbers, big game hunters throughout the world coveted the animal.

One afternoon after lunch, as Moher, the Frenchman, his son, and others lounged

in the living room enjoying cigars and coffee, panicked Lao soldiers dashed in shouting for Jean. It required several minutes to calm the agitated men, but they eventually communicated that a giant Gaur had just attacked one of their Jeeps a short distance from the house. They had barely managed to escape the raging monster. The thought of an attack so close to inhabited areas fascinated Cadeaux, who immediately gathered his weapons and decided to investigate. Several men piled in Moher's helicopter and they proceeded down the road. From 200 yards, a huge cloud of dust boiled upward. Closer examination revealed a furious animal, probably a rogue bull Gaur, still hammering on a half-tilted vehicle it had jostled off the road. The maddened creature also continued goring two Lao soldiers it had previously torn to shreds. Moher held the helicopter at a low hover so those inside the cabin could more easily view the carnage. Hearing the unfamiliar aircraft noise, the maddened Gaur then turned and bolted toward its larger adversary. Using his largest rifle, Jean aimed and fired a round. Wham! The animal slowed, shuddered, but still rushed toward the helicopter. Another round exited the large caliber barrel. Before a third slug's report shattered the air, Moher placed the ship on the ground to provide the old hunter with a more stable gun platform. Splash, the beast dropped to its knees and expired. Moher then secured the aircraft for all to view the magnificent creation. Marveling at its size, while extending both arms laterally to maximum width, he failed to touch the beast's horns from tip to tip. Then Tom, squeamish over events, declined to look at, approach, or retrieve the Lao bodies. The Lao soldiers understood his reluctance, and indicated that they would send someone as soon as possible to recover the remains. ²⁹

Within a year, on suspicion of his being either a government informer, or an Agency asset, or merely to establish an example in the area, Pathet Lao operatives murdered Jean Cadeaux's son. Heartbroken, the old man abandoned his beloved farm to seek other pursuits in South Vietnam.

Placed in an environment akin to the early American Wild West, one Air America pilot excelled. Portrayed by those who knew him in the Marine Corps as the ultimate example of an undisciplined, young, and restless daredevil, Mike Weinberg emulated an

²⁹ Tom Moher Tapes.

American cowboy, proudly wearing a brace of pistols and cowboy hat. Similar to historical troublemakers, Weinberg received an inevitable comeuppance one evening while visiting a local sporting house.

Located beyond the first traffic circle in the eastern portion of Pakse town, the establishment stood close to a well-patronized French restaurant. Turning left and walking down an alley, one arrived in front of a sizeable green building that sported a grand portico festooned with garish colored lights. Benches lining the wall inside the pleasure palace displayed the local talent. Once the "best looking" gal had been selected and hired, side cubicles fitted with cement sack pads and mosquito nets provided a modicum of privacy and comfort. As customary in tropical climates, to provide additional circulation, bedroom walls terminated a foot short of the ceiling. Despite a potential lack of privacy, voyeurism seldom proved a problem. However, one night a substantial altercation ensued between a Hungarian and a Frenchman vying for their favorite paramour. The fracas resulted in peeking, abusive language, and then fisticuffs. Reacting to the quarrel, the madam ejected both men and closed the house for twelve hours. Then, realizing that ninety per cent of her business had departed with the two men, she eventually relented and coaxed them back.

On this particular night, Weinberg slouched into the house, and, with his mouth characteristically flapping at ninety miles per hour, caused a general disturbance. Then, while posing in the middle of the floor, hands on his hips, and surveying the pretties coyly perched along the wall, he was startled by a gentle voice from behind him. Whirling, he encountered the local enforcer who cradled a Thompson sub-machine gun angled menacingly at his stomach. He was astonished further when he was abruptly ordered by the man to remove his hardware. Unlike the tragic principal in the Johnny Cash song who failed to heed his mother's words, Weinberg proved more fortunate and never again took his guns to town. ³⁰

³⁰ Tom Moher Tapes.

CJ ABADIE

Toward the end of July, Air America hired a fourth helicopter pilot, Clarence J. "Ab" Abadie (DOH 7/28/60). Nearing the completion of a yearly tour, the West Coast squadron HMR (L)-362 prepared to rotate from Okinawa to the Marine helicopter base at Santa Anna, California. Abadie was one of the squadron members, along with mates Charlie Weitz, Jack Leister, Barry Cox, J.J. McCauley, and Ed Subowsty--all of whom, along with mechanics Louie Jones and CP Wyatt, ultimately worked for Air America. Abadie had first learned of the Air America operation from his squadron commanding officer and operations officer during a morning squadron meeting. At that time, HMR-362 personnel billeted at the Sukiran U.S. Army base, as only a runway and few buildings existed at the fledgling Futema Marine facility. Single, with no compelling reason to return to the States, Abadie journeyed to the Company office at Kadena Air Force Base to obtain further information concerning the Air America operation. Operations Manager Bob Aubry interviewed him.³¹ After divulging that former Marines Moher, Bade, and Weinberg already worked in Laos, Aubry processed all necessary paperwork for CJ Abadie's military separation. Within a week, Abadie found himself a civilian. Lieutenant Wayne Knight stood Group Officer-of-the-Day duty when Abadie checked out of the Futema Marine Corps facility. This was when the blond Knight first learned of Air America's existence. The men conversed for a few minutes regarding the pending adventure, and Abadie, yet naive as to the operation's full scope, painted a general picture valid only for the central Lao Panhandle area.³²

Next, the new employee departed for the Air America Taipei headquarters, where a three-day orientation, Company familiarization, and actual hiring followed. Early in August, he departed for Bangkok. George Demyonvich, one of the

³¹ Bob Aubrey arrived later in Udorn and Laos to assist establish and run system radio stations.

³² Clarence Abadie "Air America and the H-19-A" Air America Log Volume 15-1, 8. CJ Abadie Emails, 02/03/99, 11/24/02. Wayne Knight Email, 01/08/01.

CIA personnel assigned to Laos, described as a lighthearted guy, accompanied Abadie on a C-46 "milk run" from Bangkok to Vientiane. Like so many of his ilk, while concealing his true mission, "Demmi" posed as an Air America Operations Manager conducting pilot briefings.³³

Relatively unimpressed with Vientiane, with its broad avenues lined with huge trees, the well-traveled Abadie characterized the city as generally quiet, especially during the noon two-hour siesta period. Similar in nature to other Asian cities visited during his overseas tour, he observed people congregating and eating on the sidewalks. Their languid movements appeared to accomplish nothing tangible amid the obviously cosmopolitan society. All manner of Indian fabric and Chinese and Vietnamese food shops lined the roads. Happy children constantly spilled into the streets, where bicycles, samplers, and motorbikes wound cautiously around potholes and unconcerned individuals. Bustling morning and evening markets presented substantial local color to the city.

Similar in design to other Southeast Asia airfields, Wattay Airport provided the primary focus of activity. Workers performed their jobs, while numerous Lao military guards stood duty at the gates and around the grounds. Upper class elite, enjoying the good urban life, gathered at the riverside hotel to socialize. A mass of bad roads crisscrossed the municipal area. Except for one single paved main artery, Abadie found that all others became tremendously dusty in the dry season, and muddy during the rainy period. Only a few well-to-do individuals possessed fancy cars, mostly of the Mercedes Benz type. When in town, Americans could not readily discern if danger lurked or anything of a military nature prevailed. Overall, friendly people and French influence abounded. Consequently, one heard other languages than Thai or Lao. Economically, the enduring universal gold staple provided the currency of choice.

When Abadie arrived, there were only two H-19s based at the airport. Customers used one for flights from Vientiane, while the other was sent south to be utilized at Paksane, Thakhet, Savannakhet, and, occasionally, Pakse. During H-19A transition, Abadie flew locally as a First Officer, at the rate of 600 dollars a

³³ CJ Abadie Emails, 02/11/99, 02/16/00.

month, with lead pilot Charlie Bade and Captain Tom Moher. Moher recalled Abadie as a quiet, soft-spoken, pleasant, and friendly chap. Deemed an excellent pilot by his peers, he checked out within two weeks. Between scheduled helicopter flights, he solicited trips down river from fixed wing pilots, to familiarize and orient himself with the various airfields and operational areas. ³⁴

From the beginning of his interview and employment, following a very positive impression on Rousselot, the VPO envisioned Abadie as a prime candidate for future promotion to head the Lao helicopter project. Rousselot recognized in Abadie a distinct contrast to his most senior helicopter pilot, Charlie Bade, whom he considered simply one of the guys, a bit flippant, and without a great amount of respect for authority. With Abadie, he perceived a loner, one who was ambitious, and willing to make unpopular pronouncements without objections. ³⁵

After spending two lonely months in country, Tom Moher petitioned the VPO to allow his wife's relocation to Bangkok. Waving the usual Company six-month probationary policy, Taipei granted his wish. Boarding CAT's "Golden Worm" for Tokyo to escort his wife to Bangkok, he noted only six Air America personnel in the cabin section. At the first stop at Taipei, five people disembarked and more CAT-Southern Air Transport employees embarked for the flight to Japan. Always a social animal, having enjoyed numerous free liquid amenities, Moher found himself wiped out by the time the plane landed at Hanada airport. His sodden condition seriously upset Kathy, so he devoted the next two days to rectifying his error in judgment, and enjoying big city life. During the period, he instructed Kathy, a country girl unaccustomed to modern appliances, how to properly operate the hotel shower. During the return to Bangkok, the couple judged interim stops and shopping in Taipei and Hong Kong interesting and great fun.

In early 1960, westerners considered Bangkok, relatively uncrowded and pristine, with numerous small shops and klongs, to be a charming and gentle Southeast Asian Mecca. Moreover, compared to the more rural features of Vientiane,

³⁴ Tom Moher Tapes.
CJ Abadie Interview; CJ Abadie Emails, 02/19/00, 08/28/03.

³⁵ Bob Rousselot Memorandum.
EW Knight Email, 07/11/00.

Bangkok provided a wonderful place to live, visit, and enjoy life. Therefore, with a minimum of hassle, Moher rented a small but hardly inexpensive, furnished house for Kathy near Lumpini Park, and then he returned to Vientiane.

Within the offices of prime movers and shakers in Washington, D.C., a National Security Council "Statement of Policy in Mainland Asia", dated 25 July 1960, reiterated continuing U.S. policy and recommendations for Laos. Recorded in the Pentagon Papers, it stated in part:

*"The national security of the United States would be endangered by communist domination of mainland Southeast Asia, whether achieved by overt aggression, subversion, or a political and economic offensive..." Therefore, we [USG] should "implement as appropriate covert operations designed to assist in the achievement of U.S. objectives...Provide military assistance for the development of Lao armed forces...Encourage Laos to formulate and implement a broadly conceived security plan, including both internal and external, which encompasses the services of all branches of the Royal Government, civil and military..."*¹

Notwithstanding the lofty goals of the NSC 6012 statement, and despite the Eisenhower Administration's approval of the policy, the Lao backwater soon became seriously muddled by unexpected military events that effectively opened Pandora's Box, and seriously divided the loyalty of the Lao army for several years.

It was very late on the linear time scale of Lao's troubled history. The political and military environment was ripe for a coup. Laos had never achieved any overall sense of unity under a strong central governing system that a nation requires. The diverse people lacked loyalty and identity to a cohesive nation, and were further divided by traditional ethnic, regional, and family disputes. Furthermore, a chasm had always existed between the Vientiane government and populations living in the countryside. Governing elitists had never established authority or earnestly attempted to achieve respect from all the diverse individuals within the country. In addition, non-communist political factions never attained unity and mainly viewed the other entities with as much distrust as they

¹ Marek Thee, 360-361.

did the leftists. Consequently, no firm, effective non-commie leadership had emerged since independence from France in 1954. A coup was inevitable because of the country's structure, inept leaders, and diverse peoples.²

After arriving in Vientiane, Captain Tom Moher sensed a crisis brewing. Angry and disillusioned with events in the city, Lao soldiers milled around and mumbled like a herd of cattle in the streets. One objection stemmed from the inflated kip and creature comforts filtering down slowly to the common man, and the riches accorded only a few favored locals. In addition, a black market in imported goods continued to flourish with many resident business people reaping financial killings from lucrative United States Information Service (USIS) and United States Operation Mission (USOM) contracts. The city's population waited for the steaming kettle to boil over.

Alarmed over potential implications of the shaky political situation, fixed wing Chief Pilot Captain Fred Walker convened all his pilots in early August to discuss the tangible options available to them in the likely event of a military coup. For crews billeted north of town, the most exposed and vulnerable location in Vientiane, the most important topic discussed at the meeting outlined a lengthy escape route through surrounding rice paddy countryside to the Mekong River and to Thailand's ultimate safety.³

The briefing proved timely, for soon afterward the unthinkable occurred. A late-night 8 August telegram from Embassy Army Attaché (ARMA) and PEO to the Department of State and seven other departments or agencies transmitted sparse initial information regarding the Kong Le coup.

"The Second Parachute Battalion under Captain Kong Le on 8 August seized control of Vientiane and a nearby army base in a sudden and unexpected action. Kong Le seemingly carried out the takeover unilaterally, although it may have had the secret backing of certain high-ranking army officers disgruntled over the

² CIA Special National Intelligence Estimate #68-60, The Situation and Short-Term Outlook in Laos, 12/06/60.

³ Tom Moher Tapes.
CJ Abadie Email, 02/16/00.

meteoric rise to preeminence of Defense Minister General Phoumi...

It is still too early to determine whether the revolutionaries can make their takeover hold up. Phoumi, however, suffers a serious disadvantage in that the troops at his disposal for counteraction are widely dispersed throughout the country." ⁴

Just after dark, citizens heard intermittent gunfire in Vientiane. Curious, Colonel Kouprasith Abhay, Commanding Officer of the Fifth Military Region (Vientiane and Paksane area), followed by the assistant ARMA representative, Jeeped to Chinaimo army headquarters. Upon arrival, the colonel was placed under house arrest. Learning that Captain Kong Le was in the process of seizing the town with his Second Paratroop Battalion and armored units, he obtained permission for ARMA to leave the garrison with a mimeographed leaflet.

The information leaflet, translated from French to English, purported that the Revolutionary High Command had assumed all military and civil authority in Laos. It read in part:

"Soldiers, police sergeants, functionaries: the military has taken power: we demand of the military and police to support the revolution to avoid letting blood among the Lao. It is necessary to avoid corruption from those who make money from the population, those who oppress the population. It is necessary that we Lao patriots work together to chase the government out that demands money from the great powers [America]. If you are in accord with us, come with us and demonstrate before the Assembly the ninth at 0800 hours. Police and army are not enemies after today and must take care of each other. Don't take the rifle for fighting against us as it is dangerous.

The Revolutionary Committee Captain Kong Le" ⁵

On 9 August 1960, most top government cabinet members, including Generals

⁴ CIA Bulletin, 08/09/60.

Author Note: Central Intelligence Agency Bulletins and Daily Briefs contained in this chapter's narrative will generally develop and describe in detail the drama of this Lao crisis.

⁵ Telegram to Department of State from Chief PEO (2219), copies to Department of the Army, CINCPAC, JUSMAG Thailand, JUSMAG Vietnam, CIA, DOD, JCS, 08/08/60.

Ouane and Defense Minister Phoumi, were in Luang Prabang attending post-year funeral preparations for the world's longest reigning monarch, King Sisavang Vong, who had died October 1959. During the early morning hours of that day, Captain Kong Le, the disgruntled RLA commander of the elite several-hundred-man-strong 2nd Parachute Battalion, which was reputedly the best in the Lao Army, quickly captured Vientiane and its 100,000 inhabitants, with the support of armor and hundreds of additional troops from other local units. ⁶ Departing the Chinaimo Army base under the cover of darkness, while transiting the administrative capital to overtly begin a planned sweep operation against pro-Pathet Lao villages north of the city, his troops commenced a swift and well-organized coup, with minimal resistance and relatively little blood-letting. (Casualties: one Kong Le and one FAL troop wounded, one FAL killed.) Within two hours they efficiently seized crucial facilities: police station, banks, post office, telegraph, telephone, radio station, power plant, arsenal, and government ministries. Furthermore, important street intersections rapidly succumbed to his control, and road blocks were established. Through clever planning, army camps at Phone Kheng, Fort Chinaimo, and the Engineering Corps surrendered to the insurgents with minor fighting. Guards were also stationed at the homes of FAL Generals and other high bureaucratic officials. Amkha, Sing, and Oudone Sananikone were arrested, in addition to Kouprasith.

As of 0800 hours, only sketchy information was available to USARMA to evaluate the situation. However, it was noted that paratroopers patrolled town in Jeeps and armored vehicles, and observable conditions appeared calm. Wattay Airport was under Kong Le's control, and no foreigners were allowed on the field. Civilian aircraft were surrounded by barbed wire and guards; the tower was unmanned.

Starting early in the morning, the local radio station began broadcasting a short message stating that a parachute battalion had captured key installations in the city. This action had occurred because the government had misled them, the

⁶ The 22nd, 25th Infantry Battalions and the 3rd Reconnaissance Company were located in the area. The total numbered about 3,000 men.

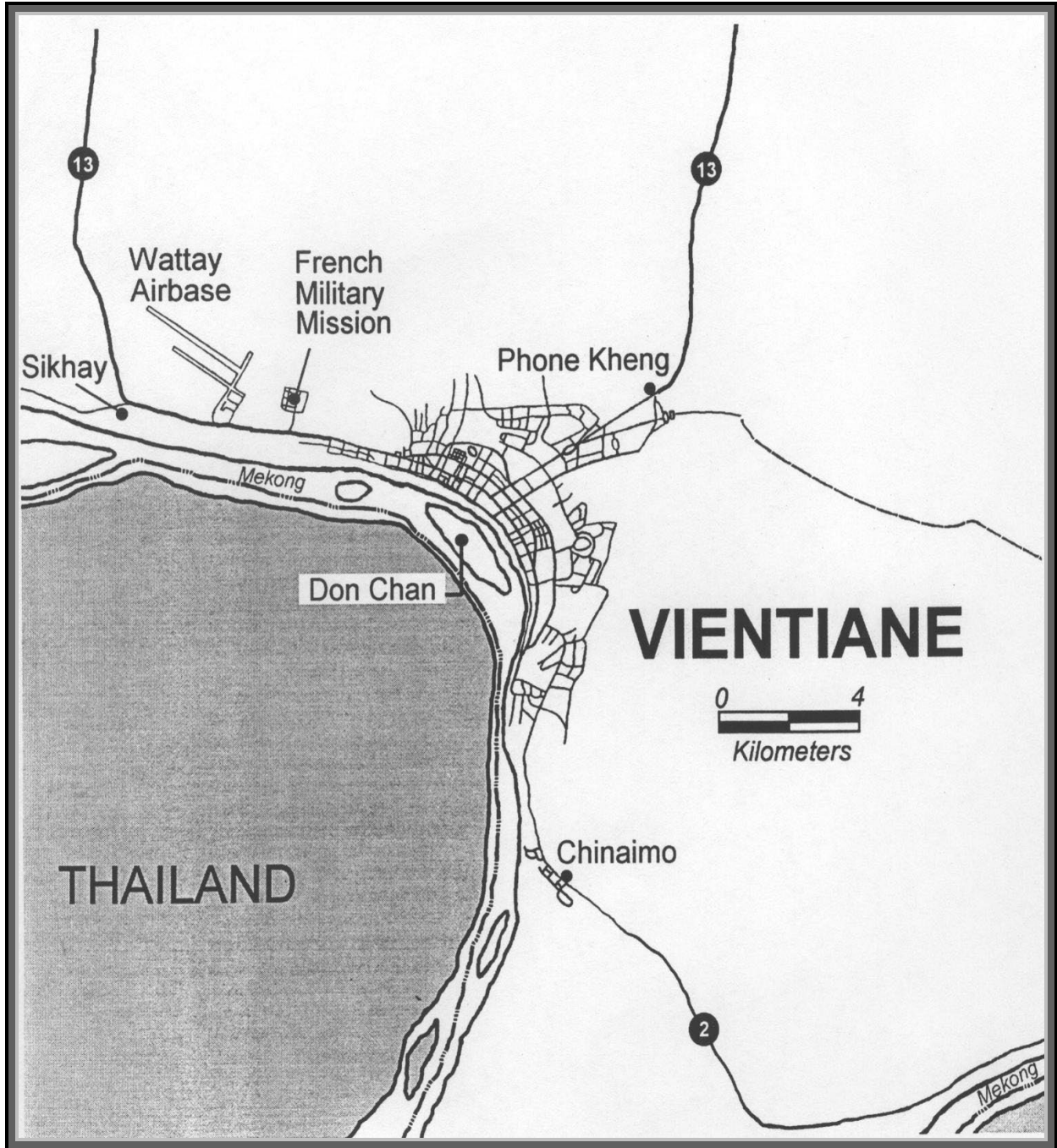


Diagram displaying the location of Royal Lao army camps at Chinaimo and Phone Khene relative to Vientiane and Wattay Airport.

Americans had interfered in Lao affairs, and the kip had failed to purchase needed items.

The U.S. Embassy was allowed to broadcast messages stating aims of the revolution, ordering soldiers to remain in camps, and commanders and officers throughout Laos to stay away from the opposition to avoid bloodshed while awaiting negotiations. Americans were advised to remain off the streets.

With typical Lao fondness for tardiness, the planned early demonstration in front of the National Assembly building did not occur at the scheduled time, but by noon 1,000 people had arrived.

By 1800 hours, with Kong Le forces imposing a 1900 to 0600-hour curfew, the city remained calm. Reports from U.S. personnel in Luang Prabang, Savannakhet, Pakse, and Xieng Khouang indicated that the situation was quiet.⁷ The fact was that the situation required clarification: Vientiane was the only territory Kong Le controlled in the country.

With the city completely secured by Kong Le's forces, confusion reigned supreme among both attackers and recipients. They wondered what would follow the military action. The situation equally baffled the common man. Bewildered, people on the street inquired, *"Who is Kong Le?"* Few individuals had previously heard of the diminutive leader. Consequently, for most locals, his lightning takeover proved difficult to understand. To allay negative rumors, in ensuing radio broadcasts attributed to Kong Le, the humble captain from modest southern tribal origins professed concern over the country's never-ending bloodshed and foreign meddling. He envisioned an end to the constant fighting, an end to corruption, and the initiation and pursuit of countrywide peace and neutrality. Many communiqués and leaflets contained anti-American sentiment. Directly targeting USG's military attaches and Special Forces advisors, he stated that foreign troops would be asked to depart the country.

"The infiltrations of a great Power are increasing daily. Every organization

⁷ Wilfred Burchett, *The Furtive War: The United States in Vietnam and Laos* (New York: International Publishers, 1963) 187.

Telegram USARMA to State (PEO 2221) c 1100 local, 08/09/60.

Ambassador Winthrop G. Brown to State, #240, c 2000, 08/09/60.

in the country has a group attached to it. Even my own battalion has ten Americans whom the Government has authorized to infiltrate into our ranks. There are also many cases of this outside my own regiment." ⁸

Demands were also forwarded to the Lao government calling for a strict policy of neutrality, and the formation of a new government under Prince Souvanna Phouma, Assembly President and former Prime Minister, who had advocated neutralism and fostered integration of pro-communist Pathet Lao into the government during 1957. ⁹

WHITE STAR

Many months prior to the coup, U.S. Special Forces personnel--eventually code-named White Star--had been assigned to train and advise Captain Kong Le and his men, and had formed a close bond with him. Born in a remote village in Military Region Three, of mixed Lao-Kha parentage, Kong Le had to struggle to pull himself up out of a lower caste system and achieve upward social mobility. In addition to the Kha--a derogatory term indicating savage--stigma, and his five-foot one-inch stature, he had to prove himself not merely a shrimp. In the process, he likely had acquired a little man complex. After attending some secondary schooling at Savannakhet, Kong Le had joined the French Union Army in 1952 to fight the Viet Minh. There he developed leadership potential while attaining the rank of sergeant. When the French ignominiously departed Indochina in 1954, he joined the RLA paratroopers and was advanced to the rank of lieutenant. After distinguishing himself in battle, in 1957 he was sent to a U.S. scout and ranger school on southern Luzon, Philippine Islands, to learn ambush and guerrilla operations and gain additional valuable combat experience fighting communist Huks. Having achieved upward mobility from his humble roots, after returning to Laos, he was assigned to command a paratroop battalion.

⁸ Keesing Record of World Events (formerly Keesing Contemporary Archives), Volume 6, October, 1960 Laos, Page 17719. Internet and courtesy of Robert Sander.

⁹ Wilfred Burchett, 190-191. Assistant Secretary of State, Graham Parsons to Douglas Dillon, Under Secretary of State, The Situation in Laos, 08/12/60.

Knowledgeable and experienced in his country's conflicts, by 1960, the twenty-six-year-old was elevated to commanding officer of the Second Parachute Battalion. The unit was formed, financed, and armed in 1958, with many troops trained in Thailand.

By all his mentors' accounts, Kong Le respected Americans, and advisors favorably judged the captain's activities, attitude, and moral attributes. They considered him a very bright person, a thinker, concise in speech and action, neat in appearance, and a consummate leader who commanded respect. Furthermore, the quiet leader did not drink, smoke, or gamble. He stressed health issues and honesty among his men. Buried in after-action reports, U.S. Special Forces advisors asserted that Lao higher ups tended to malign the Kong Le's soldiers; that they failed to adequately support his unit during field operations, continuously placed his men at risk, and ultimately held them responsible for setbacks when superior enemy forces prevailed on the battlefield. Additional grievances cited by Kong Le's subordinates, Lieutenants Thong My and Deuane, declared that military staff leaders unduly criticized the Second Battalion instead of praising their heroic contributions during past Sam Neua and Pakse operations, and the escape of "Red" Prince, Souvannavong. Bitter criticism arose regarding pay deficiency during the preceding three months. The captain also expressed anger regarding black market churning of military goods supposedly allocated for his men, but never received. He firmly believed that high-level criminals diverted paratrooper jump boots earmarked for his troops and sold them at a profit to Pathet Lao sources, while his men wore inferior sneakers and shower shoes during airborne and offensive operations. He also expressed distress that no proper medical attention or facilities existed to benefit his men.

At joint nightly critiques over a bottle of beer with the American sergeant major adviser, Kong Le and junior officers' frustrations gradually surfaced and festered. Originally intended as a form of catharsis, the officers vented their emotions during these sessions, while ostensibly jesting and speculating about overthrowing the haughty jerks in Vientiane. In reality, their complaints and proposals to prevail over the corruption and incompetence developed into far more than just humor. Some speculated that in the process, perhaps American advisors

had unwittingly sown the seeds of rebellion, which fomented and resulted in the August coup.

In retrospect, some Western theorists, without much hard evidence, and largely based on General Phoumi's accusations, harbored concern that Kong Le had succumbed to communist ideology long before any coup occurred. In addition to his verbal attack on Kong Le, Phoumi also announced formation of a Counter Coup Committee. He also solicited and gained troop support in all military regions except Military Region Five. Helping to tip the scales in his favor, he guaranteed military salaries and declared an intention to reclaim Vientiane.¹⁰

Air America personnel in town heard a few shots when Kong Le took over the city. No one worried or panicked because gunfire was common during most nights and constituted no real threat or disorder to the American community. Moher, Bade, and Weinberg snoozed in the helicopter crew cottage when notification of the coup d'état filtered down to their level. Initially elated that Kong Le would "kick ass and take names," they speculated that the elimination of rampant corruption, and incarceration of a few dishonest manipulators, would certainly follow. Before long, however, the Air America Operations Manager ordered them to prepare for evacuation to Bangkok. Kong Le personally reinforced the necessity to depart the city by advising the pilots that because Commanding General Kham Korn possessed sizeable opposing units and had seized the Mekong River town of Paksane, in all likelihood, a genuine shooting conflict would soon develop.

Aptly recounting the Lao situation, one anonymous "philosopher of the day" later described the state of affairs to Captain Tom Moher postulating:

"It is not because the communists are so good that they win all the wars of social unrest; it is because the other side is so appalling, and they keep getting worse. Communists, therefore, take advantage of political and military

¹⁰ Segment Sources:

Arthur Dommen, Conflict 141-142.

Dr. Stanley Sandler, Interview Sergeant Roy Mathews (Fort Bragg: U.S. Army Special Operations Command, History and Museums, Project # 1989) 11, 13.

William C. Maus, Notes for Captain Walker {concerning Kong Le} (Fort Bragg: U.S. Army Special Operations Command, History and Museums).

Time Magazine, The Awakening, 06/26/64.

Andrea Savada, ed. *Laos, A Country Study, A Deeping Split* (Washington: Federal Research

unrest. They harshly discipline their leaders. Then it becomes a simple matter to overthrow any government, particularly in this part of the world." ¹¹

CONFUSION REIGNS

In the midst of escalating confusion, the politically and administratively naive Kong Le realistically acknowledged that he could never manage Laos without assistance. In a quandary, he consulted everyone close to him on how to proceed. Seizing the opportunity, leftist leader Quinim Pholsena provided the most influence. Ultimately, Kong Le acted. He professed a desire for a united Laos, free from all foreign influence. Convinced that neutralism provided the only logical course for his country, the modest commander and those National Assembly delegates remaining in the city recommended to the people that King Savang Vatthana appoint former Prime Minister Prince Souvanna Phouma, a supposedly middle-of-the-road politician of royal blood, once again to the post from which he could establish a "neutral" coalition government. To balance the slate, prevent war, and calm the situation, Souvanna later proposed installing strongman General Phoumi as Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of the Interior. ¹²

Suspecting arrest or an assassination attempt once he returned to Vientiane, and despite USG State Department's displeasure, General Nosavan refused to accept the proffered posts. Further complicating the country's future, directly after the coup Phoumi flew to Savannakhet to establish a Rightist military force and political government in exile.

On 14 August, Agency operative Jack Mathews, working in the PEO office since October 1958, and active in upcountry work with the RLA and Vang Pao, was assigned to Savannakhet to work with the PEO and Special Forces teams who were tasked to assist General Nosavan's troops in recapturing Vientiane. During this critical

Division, Library of Congress, 07/94.

¹¹ Tom Moher Tapes courtesy of Bill Leary, who obtained the classic tapes from former Air America helicopter pilot Tony Byrne.

¹² Roger Hilsman, *To Move a Nation: The Politics of Foreign Policy in the Administration of John F Kennedy*, Doubleday, 1967, 123.
Hugh Toye 144-145.

period, Mathews continued to fly upcountry in the Helio Courier with Captain Ron Suthpin to meet with Major Vang Pao and the White Star team at Khang Khay on the Plain of Jars. The mission included retaining Vang pao and other RLA officers' support for General Nosavan against Kong Le. ¹³

During the evening of 10 August, hoping to gain support for his movement, Phoumi met with Thailand's Field Marshall Sarit Thanarat, U.S Embassy counselor Leonard Unger (who was assigned the Vientiane U.S Embassy Ambassador during July 1962 and served until November 1964), and other Thai and American officials. Phoumi was confident that the government at Luang Prabang controlled all the FAL except those in Vientiane. However, he was concerned about the disposition of several hundred Pathet Lao located fifty to seventy-five miles northwest of Vientiane, and the possibility that they may have joined the coup group. To suppress the rebellion, the general outlined a joint airborne-ground plan to retake Wattay Airport and then Vientiane, but he required funds and other assets to support this goal.

"General Phoumi, defense minister in the Somsanith government, told American and Thai officials in Ubon, Thailand that he planned to gather a force of 600 paratroopers for a drop on Vientiane airfield, which would be reinforced by an airlift of infantry troops. Phoumi plans to place these elements under the command of Colonel Sourith, commander of the Laotian air arm, who has just returned from the United States. An American Embassy observer notes, however, that Sourith appeared reluctant to undertake such a mission and had expressed high regard for Captain Kong Le, the leader of the Vientiane revolutionaries." ¹⁴

To fulfill the manpower requirement, he asked for transport of the Lao training group ERWAN, then at Lopburi, Thailand, to Savannakhet, and necessary supplies shipped from Thai stocks to support his plan.

Since USG was very concerned regarding the RLG's division, and Thai leaders

¹³ Letter from Jack Mathews to William Leary, 03/24/93.

¹⁴ CIA Daily Brief, Laos, 08/12/60. It was noted that insufficient planes were available to Phoumi Nosavan (three C-47s). Except for Phoumi, there was little support among many political and military Lao leaders anxious for a counteroffensive. Instead, a settlement was believed the viable alternate.

seemed unimpressed by Phoumi's proposals, there was serious consideration given to helping him reclaim Vientiane by force. The general represented the only viable military alternative to forfeiting years of effort and substantial American aid to maintain a free Laos. In addition, there was evidence of neutralism among the people, increased Pathet Lao infiltration to the north and west of Vientiane, and anti-foreign feeling among both the military and the people, that could turn against conservative politicians. There was a strong possibility that a political left-wing minority might control Kong Le's troops. In a least desirable scenario, the Pathet Lao might regard the divided Lao army and the disruption of government leadership as an opportunity to gain control of the country.

In the interest of supporting Phoumi and increasing a RLG bargaining position in negotiations, Ambassador Leonard Unger requested State to authorize the immediate use of Bangkok-based Civil Air Transport aircraft to move Lao paratroopers from Lopburi to Savannakhet. A one-time event, this would not include any further troop movements. The positive and timely action would also portray resolve to Thai leaders of USG support to Phoumi, and overall determination against communist domination of free countries.

On Saturday, State twixed the American Embassy in Vientiane specifying that authorization to use Civil Air Transport planes to move ERAWAN trained Lao paratroops to Seno was conditional on RLG agreement. Additionally, further movement or deployment of the troops would be contingent on a satisfactory plan approved by the United States and the Royal Lao Government.¹⁵

While Ambassador Brown's confused U.S Embassy staff in Vientiane, expecting the worst, hastily burned classified papers, U.S. sponsored RLA training teams located at outlying sites throughout the country learned of the coup over single

¹⁵ Segment Sources:

Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Chronological Summary of Significant Events Concerning the Laotian Crisis, First Installment 9 August 1960 to 31 January 1961* (Revised Version) Historical Division Joint Secretariat Joint Chiefs of Staff, 27 February 1961, Revision 23 April. 1961, Document is slightly redacted and is found on-line in the Virtual Vietnam Archive of the Vietnam Project at Texas Tech University, Lubbock, Texas 1.
Telegram, Chief JUSMAG Thailand to State, 08/10/60.
State Parsons to Dillon, The Situation in Laos, 08/12/60.
Telegram Unger to State, 08/12/60; Telegram State (Herter) to Vientiane/Bangkok Embassies, 08/13/60.

side band radios. Countrywide training immediately ceased, while the Americans paused in limbo for official word on what action to take next. Turmoil reigned supreme for three to four days, as Vientiane and Bangkok Embassies evaluated the upheaval, and Lao soldiers wandered the streets and surrounded airports.¹⁶ At the same time, diplomatic messages ricocheted frantically around the world, while the State Department attempted to determine which faction to support.

Because of the potential danger to 600 American government officials and dependents, and 500 Filipino contract employees in Laos should the situation spin out of control, request for a military aircraft evacuation standby was forwarded to President Eisenhower. At the time, there were six twin-engine planes in Thailand and Vietnam standing by to perform evacuation flights. It was judged that most individuals could be moved from Laos to safety in a few days if local authorities allowed the aircraft to commence the personnel movement.¹⁷

Among demands for the Royal Lao Government to resign, General Ouane Rathikoune, head of the Royal Lao Army, returned to the administrative capital on the 13th to meet with Souvanna Phouma and Kong Le. Closely guarded and bullied, Assembly members remaining in Vientiane elected to dissolve the pro-Western cabinet. When this information reached Luang Prabang, RLG members there declared the vote illegal and refused to resign. A distraught King Vattana threatened to abdicate. A counter proposal was offered by RLG-Luang Prabang members to go before the Assembly and resign if so voted. However, this action was contingent on the rebels withdrawing from the city and restoring Vientiane services to the original government. This was rejected by the Revolutionary High Command.

From his Savannakhet headquarters, Phoumi indicated that his special agents and teams had initiated psychological warfare in Vientiane. Should negotiations and the psychological war fail, claiming 6,000 troops under his command, he was prepared to initiate a battalion airborne attack on Wattay Airport, followed by airlifted units,

¹⁶ Roy Mathews 12.

¹⁷ Christian Herter, Memorandum for the President, Request for Standby Orders to use Military Transportation for Possible Evacuation of American Citizens in Laos, 08/12/60.

and five ground infantry battalions. ¹⁸

Prime Minister Tiao Somsanith submitted his resignation.

"The rebel-controlled Vientiane radio has announced that King Savang has designated National Assembly President Souvanna Phouma to form a new government. This action follows Savang's acceptance on 14 August of the resignation of the Somsanith government, which had received a vote of no confidence the previous day from the assembly in Vientiane. The assembly's vote was 'unanimous,' apparently had been forced by the rebel Kong Le group controlling Vientiane, and Premier Somsanith and other government leaders in Luang Prabang initially dismissed it as illegal. The king presumably acted to avert a military showdown, which was becoming increasingly likely with the failure of repeated efforts to negotiate a settlement with Khong Le..." ¹⁹

Princes Boun Oum Na Champassak and Souvanna Phouma's names were submitted as choices to fill the position. The King rejected this, but recanted his objection after discussion regarding the country's future, and only Souvanna was proposed for the Premiership. ²⁰

On Monday, Souvanna at first indicated that he would not entertain a military representative as Minister of Defense in his civil government. In addition, it did not appear that the Neo Lao Hak Sat politicians would be invited to join the government.

A victory parade was conducted by citizens and paratroopers in tanks, Jeeps, and armored cars. Headed by Kong Le, it moved through town to the National Assembly building. Following a short demonstration, it dissolved.

Wattay Airport remained closed to normal traffic. Paratroopers continued to control key installations in town. Roadblocks on access roads were still manned, but by fewer soldiers. With the soldiers soon becoming sloppy and inattentive in their duties, reports indicated that numerous Pathet Lao soldiers were infiltrating Vientiane.

On the domestic front, there was some hoarding and speculation in Vientiane.

¹⁸ One of several CIA Bulletins generated during the period.

¹⁹ CIA Bulletin, Laos, 08/15/60.

²⁰ Souvanna Phouma engineered the short-lived integration settlement with the communist Pathet Lao dissidents while premier in 1957.

The banks remained closed and kip was in short supply. Shops were open for civilians, but dealt only in cash.

The National Assembly convened during the morning of 16 August where Souvanna proposed his cabinet of experienced individuals. He would assume the multiple positions of Prime Minister, Defense, and Veterans; followed by Boun Oum as Secretary of State; Meo leader Touby Lyfong (often referred to by Americans as the Meo King) as Minister of Justice, Religious Affairs, and Information; and Quinim Pholsena as Minister of Interior, Sports, Youth, and Public Administration..

Souvanna's agenda was ambitious, primarily stressing the importance of national reconciliation. He believed the Assembly would accept his cabinet by the 17th, with later royal installation. As a peaceful measure, the Prince hoped to coax Phoumi to join his government. At any rate, he informed Ambassador Brown that the government was provisional and would resign when full peace was reestablished.

In the meantime, one of two operational FAL C-47s dropped Phoumist leaflets, written in French and Lao, around the airport and city. The propaganda announced the formation of the "Committee Against the Revolutionary Group," composed of Lao military officers with General Nosavan as chairman. Kong Le had forced the resignation of the government and opened the door to foreign domination. The leaflets disturbed locals, and some people departed Vientiane for Thailand.

Later the same day, General Phoumi sent PEO Chief, Brigadier General John A. Heintges, his war plan. In it he delineated plans to retake the city and move north with five battalions against what he claimed were increasing numbers of rebels. Employing troops from Savannakhet, Paksane, and Luang Prabang, the attack was planned to commence on 20 or 21 August. However, the implementation of the method of movement was suspect. It was the monsoon season, Phoumi required air transportation, and the ERAWAN troops required for the plan to succeed were still training in Thailand. In addition, LP forces were at least five days away from Vientiane by road. It seemed unlikely that he could meet the timing.

PEO projected that the plan could work if sufficient aircraft and the French-controlled Seno airbase were made available. Seno was essential to the plan, and Phoumi requested that the French supply him with ammunition, use of the radio station, and other items. However, French political policy supported the new government in

Vientiane. Therefore, a directive from Paris denied Seno's use or supplies to other than legal RLG sources.

In the end Phoumi was advised that USG, still opting for a negotiated settlement, was not yet prepared to support a military move to retake Vientiane or prevent establishment of a new government. ²¹

Exacerbating kingdom problems, on 16 August, following plans for the formation of a new Lao government with Souvanna Phouma the apparent Prime Minister, Pathet Lao guerrilla forces, supported by North Vietnamese cadres, began initiating plans to seize and control Houa Phan Province, better known as Sam Neua Province.

THE PATHET LAO ADVERSARY

A majority of Pathet Lao forces, the military arm of the Neo Lao Hak Sat political organization, were located along the lengthy Lao-North Vietnamese border. Movement was difficult through the heavily inundated jungled mountains, particularly during the wet season. For obvious reasons, the FAL troops rarely ventured into these areas.

A Pathet Lao-controlled area fifty to seventy-five miles north of Vientiane contained an estimated 600 enemy and was employed as a forward base for operations on the Vientiane flood plain area.

The movement was estimated to have 3,000 trained men organized into combat units. An additional 6,000 poorly trained and armed sympathizers could be activated for operations.

²¹ CIA Telegram, Lao Situation Report, 1900 hours, 08/15/60.
CIA Telegram, Lao Situation Report, 1900 hours, 08/16/60; CINCPAC to State (Chapman, Laos desk), 08/16/60.

The overall military capability of the Pathet Lao was limited to small unit guerrilla type operations. The restricted number of combat units was scattered throughout the country. They possessed no transportation facilities, only limited supplies, were deficient in both weapons and ammunition, and evidenced logistical problems. They did have the capability to increase local operations, but were unable to mass in any particular area.

In light of inadequate Pathet Lao capabilities, it was estimated that the communists possessed only a delaying capability in opposing Phoumi's counter-coup operation. Any delaying operations would consist of hit-and-run guerrilla raids. Near term, only the Pathet Lao located in the Vang Vieng area could threaten Phoumi's forces.

Over time, the North Vietnamese could provide assistance in the form of troops. However, evidence suggested that logistic, communication, and advice would be more likely. ²² USG observers were watching closely. Within two days of enemy movements in Sam Neua, to counter any further communist moves in this region and perhaps exploit the coup, U.S. Pacific Fleet units deployed to sea. Calculated to exhibit USG force, with helicopter squadron HMR-162 onboard the USS *Hornet*, the Seventh Fleet steamed into the South China Sea off South Vietnam, and essentially remained in the region for the next three months. ²³

THE AIR AMERICA OPERATION RELOCATES SOUTH

While Kong Le's forces consolidated their stranglehold on the administrative capital, the Air America operation experienced increasing difficulty functioning in the hostile environment pervading Vientiane. Therefore, on 20 August 1960 personnel transferred all remaining aircraft and items deemed critical for flight operations to

²² Joint Chief of Staff (Allen) Memorandum to Director Far East Region, Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs, Intelligence Estimate on Pathet Lao Combat Capability, 08/19/60.

²³ Edward Marolda, 46.

Don Muang Airport, where established maintenance facilities and programs already serviced various aircraft types. Crew billeting concentrated in Company-rented rooms in town at the Plaza Hotel, located on a parallel road a stone's throw from the Civil Air Transport and Air America offices on Pat Pong Road. Occasionally, overflow crews stayed overnight (RON) at the Erawan Hotel. ²⁴

Air America crews resumed helicopter flight operations in southern Laos soon after the initial shocks to the operation, and Kong Le declared an end to his coup. With only two helicopters operational at any time, H-19 crews rotated weekly to Pakse or Savannakhet in support of General Phoumi and U.S. Special Forces training activities throughout the region. A few Filipino mechanics permanently resided in Pakse, performing daily servicing and light maintenance for both helicopters and fixed wing aircraft. At the end of a RON period, pilots ferried machines to Bangkok for more detailed maintenance inspections and a crew change. Missions during this period included flying payrolls from Pakse and Savannakhet to easterly FAL troop positions near the Vietnamese border and Khong Island, far to the south. A Frenchman, Michel, hired specifically by USAID to interpret for non-French-speaking Americans, often accompanied pilots during missions from the river towns.

A low intensity war in constant flux, coupled with poor field communications, required a helicopter pilot to carefully distill Customer mission requirements and motives. Most briefings, if they were available, neglected to update flight personnel concerning recent intelligence. ²⁵ For this reason, helicopter pilots briefed each other on latest developments during aircraft relief or down time. Covering extensive territory over the course of a day, Air America Helio Courier pilots provided an additional wealth of pertinent information to crews regarding military situations. The pilots frequently discussed questionable areas face-to-face, while on the ground at refueling points, or over the radio while airborne to a mission site. Because of the high altitudes flown, fixed wing pilots, driving larger planes, only provided

²⁴ RON: Remain overnight at an outstation was abbreviated as RON. Since RON was the common term used by crews, it will be subsequently referred to in this form.

²⁵ Customer: Although normally accorded to Agency types, the term Customer was used generically, pertaining to various representatives for whom the pilot worked like USAID or Requirements Office (RO).

information regarding local sites where they dropped loads.

Many times, pilots launched without adequate mission briefings. One payroll assignment to an isolated outpost northeast of Thakhet illustrates problems confronting these early helicopter operations. The flight path entailed a route through or over needle-tipped karsts to an isolated site located at the "T" intersection of Routes 12 and 23, six miles south of Mugia Pass and in close proximity to the North Vietnamese-Lao border Demilitarized Zone. Later in the war, because of its logistical importance, the area would become the focal point of an intense Air Force interdiction campaign. Captain Abadie had never previously worked in the remote area, but assumed that his passenger knew the location. Equipped with an incomplete chart, but able to clearly observe terrain, and thus be generally aware of their position, the two managed to locate the outpost.²⁶ However, highly disconcerting to both men, ten-minutes elapsed before troops managed to display a proper signal panel. Noting only a few people on the landing zone, and fully expecting trouble, the apprehensive Captain descended in a tight circle and landed directly over the panel. The landing zone proved secure and the paymaster conducted his business without incident.

Two days later, this time following a seemingly good briefing that depicted known enemy locations and cautioned what to avoid, Ab launched to the identical outpost with a U.S. Army West Point graduate--a major he would fly with frequently over succeeding months. Upon arrival, he circled patiently for some time awaiting an identifying marker panel, but failing to observe a signal or ground movement, he departed the area. During the long return trip to Thakhet, Abadie, perplexed and suspicious, mulled over events at the landing zone. From prior experience in similar situations, he assumed that Special Forces people knew, or suspected, the RLA unit had abandoned the position, but had failed to inform him of this before or after the flight. The trip constituted helicopter crews' final flight there for many years.

The extensive trail system, later generically called the Ho Chi Minh Trail by

²⁶ Maps: Charts for pilots were often difficult to obtain. Much of Laos had never been adequately plotted, and old French maps had relied on word of mouth from missionaries, or wandering happy souls. Consequently, topographic details in regions close to the border were displayed in white and not reliable.

Theater participants, coveted by North Vietnamese leaders for unimpeded movement of men and materiel into South Vietnam, necessitated eliminating RLA positions. The target soon fell without resistance. Obtaining RLA territory proved relatively effortless for the enemy. At times, in order to cause a unit to flee, PL merely radioed their intentions to take a position. On other occasions, Lao troops heard a few bursts of AK-47 fire from the jungle. Either situation provided sufficient cause for government troops, recalling William Shakespeare's Sir John Falstaff's "better part of valor," to hastily abandon a position--aka to run like hell. ²⁷

STATE ET. AL. CONCERNS

On the eighteenth, the Washington Watch Committee concluded:

"Although the Kong le revolutionary faction has succeeded in setting up a new government with approval by the National Assembly (but not yet the King), the situation in Laos remains confused. General Phoumi intends to defy the new government. He apparently controls enough troops to retake Vientiane, provided he can obtain sufficient money, supplies, and transport. The Pathet Lao has not yet intervened effectively but has the military capability of further complicating the situation. There is still no evidence of any Chinese communist or North Vietnamese intentions overtly to intervene. Nevertheless, the situation remains favorable to communist exploitation." ²⁸

Four days later intelligence reports revealed:

"Souvanna Phouma apparently is moving to meet at least some of General Phoumi's preconditions for negotiations. He has reinstated General Ouane as armed forces commander and has placed him in charge of security in Vientiane, with Captain Khong Le serving as Ouane's 'temporary deputy.' Ouane's freedom of action under such an arrangement is questionable. Khong Le's paratroopers are withdrawing from the city and are being replaced by civil and military police and possibly regular army units as

²⁷ Professor Bill Leary Notes derived from CJ Abadie Interview on 06/10/90.
CJ Abadie Interviews with Author, 05/30/98, 01/22/99, 08/21/02.
CJ Abadie Emails to Author, 02/16/00, 02/18/00.

²⁸ CIA Daily Brief, Laos, 08/18/60.

well. Souvanna claims that either he or Ouane will meet Phoumi in Savannakhet as soon as the 'arrangement' now in progress in Vientiane is completed.

Meanwhile, Phoumi continues to apply pressure on the Vientiane regime by moving up his troops, although the location of his units is the subject to conflicting reports. He may interpret Souvanna's conciliatory gestures as a sign of weakness and hence raise his price for a settlement."²⁹

Equipped with this current information, USG administration personnel recognized that by 22 August the Lao situation was entering a critical phase. Furthermore, the Royal Lao Army had to be maintained to resist communism within the country, and the extraterritorial meddling. Therefore, recommendations to strengthen General Phoumi were presented to ensure resolution of the crises and not strengthen pro-communist and neutralist elements. They included forwarding kip for army back pay and food supplies, and preparing to send funds to cover August pay and food. In addition, re-establishment of the use of MAP supplies in Thailand to supply Lao forces was required. Recommendations could be implemented by respective departments and the CIA.³⁰

A high-level meeting between State representatives and the JCS was held at the Pentagon on Tuesday to discuss the latest developments in Laos. The attendees learned that an amicable meeting between General Phoumi, Premier Souvanna Phouma, General Ouane (titular head of the Vientiane military), the United Nations representative in Laos, and a representative of Kong Le was held on the 23rd in Savannakhet.³¹ Although sketchy, first reports indicated an agreement had been reached to restore order in the country. Phoumi indicated that the first priority was reuniting the military commands, and then holding a National Assembly meeting in Luang Prabang. Upon learning that Kong

²⁹ CIA Daily Brief, Laos, 08/22/60.

³⁰ CIA Daily Brief, Laos, 08/22/60.

³¹ ISA, Irwin to Dillon, 08/22/60

³² CIA Daily Brief, Laos, 08/23/60. There was concern that Kong Le would join the Pathet Lao if General Phoumi continued to counter his coup. Moreover, the bulk of the 800 battle-hardened troops of Kong Le's 2nd Paratroop Battalion had reportedly set up a defense perimeter several miles outside Vientiane, and Pathet Lao elements were apparently in blocking position astride road and river approaches to the capital.

Le's troops had provided arms to the Pathet Lao, Phoumi requested their return.³²

The meeting ended on an upbeat note.

Military forces on both sides were active. During the same day as the meeting in Savannakhet, Kong Le's men were moving to the outskirts of Vientiane. Phoumi's Luang Prabang troops advanced south and seized a Mekong River port seventy-five miles from Vientiane. Additionally, it was revealed that Phoumist forces had occupied Paksane.³³

Despite the welcome news, no one in Washington could deduce the implications of the Savannakhet meeting, and there was general support for Phoumi. Souvanna Phouma was deemed weak, and it was recognized that the army's integrity under Phoumi, the only leader seemingly with courage, was paramount. There was some concern about the deteriorated tactical military situation in proximity to Vientiane. The entire situation depended on Pathet Lao involvement; something had to be done quickly for Phoumi. Furthermore, USG had to be alert to identify foreign intervention.

Three days after the Savannakhet meeting an Agency bulletin disclosed:

"Serious obstacles have arisen to implementation of the 23 August agreement between premier designate Souvanna Phouma and General Phoumi for a compromise settlement of the Laotian crisis. Honest misinterpretation of the loosely drawn agreement may be part of the picture, but the trouble stems essentially from a continuing power struggle between the rightist, leftist, and neutralist factions involved.

The communist [PL], fearful that the staunchly anti-communist Phoumi may emerge from the crisis with his influence virtually intact, had denounced the agreement as undercutting the authority of the neutralist Souvanna government and as being a great danger to the nation...The possibility that the [PL] will resort to force to prevent consummation of a compromise settlement between Souvanna and Phoumi cannot be

³³ Following the coup, hoping to shore up defenses in the local area against possible attack from Luang Prabang and Savannakhet, neutralist soldiers distributed 3,000 weapons stored in Vientiane to village sympathizers living near the capital. In the process, many arms were undoubtedly issued to the Pathet Lao, which greatly diminished Kong Le's balance of power and skewed it toward communist factions. Beset with such a formidable armed potential, there was increased danger the capital would be dominated by the Pathet Lao.

excluded. In any case, the Pathets are not likely to heed Souvanna's 25 August appeal to lay down their arms in the interests of national unity.

Phoumi, meanwhile, is said to have stated on 25 August that Souvanna was not keeping his word and obviously was not master of the situation in [Vientiane]...Phoumi and Souvanna are also in disagreement over arrangements for extending pay and provisions to the Lao troops in the field; each is seeking to control the operation for prestige reasons" ³⁴

Previously, Phoumi had requested a hundred tons of rice delivered to the RLA troops in Sam Neua Province. A question arose about whether to mark the three Civil Air Transport C-47s with an Erawan, indicating their belonging to Phoumi's air force, or to use CAT C-46s with original markings. ³⁵ It was considered better to use C-46s on direct charter to Phoumi, as this had been done for years to supply the Lao army.

³⁶

Subject to Ambassador Brown's approval, CIA agreed to conduct the rice airlift. However, communication in the northern area was nonexistent, and nothing was known about the situation there. CAT C-46 crews were favored for the drops, as it would be more expeditious, and provisioning the army on a humanitarian basis would show USG's continuing interest (to Phoumi). ³⁷

On the 26th, Graham Parsons forwarded a message to the Secretary of State summarizing the current Lao situation. He began by stating that within twenty-four hours of the 23rd Savannakhet meeting, it was clear that Phoumi and Souvanna differed on what had been previously agreed. State was still attempting to accommodate both parties, but it was becoming more evident that resolution of the situation might require force. The present objective centered on isolating Kong Le and convincing interested parties that he was the cause of all the problems. Then, if military action was deemed necessary, it was more likely to be supported by Lao and international opinion.

³⁴ CIA Bulletin, Situation in Laos, 08/26/60.

³⁵ Erawan: A three headed elephant on a red background on the Lao flag. In this case it would be a logo that portrayed Lao ownership.

³⁶ State-Joint Chiefs of Staff Meeting on Laos, 08/23/60.

³⁷ State Memorandum (Parsons), Airlifting Rice to Laos, 08/23/60.

Kong Le increasingly became a tool of Pathet Lao schemes. It was believed that if Souvanna lost his position and an anti-communist



Air America B-912D C-46 cargo plane with no organizational markings parked on a muddy Wattay Airport, Vientiane ramp against a backdrop of gathering storm clouds.

government was installed, Kong Le would likely be drawn into the Pathet Lao forces. In such a situation, unless he could eliminate Kong Le's influence, Souvanna Phouma would be unable to independently negotiate with Phoumi or govern properly. Moreover, there was evidence that Pathet Lao forces were assembling in the Vientiane area and Kong Le's representatives were in contact with them. Some had reportedly already been integrated into the defenses.

Thus far, Kong Le's coup had not spread far beyond the city and his hard core of troops. General Phoumi appeared to be the accepted army leader outside the city.

Politically, a majority of the previous Somsanith government, as well as twenty-five of the fifty-nine deputies from the National Assembly, had relocated south to Savannakhet..."many more wished to do so, but were held under house arrest; it was also reported that Prince Bouam Oum and Touby Lyfoung had left [Vientiane] to join General Phoumi." ³⁸ It was expected that the National Assembly would join at Luang Prabang at month's end and vote for a new government in which Phoumi would assume a prominent position. ³⁹

Communist support of the coup, and Souvanna's designation as Prime Minister, had been evidenced by broadcasts from a clandestine PL radio station and Radio Hanoi. There had been no indications of renewed PL insurgency like what took place in 1959.

State forwarded a message of confidence to Phoumi and expressed to both the General and Souvanna the support for their efforts at reaching an agreement. USG addressed the issue of paying and provisioning troops in the field, as it was imperative to maintain a standing army to prevent the Pathet Lao from seizing the country.

Agreements to implement this failed, as both leaders desired credit for supporting the army. Therefore, the Prime Minister controlled Vientiane funds, while Phoumi controlled those allocated for his troops. Steps were underway to convince Souvanna to have General Ouane reestablish security in Vientiane by attempting to

³⁸ Keesing.

³⁹ Joint Chiefs of Staff files, 6.

recover arms the 2nd Battalion had issued to outlying villagers. Next was to have Kong Le's battalion return to their barracks. And lastly, to have General Ouane assemble sufficient troops to guard the city against any future coup by Kong Le or attack by Pathet Lao. ⁴⁰

"General Phoumi, leader of the countercoup forces in Savannakhet reached agreement on 26 August by telephone with General Ouane in Vientiane over the procedures to be applied in the dispensation of pay and rice to the Laotian Armed Forces. Under this agreement, pay for troops loyal to Phoumi--in effect all except those in the [VTE] area--will be channeled through Phoumi's headquarters after release from the treasury in [VTE]. To gain this concession, of considerable importance in terms of prestige, Phoumi abandoned his previously adamant objection to the proposed use of Vientiane controlled Air Laos planes to transport rice to his troops.

Agreement on these points has removed the initial stumbling block to implementation of the Souvanna-Phoumi understanding of 23 August. While a final solution is still far from assured, both sides have become sufficiently encouraged to schedule an early session of the national Assembly--reportedly for 29 August--at the royal capital of Luang Prabang. The most likely upshot of such a session would be the formation of a new government fusing both the Souvanna and the Phoumi groups. In scheduling the session, both sides are apparently proceeding on the assumption that in the interim Captain Khong Le will have been brought under adequate control in [VTE].

Ouane admitted to the American army attaché on 25 August that in carrying out his responsibility for establishing the defense of Vientiane under the Souvanna-Phoumi agreement his big problem was Kong Le. Ouane said that Kong le trusts nobody and that he has had to use extreme care and move slowly in his dealings with him. Ouane is expecting momentarily the arrival of Colonel Sourith, Khong Le's nominal chief as commander of Laos' airborne forces. Sourith will attempt to reestablish his personal control over Kong Le's paratroopers." ⁴¹

"Key members of the two contending political factions in Laos headed by General

⁴⁰ Assistant Secretary of State, J. Graham Parsons to the Secretary, Situation in Laos, 08/26/60.

⁴¹ CIA Bulletin, 08/27/60.

Phoumi and Souvanna Phouma are converging on the royal capital of Luang Prabang to resolve their differences before a reunited National Assembly, now scheduled to open sessions on 30 August. Phoumi, accompanied by 22 assembly deputies and other principal supporters, arrived from [SVK] on 28 August. Premier-designate Souvanna and 34 fellow deputies from [VTE] are scheduled to arrive on 28 August. Both Phoumi and Souvanna are anxious to have private discussions with King Savang prior to the assembly deliberations, since his attitude could be a decisive factor.

Spokesmen for both factions claim the loyalty of a majority of the deputies, but the attitude of many is open to question since party affiliations have been severely shaken by the 9 August coup. Mutual suspicion and personal antagonisms are still running high between the principal leaders of the two groups, but there is cautious optimism among American observers in Laos that a compromise settlement is in the making. The assembly apparently will vote again on the motion of nonconference in the previous Somsanith government and on the investiture of the Souvanna cabinet which Phoumi asserts were originally vote under duress in [Vientiane].

Formation of a new government will be influenced by the fact that Captain Kong Le still retains considerable authority in the [Vientiane] area, despite the passing of overt control to General Ouane...Kong Le has relinquished command of the 2nd Parachute Battalion to a subordinate officer, apparently in order to concentrate on his position as Duane's deputy. Most of the paratroops are positioned on strategic approach routes several miles outside [VTE] where they reportedly are acting as cadres for irregular forces assisting in the capital defense..."⁴²

The Vientiane government ultimately swung back toward neutralism, and by the end of August Souvanna Phouma officially became the compromise government Prime Minister at the National Assembly gathering in Luang Prabang.

In an attempt to unify the government and to avoid civil war, officials selected General Phoumi Nosavan as Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of the Interior.

"Captain Kong Le has declared the new Souvanna Phouma cabinet, formed on 3-August in Vientiane, to be unsatisfactory, after having previously indicated his approval. Ouane, General Phoumi, and most members of the new cabinet are reported in

agreement that an attack on is 'one solution' if Kong le remains adamant.

Inasmuch as Souvanna, Ouane, Phoumi, and the king appear to have reached a new accommodation, reflected in the composition of the new cabinet, Kohn Le does seem to be politically isolated. Alliance with the [PL] would appear to be his only alternative to acceptance of the new government.

Despite Kong Le's last-minute obstructionism, officials in [Luang Prabang] are going ahead with the confirmation and investiture of the new government. The process should be completed in a day or so.

The new government is essentially a fusion of the eight-man cabinet Souvanna hastily formed in [Vientiane] two weeks ago and five representatives of the Phoumi group. In addition to the premiership, Souvanna has kept for himself the key foreign affairs and defense portfolios. As interior minister and vice premier, Phoumi will enjoy substantial influence in the new government, but considerably less than he had in the Somsanith government as defense minister. With General Ouane, the armed forces commander, assisting Souvanna as secretary of state for defense, Phoumi's role in army affairs may be greatly curtailed—a probable concession to Kong Le.

The rest of the cabinet is undistinguished. The strongest leftist influence will be Quinim Pholsena, the controversial leader of the left-wing neutralist Santiphab party, who will serve as minister of information.

Souvanna presumably remains committed to a program of strict neutrality and a new accommodation with the communist Pathet Lao. This program accords with his own views on how to stabilize the situation in Laos; it also has been insisted upon by Kong Le and his paratroopers. In addition to personal animosities in the new government the question of carrying out this program could be a source of serious contention between Souvanna and Phoumi and may eventually lead to a new crisis.”⁴³

“General Phoumi is bitter over the course of events in Laos and appears to be considering military action of some kind against the newly invested Souvanna Phouma government. Phoumi made threats at his headquarters in Savannakhet on 2 September to divide Laos in two. According to Phoumi, his compromise settlement with Souvanna Phouma was only to gain time, and if he returned to Vientiane, he would have no choice

⁴² CIA Bulletin, Situation in Laos, 08/29/60.

⁴³ CIA Bulletin, Laos, 08/31/60

by to 'uphold Souvanna Phouma's policy of making Laos red.'" ⁴⁴

"Premier Souvanna Phouma has told the American Ambassador that he is prepared to dismiss General Phoumi from the government as a rebel if Phoumi refuses to come to Vientiane. Souvanna claims Phoumi has no reason to fear for his personal safety if he returns, although Kong Le apparently still retains effective control of the capital and Pathet Lao influence in the evolving situation is becoming more pronounced. If Phoumi should decide to assume his post in the government, the [PL] may react by stepping up guerrilla activities. Souvanna is considering certain concessions to the Pathets' demands, including partial new election and recognition of the USSR." ⁴⁵

As recorded, Kong Le initially protested Phoumi's presence in the government, but in the interest of establishing and promoting peace, Souvanna changed the Captain's mind.

The new government was sworn in on 2 September in Vientiane. General Phoumi did not participate. He had returned to Savannakhet and would not journey to Vientiane until Kong Le's troops were removed from the city and it had returned to normal.

With invasion concerns continuing to pervade the Kingdom, General Phoumi formed a new Revolutionary Committee on 10 September with Prince Boun Oum as chairman at Savannakhet. Radio Savannakhet reported that the unilateral seizure of power and the cessation of constitutional rights stemmed from the Phouma government's failure to maintain a positive military position in the country. Amid rumors widely circulating of neutralist and Pathet Lao collaboration, hard line support for Phoumi and the government in exile continued to increase in other military regions. ⁴⁶

In addition to communist nations, France, Britain, Australia, and the U.S. overtly recognized the legality of Souvanna Phouma's post-coup neutral government. However, Thailand's Sarit and Vietnamese leaders refused to follow the same protocol.

⁴⁴ CIA Daily Brief, Laos, 09/05/60.

⁴⁵ CIA Daily Brief, Laos, 09/07/60.

⁴⁶ Hugh Toye, 149, 151.

Arthur Dommen, *Conflict*, 154.

Political unrest, coups and counter coups, along with American support, kept Phoumi in authority for an extended period. At the time, Phoumi's Lao army consisted of home guard troops in volunteer battalions (BV) and regular military infantry and paratroop battalions (BI, BP). Battalions were lumped into mobile groups (GM). Nosavan's military power rested mainly in Military Regions Three and Four, where southern troops were recruited and conscripted to serve in the North, the Plain of Jars, and the Vientiane region. ⁴⁷

SAM NEUA

Encouraged by Kong Le's coup and the political turmoil it generated, communist activity increased throughout the kingdom. By early September, Pathet Lao guerrilla units began re-establishing firm control in Sam Neua Province villages. Other units seized the remote Sop Nao garrison southwest of Dien Bien Phu. Communist guerrillas also moved into caves east of Thakhet, and other militants destroyed bridges along Route-13 well south of Pakse.

General Phoumi asserted that six battalions had infiltrated Houa Phan Province from North Vietnam, and five more Pathet Lao battalions were being withdrawn from the Vientiane region to join the forces in Sam Neua, Phong Saly, and upper Xieng Khouang.

Since contact with Sam Neua had been lost because of the fighting, on 17 September, Souvanna Phouma indicated that he would order delivery of supplies to the provincial town by cargo planes. ⁴⁸

In order to assuage government concerns:

"The Pathet Lao high command has ordered its units to stop fighting in those provinces--including Sam Neua--which are 'under the control of the government of Souvanna Phouma.' In choosing to consider Sam Neua loyal to Souvanna despite indications that military commanders there are loyal to General Phoumi, the [Pathet Lao] leadership may have been motivated by concern that additional military pressure at this time might serve to reunify the badly divided Lao army. The order calling for a cease fire left numerous loopholes in case the [PL] should decide to resume the

⁴⁷ Joint Chiefs of Staff, 8.
John Prados.

offensive in Sam Neua. The insurgents' propaganda activities in the province will be facilitated by the withdrawal of army troops from outlying posts to form a small defensive perimeter around Sam Neua town.

Premier Souvanna's cancellation of a planned cabinet meeting in [Luang Prabang] with the King on 19 September may have been influenced by an announcement over Phoumi's Radio Savannakhet that its 'liberating forces' were launching an [imminent] attack on [Vientiane]." ⁴⁹

The following day:

"King Savang has invited Laos' military leaders to meet in Luang Prabang in an effort to find a solution to the country's continuing crisis. While the meeting will deal ostensibly with the split in the army, the King reportedly will insist that the participants present their ideas regarding the closely related political situation. Most of the participants in such a meeting would probably side with Phoumi and could be expected to ask for Premier Phouma's resignation, a 'solution' the King himself desires but apparently has been reluctant to impose on his own initiative. The prospective participants have not yet responded to the King's invitation, but presumably they will feel constrained to heed his call.

Meanwhile, troops loyal to Phoumi apparently have clashed with [Vientiane] troops about sixty miles east of the capital." ⁵⁰

"General Phoumi on 26 September finally expressed some willingness to attend a meeting of military commanders in [LP] called by King Savang to work out a solution to the political crisis. On the same date, the King issued a decree dismissing Phoumi from the Souvanna cabinet. Although this could be merely a procedural matter, formalizing the cabinet's decision ten days ago to oust him, Phoumi could choose to interpret it as an affront that precludes any such meeting. Phoumi has informed Premier Sarit of Thailand that he would like to see Prince Boun Oum head any new Laotian cabinet, with Phoumi's followers dominating the military establishment, but this is probably a maximum negotiating position. Premier Souvanna Phouma, meanwhile, has made the first move toward opening diplomatic relations with the USSR..." ⁵¹

⁴⁸ Joint Chiefs of Staff.

⁴⁹ CIA Bulletin, Laos, 09/20/60.

⁵⁰ CIA Daily Brief, Laos, 09/21/60.

⁵¹ CIA Daily Brief, Laos, 09/27/60.

"General Phoumi and Prince Boun Oum are due to arrive in Luang Prabang on 28 September to begin consultations with representatives of the Souvanna Phouma government looking to a compromise agreement. Resolution of the many points at issue between the two groups will be difficult, and further meetings may well be necessary.

Meanwhile, Captain Kong Le remains in [Vientiane] in a position to oppose any solution not to his liking."⁵²

THE CONFLICT RESUMES

"Vientiane's action in dropping what are believed to be token groups of paratroopers behind Phoumi's lines in southern Laos could harden the attitude of the Phoumi-Boun Oum group even before the [Luang Prabang] talks get underway. Preliminary reports of increased fighting between the [Pathet Lao] and the Lao Army in Phong Saly and Sam Neua provinces are too sketchy to permit an assessment of its severity."⁵³

"Vientiane's claim that its troops have wrested control of Paksane [V-39] from General Phoumi's forces appears confirmed. Phoumi's troops have withdrawn to form a new defense line some 20 miles east of that town. Phoumi and Prince Boun Oum flew to Bangkok on 22 September for consultations with Thai Premier Sarit, possibly involving and urgent appeal for increased assistance in light of the military reverses at Paksane. Commentary by Moscow, Peiping, and Hanoi on the Laotian crisis is seeking to create an ominous atmosphere without, however, threatening direct bloc intervention."⁵⁴

With Phoumi's troops pushing northward toward Vientiane, enemy counter pressure continued on the Sam Neua region. Toward late September, bolstered by additional arms gained from the neutralists and North Vietnamese Army stiffeners, Pathet Lao troops resumed attacks in Sam Neua Province in force.

Vietnamese history recorded:

"After attacking and seizing a number of positions on the outer perimeter along the Lao-Vietnamese border to test the enemy's reaction and to try and win over the sympathy of Souvanna Phouma, on 24 September 1960, the battalion attacked and captured

⁵² CIA Daily Brief, Laos, 09/28/60.

⁵³ CIA Daily Brief, Laos, 09/28/60.

the Huoi [Houei] Thau high ground and used its 82mm mortars [effective range about three miles] to shell the [Sam Neua] airfield..." ⁵⁵

Discouraged by a purported airdrop of a few Kong Le paratroopers on the 28th, and the threat of being overrun, the 1,500-man garrison abandoned the town, and promptly withdrew south on Route-6. Shortly afterward, the units surrendered to the Pathet Lao at Moung Peun. ⁵⁶

Reports emanating from the Sam Neua area were sketchy at first:

"Sam Neua town, with its key airfield, has apparently fallen to the [PL] forces which have been gradually advancing on it since 1 September. The fate of the Nam Neua garrison is not clear, but it had earlier been reported planning to establish new [fall back] defense positions at Moung Peun, about 25 miles southwest of Sam Neua town. While Moung Peun is described as a good defensive position, support of troops there would probably present serious problems. It would be difficult to supply and reinforce the garrison by surface means, and Moung Peun's small airstrip is only marginally serviceable..."

Vientiane radio has broadcast a statement by Lieutenant Colonel. Kham Hou, military commander in Xieng Khouang Province, claiming that he has assumed command of the Second Military Region and pledging his loyalty to the Souvanna Phouma government. The region...has been loyal to General Phoumi's [Savannakhet] Revolutionary Committee. It is as yet unclear whether Kham Hou can legitimately speak for the whole region, but if the region has in fact swung to Souvanna, might also lead the Lao army forces in Sam Neua to negotiate a truce rather than offer further resistance to the [Pathet Lao].

Military commanders' representing the Souvanna regime and the [Savannakhet] Revolutionary Committee, led by Generals Ouane and Phoumi respectively, held a short meeting in [Luang Prabang] on 28 September which resulted in a ceasefire agreement between their forces. This meeting is to be followed within five days by full dress

⁵⁴ CIA Daily Brief, *Laos*, 09/23/60.

⁵⁵ Merle Pribbenow, *Translator of Vietnamese Military History*. 09/24/60

⁵⁶ Arthur Dommen, *Conflict*, 152-153.

Joint Chiefs of Staff, 22.

Andrea Savada, ed., *Laos, A Deepening Split*, 07/94.

conference of military and political leaders from both sides who will seek to resolve the substantive points at issue..."⁵⁷

"The capture on 28 September of Sam Neua town with its key airfield will give the communist [PL] important bargaining leverage in any peace talks with the royal Laotian government. The status of the Sam Neua garrison is not clear, but it had been reported planning to establish new defense positions at Moung Peun, about 20 miles southwest of Sam Neua town [on Route-6]. Support of this position would be extremely difficult because of its relative inaccessibility by surface means and because its small airstrip is only marginally serviceable. [At the time the King was making overtures to warring parties in Vientiane and Savannakhet to journey to Luang Prabang as a neutral location to talk and hopefully resolve their differences.] Vientiane radio claims, meanwhile, that there has been a revolt in the Second Military Region command structure and that the region, which has jurisdiction over Sam Neua and Xieng Khouang Provinces, has now swung its support to the Souvanna Phouma government. If this is true, Lao army forces in Sam Neua may negotiate a truce with the [Pathet Lao] rather than make a stand at Moung Peun."⁵⁸

North Vietnamese history continued:

"The enemy panicked and fled, and our forces pursued them as far as Moung Phon [Peun]. The entire enemy force in this area surrendered...All enemy weapons and equipment were captured. Sam Neua province, with 110,000 residents and an area of 5,700 square kilometers [342 miles], had been completely liberated."⁵⁹

Phoumi, without much bargaining power, and beset with a military reversal at Paksane, the imminent loss of Sam Neua, and defection of his troops in Xieng Khouang to the Souvanna government, agreed to a tenuous ceasefire at the Luang Prabang meeting. Despite the ceasefire agreement, Kong Le was not happy.

OCTOBER-- A CRITICAL MONTH

"An apparently rancorous exchange between Premier Souvanna Phouma and Captain Kong Le in two separate press conferences indicates that a showdown between the

⁵⁷ CIA Bulletin, The Situation in Laos, 09/29/60.

⁵⁸ CIA Daily Brief, Late Item, Laos, 09/29/60.

⁵⁹ Merle Pribbenow, Translator, Vietnamese History, 09/24/60.

Vientiane government and the paratrooper may be imminent. Kong Le announced that he would continue his offensive against the Phoumi forces east of Paksane despite the ceasefire reached at [Luang Prabang] and accused Souvanna of being 'very soft.' He warned that the 'people' would have to remove Souvanna if he did not 'lead his country in the right direction.' He also made slurring remarks about General Ouane, the armed forces commander and his ostensible chief. Souvanna subsequently retorted that Kong Le 'was making up stories. Do not talk about him. That will be decided by army headquarters.'

It is problematical whether Souvanna's top commanders--General Ouane and General Amkha, the [Vientiane] garrison commander--could win in any test of strength with Kong Le. Although the bulk of Kong Le's 2nd Paratroop Battalion is now outside of [Vientiane], he probably can count on the support of the numerous irregulars he armed in the period immediately after his 9 August coup d'état. He has also believed to have generated considerable popular support in the capital. In earlier phases of the crisis, moreover, neither Ouane nor Amkha showed much appetite for action against Kong Le. The scales might be tipped decisively against Kong Le, however, were Phoumi's forces east of Paksane to unite with Amkha's units in Vientiane.

Phoumi's Radio Savannakhet, meanwhile, has issued an appeal 'to our foreign friends' for help in the face of the alleged presence in Laos of three North Vietnamese units. Such statements, whether true or not, would be calculated to excite Thai Premier Sarit and would possibly be used by him to justify increased support.

British Ambassador Addis in [Vientiane] reports being informed by Souvanna that the USSR has accepted Laos' proposal that nonresident diplomatic relations be established. Souvanna claimed all he needed now was the approval of the King...The King's decision could well be delayed pending the outcome of political discussion that may result in a new government.

The Soviet counselor in Peiping recently told-redacted-that Peiping did not intend to intervene in Laos, but if the Chinese should decide to send troops to counter a United Nations move into Laos, the USSR would support Peiping 'even to the extent' of sending Soviet troops...

Moscow propaganda has emphasized the gravity of the Laotian situation and,

together with Peiping and Hanoi, is making an effort to forestall intervention by pro-Western neighbors or the United Nations while avoiding any specific threat of bloc counteraction." ⁶⁰

Agency intelligence dialogue recorded:

"The American Embassy reports indications that Laotian Army commanders representing the Souvanna Phouma government and the [Savannakhet] Revolutionary Committee are beginning to carry out their pledge, given to the King in [Luang Prabang] on 28 September to work toward the reunification of the army command structure and to present a common front toward the [PL].

Progress in this direction seems especially noticeable in the Second Military Region, which has jurisdiction over Sam Neua and Xieng Khouang provinces. Following the ouster of the pro-Savannakhet commander of that region on 28 September by his subordinate in Xieng Khouang, both sides apparently agreed to install General Amkha, who had been acting as [Vientiane] garrison commander, as temporary commander of the Second Military Region. He was ordered to launch a united effort, involving both pro-Vientiane and pro-Savannakhet elements, against the [Pathet Lao] in Sam Neua. According to press reports, the pro-Savannakhet garrison which abandoned Sam Neua town on 28 September and subsequently established itself at Moung Peun has declared its loyalty to [Vientiane]. It is presumably at Amkha's disposal for whatever action he chooses to take.

The actual military situation in Sam Neua remains obscure. The embassy reports no indication of any fighting after 28 September...[PL] guerrilla units may be in control of the town, although the area is nominally under the Souvanna government.

Tentative progress toward reunification of the army command structure could be quickly undone by Premier Souvanna's order calling for dismissal from the army of General Phoumi and 26 other pro-Savannakhet officers. This order is a follow-up of a previous warning issued by [Vientiane] that all officers must declare their loyalty to the Souvanna government by 30 September. The order is now before the King for signature. Souvanna probably does not expect the King to sign it and in all likelihood took this action merely as a tactical ploy; however, Phoumi may consider the order a

⁶⁰ CIA Bulletin, The Situation in Laos, 10/01/60.

grave personal affront and in any case might seize upon it as an excuse to end further effort at a compromise.

The Neo Lao Hak Sat [NLHS]--the Pathet Lao's legal political front--on 1 October announced its readiness to enter into immediate negotiations with the Souvanna government, professing itself satisfied that the [Vientiane] government had purged itself of representatives of the 'traitor' Phoumi. The communists apparently now feel themselves in a strong position to extract major concessions from Souvanna or, failing this, to gain representation in the forthcoming political talks under the King's aegis. They may even hope that NLHS leader Prince Souphannouvong will be included in the new government of national unity which the King is trying to promote. Willingness to entertain this possibility has in recent days been variously ascribed to all of the major participants in the current conflict, including Phoumi." ⁶¹

By the first week of October, the U.S. and Thailand ceased monetary aid to Laos. In return for cash grants, and following weak U.S. Embassy assurances that USG military equipment to Phoumi provided only a means to counter PL advances in the north, and not against Kong Le or to topple his government, the Prime Minister grudgingly acquiesced to the general's continued support (which, in fact, had never ceased). Political hyperbole begat exaggeration and the situation increasingly approached fairytale proportions. ⁶²

Both the Pentagon and Royal Thai Government, equally concerned about a possible North Vietnamese and communist Lao takeover of the country, countered an "official" Washington State Department view, and eventually sanctioned Phoumi's requests for aid. Therefore, using the façade of bypassing the Vientiane Embassy, under the auspices of the Programs Evaluation Office (PEO), and with substantial CIA resources, by early October, thirty American advisors under PEO Colonel Brownfield, secretly supported the Savannakhet movement. Thereafter, dealing specifically with the USG military mission in Bangkok, accelerated planning and training proceeded to reassume control of Vientiane by force of arms. Consistent

⁶¹ CIA Bulletin, The Situation in Laos, 10/03/60.

⁶² Hugh Toye, 152-153.

Arthur Dommen, *Conflict*, 159-160.

with the civilianized nature of the operation, Air America planes drawn from the Far East system were staged at Don Muang Airport to support Phoumi's army. Training of Lao units at Thai bases was accelerated to be ready for the impending action. ⁶³

Problems and contention continued for the kingdom:

"Premier Souvanna Phouma has informed [U.S.] Ambassador Brown that this most recent attempt to arrive at some kind of concord with General Phoumi's Revolutionary Committee was rebuffed. Souvanna said he had sent a note to [Savannaket] asking that the committee be dissolved on the basis of no reprisals. Phoumi had countered with the suggestion that both his committee and the Souvanna cabinet resign, after which the King could name a new government. Souvanna commented that Phoumi's reply put the two camps back to 30 August, when the King appointed the present government and Phoumi refused to participate.

Phoumi's determination to have nothing to do with the Souvanna regime may be strengthened by reports of a Meo tribal uprising, details of which are still fragmentary, in the Second Military Region, which has jurisdiction over Sam Neua and Xieng Khouang Provinces. This region was declared loyal to the [Vientiane] regime by a regional sub-commander in 28 September following a revolt in the internal command structure which formerly have been supported by Phoumi. It is possible that Meo tribesmen have been armed by pro-Phoumi officers in the area in an attempt to redress the situation, or at least to cause further difficulties for the [Vientiane] regime.

Souvanna Phouma may be in for trouble from another quarter. General Ouane...and some of his subordinates in [Vientiane] are reported to be considering plans for mounting a coup against the Souvanna government. Redacted-General Ouane stated on 8 October that he and other officers would carry out a coup if Souvanna's negotiations with the [Pathet Lao], which now are scheduled to begin 11 October, do not 'go well' for the royal government. The reasons for

⁶³ Andrea Savada, ed., Library of Congress Country Studies, Laos *The Attempt to Restore Neutrality*, 07/94. Adams and McCoy, 360.

Ouane's reported change of attitude would appear to bring him considerably closer to an alignment, at least in political objectives, with Phoumi.

Meanwhile, there are reports of a sizable attack by [Pathet Lao] forces on a government post in Phong Saly Province of the First Military Region. A significant upsurge of communist military activity there could be an additional persuasion for Ouane to take some action. The loyalty of the regional military commander and of his officers in the [Vientiane] regime has also been reported as wavering." ⁶⁴

Military events were moving quickly in Laos--changing daily--and because of communication difficulties, facts were often reported after the fact.

"The northeastern province of Xieng Khouang, after an interlude of about twelve days during which it supported the Souvanna Phouma government has again swung its allegiance to General Phoumi's Savannakhet Revolutionary Committee. The circumstances leading to the switch are somewhat obscure, but tribal unrest among the Meo--a major ethnic group in the province--may have played an important role. General Amkha, the [Vientiane] garrison commander who was sent to represent the Souvanna government following the province's switch of support to Souvanna has reportedly been arrested [in Xieng Khouang Ville] and flown to [Savannakhet]. Phoumi should have little difficulty effecting Amkha's defection if he should so choose; Amkha has shown a tendency to vacillate ever since the Kong Le coup.

In [Vientiane]-redacted-claims to have warned Captain Kong Le on 7 October of the dangers posed by the growing strength of the [Pathet Lao] in the capital. He noted, however, that Kong Le was 'so volatile' that he could not be relied on to pursue any agreed-upon course of action to its conclusion...the real problem in Kong Le's Second Parachute Battalion was a deputy, Lt. Deuane, who he says was responsible for organizing a leftist youth rally in [Vientiane] on 4 October against the wishes of the government.

Premier Souvanna meanwhile has told Ambassador Brown in [Vientiane] that he

⁶⁴ CIA Bulletin, The Situation in Laos, 10/10/60.

will insist in the forthcoming peace talks that the [Pathet Lao] cease attacks throughout the country and return Sam Neua Province to government administration. If the Pathet Lao refuse these demands, Souvanna claims he will break off negotiations." ⁶⁵

"Premier Souvanna Phouma and his ministers, at a cabinet meeting on 12 October, decided to move the government from [Vientiane] to [Luang Prabang]...Various Lao leaders in [Vientiane] have been considering such a move for some time as a means of getting out from under the immediate influence of Captain Kong Le, of drawing the King into more active participation in government deliberations, and of providing General Phoumi with a face-saving alternative to [Vientiane] should he decide to drop his opposition to the government...

The Thai acting foreign minister's announcement in [Bangkok] that the Thai Embassy has been instructed to evacuate all Thai nationals from Laos [ASAP] is likely to lead to additional tension with the Souvanna government. Premised on the assertions that the situation was worsening and that civil war was inevitable, [Bangkok's] action will probably be construed by Souvanna as another effort to discredit his regime. Implementation of the evacuation order will probably be limited largely to Thai nationals in [Vientiane]; neither government is believed to have accurate information on the location of Thais in other parts of Laos...

"The first session of the peace talks between the Souvanna Phouma government and the [PL], held in [Vientiane] on 11 October, was probably devoted mainly to procedural matters. The chief [Pathet Lao] negotiator, Phoumi Vongvichit, took advantage of the occasion to deliver a strong attack on American imperialism. General Ouane, a member of the government delegation, is quoted as asserting that the [Pathet Lao] had indicated that real peace could be attained only if General Phoumi's Savannakhet movement were crushed. The two sides are to resume their talks on 13 October.

Premier Souvanna has told U.S. Ambassador Brown that if the [Pathet Lao] reject his demands for a country-wide cease-fire and restoration of Sam Neua Province to government control, he will simply tell them to 'go away' and think

⁶⁵ CIA Bulletin, The Situation in Laos, 10/11/60.

about the problem some more. He claims that in any event, he will pursue delaying tactics in an effort to string the talks out as long as possible.

General Ouane, reportedly concerned over the possible outcome of the negotiations, claims that if the talks go badly, he will go to [Luang Prabang] to resign from the government. Ouane had previously reported that he expected that he expected the [Pathet Lao] would demand fixed enclaves for their military personnel, reintegration of their civil functionaries into the government, and reversion to the 1954 Geneva Accords and the 1957 Vientiane integration agreements.

Reports from Phong Saly province indicate that the [Pathet Lao], in an apparent effort to gain additional territory on which to base their claims in the negotiations, were continuing to exert strong pressure on government posts in the southeastern part of the province. One post reportedly has fallen to the [Pathet Lao], and a more important post-Sop Nao-is said to be under strong enemy pressure." ⁶⁶

At the height of the annual rainy season, Rightist military leaders found Route-13's muddy roads and bridges largely impassable, unable to allow large transport of military rolling stock. Therefore, except for minor probes, Phoumi's plan of execution and heralded counterattack against Vientiane proceeded slowly. As a precautionary measure against rumored imminent hostilities, American USOM dependents living in Vientiane evacuated to Bangkok. Dependents of other Embassy personnel also fled to Thailand. Within a relatively short time, an estimated 90% of the foreign population departed the city, which then assumed the appearance of a ghost town.

With extraterritorial interests meddling in the kingdom, the country inevitably moved toward a logical outcome, while principals scrambled to ally with preferred parties:

"The commander of the 1st Military Region, Colonel Houmpanh, is going to come out in support of the Savannakhet rebels, possibly in the next day or two. Houmpanh, whose headquarters is in [LP], previously has maintained a cautiously neutral position between the rival camps, although during the past few days he has

leaned toward Phoumi. According to Houmpanh, the top military figure in the [Vientiane] regime-General Ouane-is associated with the plan.

If Houmpanh acts, four of Laos' five military regional commanders will be lined up behind Phoumi. Premier Souvanna Phouma, who recently decided to move his government to [Luang Prabang], where it would be less subject to direct influence by Kong Le, would almost certainly reverse his decision. With the great bulk of the army arrayed against him, Souvanna would probably be forced into closer dependence on Kong Le, who today called for a shake-up in the top command of the Laotian Army, demonstrating once again that he does not see his role limited to that of a battalion commander.

Souvanna Phouma told the press on 14 October that he is determined to stick to his neutralist policy...Souvanna continues to hint broadly that he will be forced to turn to the communist bloc unless American aid is resumed. Soviet Ambassador Abramov parried reporter's questions on possible Soviet aid on his arrival on 13 October but indicated he would make a statement on the subject after he presented his credentials to the King.

In the first substantive talks between the [Vientiane] government and the [Pathet Lao] on 13 October, the Pathets reportedly called for a 'Cambodian-type neutrality' and for action against the Savannakhet regime. [Vientiane] is, in effect, being asked to sign a separate peace with the Pathets. The Pathet negotiator said that he reserved the right to attack any troops which in his opinion do not support the policy of neutrality." ⁶⁷

With concerns about Pathet Lao advances and control of northern territory, "Armed Forces Commander General Ouane flew to [Luang Prabang] on 15 October to begin preparations for what he claims will be a dual effort against the [Pathet Lao] and the forces of Captain Kong Le. Although Ouane appears to have made his decision to leave [Vientiane] independently, professedly out of concern that the Pathets were gaining too much ground, he intends to coordinate his plans-to date largely unformed-with General Phoumi in Savannakhet. Ouane's immediate intention is to from eight new battalions in the north to block any move on [Luang Prabang] by

⁶⁶ CIA Intelligence Bulletin, The Situation in Laos, 10/12/60.

⁶⁷ CIA Bulletin, Situation in Laos, 10/15/60.

the [Pathet Lao] in Sam Neua and Phong Saly provinces, areas in which he reports there are indications of a [Pathet Lao] build-up.

Regarding Kong Le, Ouane appears to have a somewhat vague concept of creating, through military and psychological pressure in concert with Phoumi, conditions whereby it will ultimately be possible to wrest control of [Vientiane] from Kong Le. One of the first steps in this campaign reported will be a declaration by the First Military Region, with headquarters at [Luang Prabang], that it no longer supports the Souvanna Phouma government.

Ouane probably will need time to refine these plans and be ready for action. In the meantime, Kong le may move to consolidate his hold on [Vientiane] and prevent members of Souvanna's cabinet from escaping to [Luang Prabang] or elsewhere. Kong Le's suspicions apparently have already been aroused by Ouane's departure.

Premier Souvanna Phouma, in a quick trip to [Luang Prabang] on 16 October, professed full approval of Ouane's plans, encouraging in particular a buildup in the First Military Region's capabilities against the [Pathet Lao]. He claimed that he must return to [Vientiane] to 'reassure the diplomatic community,' but in the event the [Pathet Lao] did not back down from their excessive demands in the current negotiations, he would announce his resignation. Such a step would pave the way for the establishment in [Luang Prabang] either of a transitional military government or a new government of national union." ⁶⁸

Confusion reigned in Vientiane:

"The Defense Ministry and army headquarters staffs in [Vientiane] are characterized by the American Army attaché s being demoralized, confused, and in some cases quite bitter as the result of splits in the military establishment and the pervasive influence of Captain Kong Le and his followers. Other factors are said to include General Ouane's failure as armed forces commander to exercise effective command over even the forces present in [Vientiane], the defection to Phoumi's camp of [Vientiane] defense commander General Amkha, and the sudden departure of approximately ten senior officers on new assignments abroad as service

⁶⁸ CIA Bulletin, The Situation in Laos, 10/17/60.

attaches. Other reports indicate the chief criterion for their selection as attaches was their unwillingness to cooperate with Kong Le.

Many officers and noncommissioned officers in Kong Le's 2nd Paratroop Battalion reportedly play dual military and civil roles. A close associate of Kong Le occupies the key position of chief of cabinet in the Ministry of Defense, from which post he has allegedly monitored all command function and kept General Ouane 'fully neutralized' in his dual capacity as armed forces commander and secretary of state for defense. Ouane's decision to go to [Luang Prabang] on 16 October, where he intends to remain, undoubtedly in part due to a sense of powerlessness in attempting to assert his authority in [Vientiane]. With the departure of Ouane, General Amkha, and the attaché-designates, there are now very few senior officers in [VTE], thus leaving the field even more than before to the Kong Le clique.

The only potential source of serious opposition to Kong Le in the capital is about 300 infantry troops under Captain Southep, who came to [Vientiane] from [Luang Prabang] Province last month. Although Southep is reputed to be strongly anti-Kong Le and an able commander, he is undoubtedly under close surveillance and his ability to take action may already have been neutralized." ⁶⁹

Souvanna Phouma finally exhibited some backbone:

"Souvanna Phouma, dissatisfied with [Pathet Lao] observance of the ceasefire, has authorized an immediate attack against [Pathet Lao] positions in Phong Saly Province. During the past few days Laotian Army troops have carried out guerrilla actions in southeastern Phong Saly as a prelude to operations to retake two posts lost to the Pathets. A resumption of fighting in the province could lead to at least a temporary halt in negotiations the Pathets, since a ceasefire was one of the preconditions Souvanna met before beginning substantive talks on 13 October.

Souvanna says he is planning to follow-up his 'house arrest' of Kong Le by transferring the captain from command of the 2nd Paratroop Battalion, Kong Le's power base, to a spot in the Ministry of Defense, where he can keep an eye on him. It is unlikely that Kong would agree to any move that actually threatened his authority over the paratroops, although he might go along with some purely nominal

⁶⁹ CIA Bulletin, The Situation in Laos, 10/18/60.

arrangement.

...Hammarskjold's [head of the United Nations] personal representative in Laos has revealed that Souvanna is interested in increasing the United Nation presence there, at least in part, to forestall communist bloc pressure for a return of the ICC [International Commission for Supervision and Control]. Souvanna particularly wanted military observers who would be available to investigate any North Vietnamese incursions or border incident that Hanoi could seize upon as a pretext for intervention.

...Souvanna has instructed his top negotiator with the [Pathet Lao] that he will not countenance any Pathet effort to undermine the [United Nations] mission in Laos. The Pathets might well raise the issue, since the communist bloc argues that the 1954 Geneva agreements form the basis for peace in former Indochina states, the ICC should be in Laos to police these international agreements, and that the UN has not legal role in Laos. Bloc interest in the return to the ICC stems from the fact that prior to its adjournment in 1958, the ICC limited the government's efforts to check Pathet subversion." ⁷⁰

"King Savang has signed an ordinance accrediting the Soviet Ambassador and has scheduled an audience with him in [Luang Prabang] on 26 October. The King had stalled signing the ordinance for ten days, apparently in the hope that Souvanna's neutralist government would topple...that he had no alternative but to accept the Soviet envoy, even though he felt that this would open the door to Soviet infiltration, propaganda, and subversion, which, he said, Laos is too weak to resist.

Souvanna reportedly left [Vientiane] on 22 October for a visit to [Luang Prabang] and two provincial capitals in northern Laos. He probably is attempting to shore up support for his government from General Ouane and other officers in [Luang Prabang], who at least earlier, were close to breaking openly with [Vientiane]...

With Souvanna and General Ouane out of [Vientiane], Kong Le is free of any restricting influence. Reports indicate that Kong, who had been described as politically unsophisticated, has extensive contact with [Pathet Lao] sympathizers. On 22 October, he reportedly allowed Colonel Singkapo, a ranking [Pathet Lao]

officer, to address a meeting of Laotian Army officers in [Vientiane] on the subject of neutrality. Rumors continue to circulate that Kong, possibly in cooperation with the [Pathet Lao], may be planning an attack on General Phoumi's defense line in central Laos.

A Laotian Army patrol investigating the loss of a post in the southern province of Attapeu was attacked on 16 October by [Pathet Lao] troops wearing new uniforms. The Pathets, who previously have withdrawn in the face of Laotian Army probes, apparently had been resupplied and possibly reinforced. Troops under General Phoumi's control are considered capable of controlling only the principal towns in Attapeu Province, while the Pathets have freedom of movement throughout the countryside." ⁷¹

"[Toward the end of October] Minister of Finance Inpeng, a member of the Laotian Government negotiating team in the peace talks with the [Pathet Lao] now in progress in [Vientiane], states that the Pathets now are specifying participation in a coalition government as one of their major conditions for a settlement. In previous sessions of the [negotiation] talks, the Pathets had seemed to soft-pedal demands for participation in a coalition government while concentrating on appeals for joint military action against Phoumi. It is possible that they have taken [Vientiane's] lack of aggressiveness toward [Savannakhet] to indicate an eventual reconciliation between the two, and are therefore entering their bid for a place in any government of national unity which might result.

Premier Souvanna Phouma, in a recent conversation with Ambassador Brown in [Vientiane], indicated willingness to reorganize his government to include Phoumi partisans, but not Phoumi himself, if the [Savannakhet] Revolutionary Committee was dissolved—a move which Phoumi has thus far shown little disposition to make.

Souvanna added that this might be followed by inclusion of one of two members of the Neo Lao Hak Sat (NLHS), the [Pathet Lao] political front, to make the resulting government of national union. Souvanna later qualified his remarks by saying that NLHS inclusion in the government was merely one 'conception' which

⁷⁰ CIA Bulletin, The Situation in Laos, 10/22/60.

⁷¹ CIA Bulletin, Situation in Laos, 10/31/60.

might lead to a comprehensive solution of the crisis in Laos...

The possibility of renewed attacks by [Vientiane] forces, possibly in collaboration with the [Pathet Lao], on Phoumi's forces between Paksane and Thakhet continues to be the subject of conflicting reports. The principal indicator of any build-up for attacks on Phoumi has been reports of the movement of a sizable number of trucks southward from [Vientiane]. The American Army attaché in [Vientiane] does not believe there is yet sufficient evidence to support the thesis of a heavy build-up of the forces of Captain Kong Le and the Pathet Lao for an attack southward toward Thakhet. A recent reconnaissance by a company of Phoumi's troops revealed nothing of significance. The [Vientiane] forces were reported to be digging defensive positions north of the Ca Dinh River. The vulnerability of Phoumi's force to an attack is suggested, however, that Phoumi's commanders at Thakhet are defensive minded, lacking the stomach to fight.

A four-day Buddhist festival-That Luang-beginning on 1 November and during which all government offices will be closed may provide a much-needed lull in which the various figures in the present conflict can reassess their positions. On the other hand, and of the parties involved might use the lull to take surprise action-for example, a renewed offensive by Kong Le against Phoumi or even a coup d'etat against the Souvanna government." ⁷²

In Washington, D.C., several months after the coup, there was still considerable confusion regarding the event and implications to the country. A Central Intelligence Agency analysis, probably derived from the Vientiane Embassy and Chief of Station (COS) sources, concluded that there was some circumstantial evidence that Kong Le had conspired with Souvanna Phouma. However, this theory was altered by stating that the coup was more likely conceived and executed on very short notice, and that, motivated by personal grievances regarding the manner his unit was treated, Kong Le solely authorized the action.

Since the coup, events surfaced which the unsophisticated Kong Le did not anticipate, and were far beyond his ability to manage. He had become so entangled with Souvanna Phouma and the Pathet Lao that he was obligated to continue their support.

Despite indications that control over his troops had weakened, Kong Le still represented an important military figure and could still rally a number of troops to his personal command.

Kong Le's role in Vientiane government's function was not entirely clear. Until recently, it appeared that he had exercised veto power over political and military decisions considered important to him, but lately, his influence on the government was being usurped by the Pathet Lao.⁷³

⁷² CIA SNIE #68-60, 12/06/60.

Following World War Two, the USG recognized that Thailand afforded an excellent opportunity to increase Western influence and ideals in Southeast Asia. A high-level USG policy decision decreed that the country was largely blameless for the Japanese-pressured declaration of war against the U.S. Indeed, Seni Pramoj, the Thai minister in Washington, had secreted the declaration of war document and refused to forward it to the proper U.S. officials. The Thai resistance group's association with the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), and the general lack of Thai cooperation with the Japanese, also ameliorated American allies' sanctions against the country. One can assess the importance of the Truman Administration's fixation with Thai freedom and future development, by the assignment of OSS director "Wild" Bill Donovan as U.S. Ambassador in 1952. ¹

The Chinese communist victory over Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist Army during the late 1940s, and its envisioned movement south into Southeast Asia, concerned President Harry Truman, Ambassador Harold Stanton, and Thai government officials. Other factors added to threats to Thailand: The Royal Thai Army was considered too small and too ill-equipped to maintain border security within such a large country. Lack of roads, harsh terrain, and remote villages with little or no communication with Bangkok inhibited reliable input of valid and reliable intelligence along the lengthy border areas. In addition, politically unreliable Vietnamese refugees living in the northeast, and communists fighting the British along the Thai-Malay border, created unstable and vulnerable borders. ²

With these factors in mind, and Viet Minh forces challenging French troops

¹ John Haseman, *The Thai Resistance Movement During the Second World War*, (Southeast Asian Studies, 1978) xi, xiii.

Alex Waugh, *Bangkok: The Story of a City* (Boston: Little, Brown 1971) 201.

² Thomas Lobe, *United States National Security Policy and Aid to the Thailand Police*, Monograph Series in World Affairs, Volume 14, Book 2 (Denver: Denver University, 1977) 19.

throughout Indochina, former members of the World War Two Thai Resistance Group in high government positions contacted friends in the OSS--an agency to be reformed in 1957 under the Truman Administration as the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)--for help.

At the time, there was no U.S. Military Assistance Program (MAP) in place, or a military mission in Bangkok. The only immediate solution to counter foreign aggression seemed to be negotiating such a mission and creating guerrilla warfare units. With the Agency interested in developing intelligence networks and paramilitary units for covert operations, the U.S. National Security Council (NSC) directed CIA to create a Thai paramilitary police force that could present defensive, offensive, and stay behind capability should the country be invaded. These units would have the means and ability to operate in small-unit patrols, parachute behind enemy lines, commit sabotage, and engage in espionage and surveillance. To expedite formation and training of such units, the Agency formed a "civilian" company, the Southeast Asia Supply (or Sea Supply Company) in Miami, Florida, and tasked the organization to provide instructors and equipment to implement the mission contracted to the Thai police. ³

WILLIAM LAIR AND THE THAI PARU

Along with other Agency instructors, James William (Bill) Lair arrived in Thailand on 1 March 1951 to commence training of selected and screened policemen in the world of unconventional, irregular warfare. Training began at a remote World War Two camp at Lopburi, approximately sixty miles north of Bangkok. An eight-week syllabus that ultimately included personnel from all military services and some government officials, stressed guerrilla and parachute operations, and the ability to train villagers to temporarily resist should Chicoms invade the country. ⁴

Over nearly two years, Sea Supply had accomplished its mission of training

³ Tom Lobe, 23

⁴ With additional funds and facilities available, initial basic training expanded to ten weeks: three weeks parachute school, three weeks jungle training, four weeks of police law, plus three months of yearly refresher training. Professor William Leary, July 1961 Notes, University of Texas Dallas.

several thousand personnel. By the end of this period, leaders perceived the northern threat much diminished. To utilize the specialize forces trained at Lopburi, the police hierarchy formed a select one-hundred-man unconventional warfare unit named the Police Aerial Reinforcement Unit (PARU) to interface with villagers in remote border areas. Other trained personnel were later incorporated into Thai Border Patrol Police (security BPP), Army Special Forces, and Navy underwater demolition teams (UDT) units.

In order to form an elite PARU unit, in 1953 the most competent instructors from initial training were selected, and the PARU headquarters and school, along with Sea Supply personnel, moved to a jungle area near Hua Hin on the western peninsula. There they established Camp Narasuan adjacent to the King's summer palace. Named after the Thai king who defeated the Burmese during one conflict, the unit soon expanded to 200, consisting of many who were recruited from border areas where they spoke regional dialect and had established rapport with the people. A logical sequence followed when the greatly expanded Sea Supply operation and Thai police instructors trained thousands of BPP at Korat. Distributed along critical border areas, PARU often jumped into remote areas to aid BPP stations harassed by bandits. ⁵

For years, Honorary Thai Colonel Bill Lair implemented the role of the CIA's man in Thailand. Exercising almost complete control over training and operations, he supervised the specialized Police Aerial Reinforcement Unit (PARU) in multifaceted guerrilla and counter insurgency warfare at the Hua Hin base. One portion of this undertaking provided the establishment of an elite stay-behind force should Communist China troops invade Thailand and triumph in such an endeavor. In this case, PARU could parachute into isolated areas to conduct long-range patrols, collect tactical and political intelligence, and sabotage enemy facilities.

POLITICAL INFIGHTING

In 1956, Police General Phao Siyanon (Captain General Pao Sriyanota) and

⁵ Former Agency Case Officer Tony Poe Letter to the Author, 08/05/88.



Bill Lair (glasses, rear center) with his well-trained Thai PARU unit.
Jim Parker, Battle for Skyline Ridge, 47.

Thai Army Field Marshall Sarit Thanarat became enmeshed in a nasty power struggle that had always festered between the two organizations. After Sarit seized control of the government during a 1957 coup, fearing the PARU would continue to support Pao, on 18 September, his army units surrounded Lair's (then an honorary police major) Panther battalion and other Border Police Patrol training camps throughout the country. A peaceful resolution eventually led to incorporation of PARU units into the army and BPP to the jurisdiction of the Provincial police. Phao went into exile. At that time, direct Agency funding and control of the BPP and PARU ceased, and many Sea Supply personnel departed Thailand. Through his friendly contacts in the Thai government, Lair narrowly escaped being declared persona non grata, and continued to work with his beloved PARU, who became Thailand's most versatile fighting force. ⁶

LAIR'S ASCENDENCY

Eventually, Bill Lair became one of USG's leading principals in the quest to contain Southeast Asian communism. In addition to his main tasks, in the late 1950s, through border contacts he closely observed the deteriorating Lao situation. As father of the Meo tribal resistance program in Laos, with high level support, he conceived and implemented a process that not only created a Lao buffer zone for more than a decade, but also diverted an estimated two or three North Vietnamese divisions from participating in South Vietnam during the Second Indochina War.

Working in concert with PARU Commanding Officer Colonel Parnet Rittruechai, he jointly planned and patiently awaited an opportunity to implement cross-border operations into the besieged country of Laos. Small Border Information Center PARU teams were positioned at Si Chiang Mai and Ban Maw along the northeastern Thai-Lao border. After Kong Le's coup, additional PARU teams moved into the northeast at Sakon Nakhon, Nakhon Phanom, and Mukdahan, where they continuously gathered intelligence regarding various ethnic groups in Laos possessing a

⁶ Tom Lobe 27-28, *The Sea Supply Co., LTD. and the Panther Battalion*, Pim Thai Artit 29 Sept 1957.

potential to hastily organize large guerrilla forces to help counter a communist takeover. With Phoumi actively soliciting U.S. and Thai assistance, the door appeared slightly ajar to utilize the unique expertise of his well-trained PARU teams.

As part of his overall mission, over many years Lair had studied the progress of ethnic Meo clans friendly to the RLG through periodic intelligence reports prepared by early field agents Rufus Phillips and Stewart Methven, who worked undercover within the Civic Action Program. ⁷ Gleaned from additional information obtained from former Sea Supply fellow workers, Jeff Cheek and Jack Shirley, Lair became acquainted with prior Meo affiliation with the French military, their daring Maquis commando participation during the First Indochina War, and the recent uphill struggle to survive events in Laos. Indeed, most intelligence indicated that of all the numerous and diverse tribal clans in Laos, the aggressive Meo clans would be the most receptive to influence and mold into military and political units. ⁸

With ample intelligence pouring into his office over upcountry radio nets, Lair plotted, objectively observed, and speculated about Laos' future. He, and many others within his profession, firmly believed that communist maneuvering and intentions included occupying the administrative city of Vientiane. In addition, disconcerting to intelligence types, confused friendly Meo living on northern mountains, far removed from river towns and without Western support, might not select the proper direction to follow and, under pressure, would opt for communist ideology. Like many of his ilk, Lair was convinced that if Vientiane fell, Xieng Khouang Ville, Sam Neua, and the remainder of Laos would quickly follow. He seriously considered formation of a Meo military program to disrupt communist

⁷ Bill Leary Notes. Replacing Rufus Phillips, Stewart Methven was assigned to Laos during the summer of 1959. Methven began a civic action program with the Meo in the Ban Ban Valley along Route-7 northeast of the Plain of Jars. It was there that he met Vang Pao. He claims that he became Vang Pao's first Agency Case Officer. However, this conflicts with accounts by Jack Mathews.

⁸ Zalin Grant, *Facing the Phoenix: The CIA and the Political Defeat of the United States in Vietnam* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1991) 137, 141.

timetables, advances, and plug a serious vacuum left by the dispirited and largely inept Lao Army. Moreover, he planned for his multi-talented PARU personnel to participate in achieving this end.⁹

STRIKE WHILE THE IRON IS HOT

Following Kong Le's successful coup, confusion reigned supreme at both U.S. Thai and Lao embassies as to which faction to support. Consequently, all agencies concerned produced streams of front and backdoor communication with Washington.

For two months, intense infighting between the State Department and Department of Defense continued over the most suitable course of action to pursue in Laos. Therefore, with U.S. government agencies at considerable odds over the situation, Lair recognized this as the most opportune moment in history to enter the fray.

Since commencement of the August coup, USG had sequestered a majority of aid funds in Bangkok banks earmarked for the Lao government. U. Alexis Johnson's Bangkok Embassy staff periodically released kip on the demand of Lao government officials for humanitarian needs. However, with one faction located in Vientiane and another at Savannakhet, U.S. administrators had difficulty comprehending who actually represented the government.

Finally, during late October, Phoumi insisted that Vientiane authorities would arrest his paymasters should they journey there to obtain operational funds.¹⁰ Unable to determine what other course to pursue, USG and the Bangkok Embassy bypassed Vientiane's Ambassador Brown and elected to forward payroll funds directly to General Phoumi's five battalions at Savannakhet. During the normal course of his duties--compounded during the coup flap--Lair visited his station chief embedded in the Bangkok Embassy. During these trips, he attempted to

⁹ Bangkok, Thailand interviews with Bill Lair at the Montien Hotel, 11/06/95.

Bill Lair, History of the BPP/PARU, 04/01/92; and Pathet Lao captive, Pisith Indrat interview Bangkok, 03/95.

Even today, Thai officials are loath to acknowledge the substantial Thai participation and use of assets during the Second Indochina War in Laos.

¹⁰ Joint Chiefs of Staff, 10/24/61, 37.

generate support for his long-term plans for Laos. Convinced that the situation was ripe for plucking, he lobbied to deliver the funds himself to Phoumi. His efforts proved fruitful. Pleased with the responsibility, he arranged through Embassy auspices for a Vientiane-based Air America Helio Courier to deliver him and the cash to Savannakhet.

Flying in the short takeoff and landing (STOL) aircraft with Captain Ron Suphin marked a first for him and proved quite an experience, for Suphin enjoyed terrorizing his passengers with engine out demonstrations. After landing on a soccer field near army headquarters, he met Phoumi and his "civilian" advisor Jack Haze. ¹¹ At the ensuing meeting, during which he turned over money to fuel Phoumi's operation, Lair inquired about his pending battle plans. Phoumi indicated that his battalions continued preparations for the capture of Vientiane. Finding an opening, Lair touted the expertise of his PARU teams to advise his troops, and inquired whether Phoumi might consider complementing each of his five battalions with five-man Thai teams. He stressed that, in addition to employing modern radios with competent operators, and possessing language advantages with the American advisors, his effective medical technicians could assist with health problems. The offer impressed Phoumi, who admitted that he certainly could use the support. Not readily obvious to Phoumi was the fact that, with the introduction of his teams, Lair would gain valuable daily intelligence through the PARU radio net regarding the unfolding situation. With part of his mission accomplished, Lair returned to Bangkok eager to persuade the Chief of Station, embassy personnel, and Field Marshall Sarit to implement what he considered a foolproof plan.

Lair and Parnet received a Sarit audience. The Prime Minister considered the plan viable, for he desired to assist his distant relative Phoumi Nosavan. However, because of violent past confrontations with police hierarchy, Sarit lobbied to alter the plan. He proposed using selected Thai Army personnel in lieu of Lair's PARU teams. A compromise was effected and Lair, Colonel Parnet, and four Thai Army officers representing the Lopburi ranger battalion returned to Savannakhet for a continued dialogue with Phoumi.

¹¹ John Prados, 264.

Recalling Lair's extensive explanation of PARU capabilities, Phoumi leaned toward utilizing this unit, while Thai Army representatives continued to pressure him to insert their people. Finally, Phoumi asked the senior Thai officer for the earliest possible date his troops could enter the field. Without pausing, he indicated thirty days. Phoumi laughed, and responded that within a month he would occupy Vientiane. This provided the opening Lair and Colonel Parnet desired. Parnet quickly indicated that a PARU team was currently positioned directly across the river from Savannakhet at Mukdahan. Moreover, if he radioed an immediate alert, he could have them deployed to the Savannakhet airport by morning.¹² Because of the timely response and Phoumi's request for immediate help, and with tentative Thai Army blessing, the PARU won the day and commenced their initial movement into Laos.¹³

INITIAL MOVEMENT NORTH

During September and October, while General Phoumi's southern based troops prepared to recapture Vientiane, fifteen Air America C-46 and C-47 transports--still called CAT in some quarters--bolstered by additional planes and crews from the Tachikawa, Japan, base, delivered airlifts of 1000 tons of military supplies per month from Bangkok to anti-communist Phoumi's exiled rightist forces. To curry favor with outlying Phoumist supporters, including friendly Meo forces within Xieng Khouang Province, Phoumi redistributed a portion of these supplies upcountry in MR-2.¹⁴

Marking the first early action between Souvanna Phouma's government forces and those of General Phoumi, from 20 to 22 September, two companies of Kong Le's tough Second Parachute Battalion, reinforced by Pathet Lao elements, and well equipped with captured RLA arms and ammunition following the coup, soundly defeated two Phoumist battalions which were probing gingerly toward Paksane.

¹² Bill Lair had two other PARU teams deployed in the field, one across the Mekong River from Paksane in Thailand, and another across from port Tha Deua and the road leading to Vientiane.

¹³ Bill Lair 11/06/95 Interview & Notes.

¹⁴ Bill Leary Notes.

John Prados, 269.

Phoumi's units promptly fled across the swollen Ca Dinh River, located eighteen miles east of their objective. The flooded river thwarted further skirmishing and became a temporary demarcation line between opposing forces.¹⁵

History records:

"The first open clashes between the forces of the Government and of the 'revolutionary committee' in [Savannakhet] took place near Paksane on September 20; announcing this on the following day, the Prime Minister claimed that the committee's troops had been halted and that they had retired to Paksane itself. Prince Souvanna added that the King had been informed of the fighting and had at once summoned all military commanders to a conference in [Luang Prabang]; he himself had assured the King that the Government commanders would attend as soon as General Phoumi had agreed to do the same.

The capture of Paksane by troops under Captain Kong Le's command was announced on September 22 by the Government, which also claimed that General Phoumi's force had lost eighty dead¹⁶ against only one soldier killed on the government side; nevertheless, fears continued that General Phoumi would press forward his attack along the Mekong."¹⁷

A day after the government announcement, the Agency produced further details:

"Radio Vientiane's claim that troops loyal to the Souvanna Phouma government have captured Paksane, about 75 miles east of the capital, would appear confirmed-redacted-General Phoumi...had a force of about three battalions in Paksane awaiting orders to march on [Vientiane]. An engagement between the Phoumi forces and Vientiane troops took place on 20 September and apparently further clashes occurred the next day. Redacted-the Phoumi forces were withdrawing eastward and planned to establish a new defense line on the Ca Dinh River.

¹⁵ Joint Chiefs of Staff, 18, 19.
Hugh Toye 150.
Arthur Dommen, *Conflict*, 154.

¹⁶ The reported number of dead appears inordinately out of proportion for a Lao military engagement, which normally amounted to only a handful of casualties.

¹⁷ Keesing.

Phoumi's military reverse may have been responsible for his sudden trip to [Bangkok], accompanied by Prince Boun Oum, on 22 September for consultations with Thai Premier Sarit. [As opposed to previous consideration] Sarit has become increasingly open in his expressions of sympathy for the [Savannakhet] group, and Phoumi may hope to extract more material support from his uncle.

"In their continuing commentary on the Laotian crisis, Moscow, Peiping, and Hanoi have sought to create an air of foreboding about the situation without, however, issuing any threats of direct bloc intervention. Hanoi on 19 September charged the United States with 'instituting a civil war' which could be transformed into an 'international conflagration.' The broadcast further stated that the Laotian situation was 'a direct threat to the security' of North Vietnam and that 'the Vietnamese people cannot remain indifferent.' On 21 September, Moscow issued a statement charging 'crude interference' by the United States and SEATO and remarking that the 'Soviet Union is attentively watching the courageous struggle waged by the peoples of Laos.' All three communist states seem to confine the 'struggle' to the Laotian people and bitterly denounce what they term 'U.S. instigation' of 'intervention' by Thailand and South Vietnam. ¹⁸

On 28 September, Phoumi, Boun Oum, General Rattikone, and other VIPs arrived in Luang Prabang for talks with the King, as moderator for peace in the kingdom. Within a day the parties agreed to a limited ceasefire, and there were talks of a coalition government.

"[Vientiane] and [Savannakhet] forces facing each other east of Paksane appear to have ceased fighting, in belated implementation of the agreement reached at [Luang Prabang]. The ceasefire could prove short-lived, however, inasmuch as the [Vientiane] forces in the area may be more responsive to Captain Kong Le's orders than to those of the nominal high command." ¹⁹

A week later, in the north the military and political situation was escalating:

"A group of officers under the leadership of Major Bountheng, commander of the Third Infantry Battalion, seized control of the royal capital of Luang Prabang

¹⁸ CIA Bulletin, The Situation in Laos, 09/23/60.

¹⁹ CIA Bulletin, The Situation in Laos, 10/03/60.

on the night of 10 November, with the apparent objective of swinging the First Military Region over to General Phoumi's Savannakhet Revolutionary Committee. Phoumi promptly flew paratroop elements to [LP] to help Bountheng sustain his coup. The coup was staged while First Military Region Commander Colonel Houmpanh and Armed Forces Commander General Ouane were touring northern Laos with Souvanna Phouma. When he heard of the coup, Souvanna flew directly back to [Vientiane] while Houmpanh returned to [Luang Prabang], apparently in an effort to dissuade the Bountheng group from going ahead with his plans to declare for Phoumi.

Bountheng's action was probably stimulated by the belief that Souvanna was not taking adequate measures to counter the communist-dominated [Pathet Lao], who have made substantial gains during the crisis touched off by Captain Kong Le's August coup.

If Bountheng can maintain control of [Luang Prabang] and carry other units in the First Military Region along with him, Souvanna's position will suffer a major blow. His several fence-mending trips to northern Laos in recent weeks reflect the importance he attached to holding the First Military Region, without whose support he would be reduced to dependence on the support of the [Vientiane] garrison. This latter force is believed still semi-paralyzed by fear of the [Pathet Lao], who share control of Vientiane Province with regular army elements. The American Embassy in [Vientiane], commenting on the [Luang Prabang] take-over, expresses concern that this development, coupled with frequent reports of an imminent Phoumi attack on [Vientiane] from the south, may cause the [Pathet Lao] to evaluate the situation as a serious threat and attempt to take control of [Vientiane] or attack Phoumi's forces south of Paksane. Pathet Lao units are intermingled with [Vientiane] troops facing Phoumi's units and tension between the opposing forces had already been increased by a skirmish on 8 November, apparently caused by probing action by a Phoumi company." ²⁰

Despite rumors, the military situation around Paksane remained fairly static:

"The possibility of renewed attacks by [Vientiane] forces, possibly in

²⁰ CIA Bulletin, The Situation in Laos, 10/12/60.

collaboration with the [Pathet Lao], on Phoumi's forces between Paksane and Thakhet continued to be the subject of conflicting reports. The principal indicator of any build-up for attacks on Phoumi has been reports of the movement of a sizable number of trucks southward from [Vientiane]. The American Army attaché in [Vientiane] does not believe there is yet sufficient evidence to support the thesis of a heavy build-up of the force of Captain Kong Le and the [Pathet Lao] for an attack southward toward Thakhet...a recent reconnaissance by a company of Phoumi's troops revealed nothing of significance. The [Vientiane] forces were reported to be digging defensive positions north of the Ca Dinh River. The vulnerability of Phoumi's force to an attack is suggested, however, that Phoumi's commanders at Thakhet are defensive minded, lacking the stomach to fight." ²¹

In order to enhance transportation during the waning monsoon season, and to further support Phoumi's tenuous trek north, Air America relocated H-19s and crews to Savannakhet, where they noted Special Forces personnel, wearing ranger tiger patches, overtly working to whip Lao troops into shape. Troops there actually appeared somewhat superior to soldiers in other parts of the country. ²²

UGLY AMERICANS

The training period was not all work and drudgery. Humorous interludes occasionally interrupted the monotony at Savannakhet for both Special Forces types and Air America crews. Although Commanding Officer of the Special Forces Lao contingent, Colonel Bull Simons, had asserted to his boss, Don Blackburn, Commanding Officer of the 77th Special Warfare Center at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, that "few incidents of any magnitude" involved his troops, some incidents did occur. Tom Moher related the following exception to Simons' claim.

Following a late night on the town, mean "Ding Dong" McCall, ²³ a flamboyant, mission-oriented captain, and a bevy of intoxicated Air America

²¹ CIA Bulletin, The Situation in Laos, 10/31/60.

²² Tom Moher Tapes.

²³ Ding Dong: Likely a pseudonym accorded McCall by Moher.

crewmembers, screeched to a halt in front of a fancy pleasure building. From previous forays, they considered this house of ill repute superior to any other, citing clean sheets on the beds. Noting the firmly secured huge front doors, "Ding Dong" beeped the Jeep's horn. After a time, the madam, humorously identified as "Mighty Box" (an example of American men's proclivity to assign nicknames), opened a window. In a shrill, agitated voice, she declared her establishment closed, and for the men to leave promptly before she called the gendarmes. With deprivation not in his vocabulary, the incensed captain revved up his vehicle and drove it into a column supporting the wooden portico. The collision nearly caused the structure to collapse on him. Despite his desperate move, the equally strong-willed "Mighty Box" still refused him entry. Spurred on, akin to a knight of old on a holy quest, Dong returned to the team house to obtain C-2 explosive charges, with plans to blow his way into the sporting house. At this critical point in the questionable venture, his sleepy Air America cronies begged off further exploits, and wisely retired.

The rest of the story materialized from after action reports which might be taken with a grain of salt. Upon return to his objective, the addled soldier expertly packed the framework of the tall double doors with plastic compound. Unfortunately, in his sodden and disoriented condition, he vastly over calculated the amount required for the job. The explosion not only blew the double doors from the frame, but also a substantial portion of the building's facade. Despite terrifying the young lovelies inside, no one within the shattered structure suffered an injury. However, as justifiable retribution for his act, "Ding Dong" sustained a dislocated shoulder incurred by flying debris, and evidenced by the sling he wore the following day. ²⁴

The incident, no doubt embellished by pilots over time, became the stuff of legend and barroom stories.

²⁴ Tom Moher Tapes.

CJ ABADIE

After Kong Le's forces seized Paksane, three government gunboats, defaulted to Pathet Lao control, docked along the banks. During the turmoil a Special Forces team conceived a special mission: A team of five demolitions weapons and radio specialists moved from Savannakhet to capture or destroy the boats. Aided by Thai forces, they clandestinely squeezed through Thailand and past Thakhet toward their objective. A gutsy Helio Courier pilot supported the team, dropping hand grenades in Skippy peanut butter jars, until his ship was badly damaged by enemy gunboat fire. While preparing to kick off their final attack, the team radio operator established contact with the PEO office in Bangkok. A return message sternly ordered, *"Get the hell out of Thailand, return to Thakhet, and don't start World War Three."*

The team quietly returned to the river town via the river. ²⁵

During the military movement up Route 13, Field Training Team (FTT) leader, Captain Jim Ipsen, aided by an older, roughhewn sergeant, operated out of his forward headquarters, a hotel in Thakhet. Ipsen often flew reconnaissance missions with Abadie. One day, after a heated dispute regarding proper utilization of the helicopter, Abadie and Ipson conducted a sit-down discussion in a Thai rice field near a river bend south of Paksane. To forestall any future misunderstandings, Abadie calmly informed Ipsen that while he was in the cockpit and physically operating the helicopter, he, and he alone, commanded the helicopter and made all decisions. Additionally, to successfully accomplish the mission and ensure the safety of all individuals in his machine, he always flew in the manner that he considered most expedient. He further emphasized that while serving in the Marine Corps, not even someone of a general's rank possessed the authority to question or sway a PIC's decisions. Ipsen wisely accepted Ab's admonition, and never again challenged the pilot's methods. ²⁶

With Mister Murphy always lurking in the background, unforeseen and bad

²⁵ Roy Mathews, 14, 15, 02/18/00.

²⁶ CJ Abadie Email, 02/17/00.

events sometimes occur while piloting aircraft--particularly complicated helicopters.

On 13 October, the Air America Operations Manager in Bangkok directed Abadie to fly directly to Savannakhet and work with Special Forces. After being shot at between Paksane and Savannakhet on one long mission, he landed late in the afternoon. The Customer loaded Hotel-Eight with a large radio transmitter along with two technicians who were assigned to install the equipment in the Pakse area. Lao troops pushing east on an operation from Pakse had requested the radio to augment existing communications gear.

While enroute to Victor-11, Abadie encountered a massive thunderstorm that appeared to negate a direct flight path either north or south of the river.²⁷ Unable to circumnavigate the storm because of daylight and fuel constraints, he elected to continue a low-level flight toward Pakse, rather than return to Savannakhet. Following the riverbank, he successfully proceeded downriver until he encountered places along the route where rain and river merged. Then, even with the windscreen wiper operating at maximum speed, no forward visibility or horizon existed. These conditions forced him to proceed slowly in a right crab (a condition of partial sideways flight induced by pressing on the right tail rudder pedal), while peering out the open window to maintain adequate clearance just over the treetops. Hugging the right bank of the river, while almost hovering at times, from the cabin door, Flight Mechanic Ben Sabino cleared his tail section. The rain pelted him in the eyes, and completely soaked the cockpit and its occupant. Heavy rain continued unabated. Severe winds buffeted the helicopter while the ship penetrated the final gap in the mountains leading to the western Pakse Valley. Then, as he cleared the hills, the storm abruptly terminated. With the sun low on the horizon, hoping to realize maximum advantage of the earth's curvature and enhanced twilight, Ab climbed to 1,500 feet.

Mike Weinberg, conducting a late test flight in Hotel-One, heard Ab's call in the blind announcing his estimated time of arrival and intention to land at the facility. Ten minutes from the field, Mike requested a join up and a formation

²⁷ At this time Lao sites were either recorded as Victor or Victor Sites. They were later renamed Lima or Lima Sites.

approach to Pakse--a standard procedure in the military. Ab rogered the request for the rarely performed maneuver. Heading directly for the approach end of Runway-14, he observed Mike closing rapidly from his left side. While preparing for a descent to 500 feet, he suddenly felt a violent thud, and a deafening noise rattled through his helmet. Simultaneously, the helicopter vibrated and shuddered violently from side to side. With Weinberg squawking loudly in his ear, Abadie decelerated, attempted to maintain RPM, dropped the collective, split the needles, and entered autorotation. With some satisfaction, he noticed only a moderate vibration during the power off descent. During the final hundred-foot deceleration, he married the needles with the characteristic and resounding metallic clang unique to H-19 clutch engagement to perform a power on landing.²⁸

Abadie successfully touched down near the main road (Route-13), about two miles west-northwest of the field. Following shutdown, Abadie and Sabino quickly noted two feet of honeycombed pockets missing from the end of one rotor blade, which logically explained the severe vibrations. Further inspection revealed that transmission deck mounts and all other components were apparently undamaged. Weinberg rushed to the helicopter from an adjoining rice paddy, and, joking about his blade-tangling join-up, enquired as to the condition of the crew and passengers. As night generally belonged to bands of roving enemy outside the Pakse perimeter, recovery of the helicopter was an immediate priority. Except for one dinged rotor blade cap, they discovered Weinberg's aircraft was relatively undamaged, so they transferred the Hotel-Eight cargo and passengers to Hotel-One.

At the Pakse airfield, maintenance personnel hastily removed an undamaged blade from Weinberg's ship, and transported it by land vehicle to the downing site. After a more detailed inspection and blade installation that did not include tracking, Abadie ferried the ship to Pakse just before total darkness. That evening, when asked for his assessment of the accident, Weinberg offered few

²⁸ Clutch engagement: In helicopter pilot parlance, the process of merging the engine and transmission drive train during a power recovery from an autorotation is referred to, as "marrying the needles." In addition to sound, the instrument panel tachometer gauge, displays this procedure to the pilots, as a visual joining of engine and transmission needles.

excuses and little explanation for overlapping Ab's blades, admitting he just screwed up. The two conversed little more about the incident. Surviving a mid-air collision of any kind constituted major good luck, for, recorded within the annals of aircraft accidents relating to this type, were few reports of individuals surviving.

Despite the unfortunate event, Abadie considered Weinberg a good pilot, and in his opinion, someone desirable to have along during an unfolding tough situation. Moreover, nothing seemed to scare the man and he flew anywhere. However, Taipei failed to appreciate and second the assessment.²⁹

VPFO Bob Rousselot, an ultra-strict disciplinarian, judging Mike too immature for the difficult job, formed an entirely different opinion. He regarded Weinberg unmanageable and too free spirited. Beside other questionable antics over the months, he had damaged too many helicopters. On 15 November, H-1 suffered additional blade damage while taxiing at Pakse when an air/oil oleo strut failed.³⁰ Therefore, during December, the VPFO terminated Wienberg.³¹

Early in the crises, Souvanna Phouma believed that a combination of neutralist and Pathet Lao military pressure, coupled with U.S. political pressure on General Phoumi, would force him to capitulate and strengthen his government's negotiating position and authority in areas controlled by the Savannakhet Revolutionary Committee. Attempts to open negotiations with the Boun Oum-Phoumists failed because of unattractive conditions. Therefore, to strengthen his position in Vientiane, Souvanna recruited additional battalions, thought to be infiltrated by Pathet Lao.

To compensate for loss of power and critical supplies to his capital and military forces, during mid-October, Souvanna opted to begin negotiations with the communists. By 17 November, his government and the Neo Lao Hak Sat announced an agreement to establish a national coalition government that would include

²⁹ CJ Abadie Interview, 05/30/98.

CJ Abadie Emails 02/15/00, 02/16/00, 02/18/00, 02/25/00.

³⁰ Professor Joe Leeker

³¹ Professor Bill Leary 1961 Notes.

representatives of the NLHS. The agreement assured that the Vientiane government would receive aid from China and North Vietnam. Souvanna would dispatch a delegation to those countries for exchange of economic and cultural relations, the re-establishment of telecommunications with North Vietnam, and the immediate opening of the Lao-China border. ³²

CRANKING UP FOR BATTLE

By the second week of November, without sustaining hostile action, army troops of the Third Infantry Battalion at Luang Prabang attempted to adhere to a neutral position, then defected from Souvanna Phouma government control and opted for the Phoumi camp.

"Major Bountheng, leader of the group of officers which seized control of the royal capital of [LP] on 10 November, has asked General Phoumi in [Savannakhet] to send a delegation at once to concert plans for action against the Souvanna Phouma government in [Vientiane]. Phoumi plans to send military and civil liaison officers shortly but will not go himself. No overt opposition to Bountheng's take-over has been reported..."

Souvanna...seems determined to hang on even though his freedom of maneuver has been seriously reduced by what now appears to be the loss of northern Laos to his [Savannakhet] opponents. He asked Ambassador Brown in [Vientiane] on 12 November to hold up further military aid shipments to [Luang Prabang]. He also stated that he refused to recognize the validity of any action taken by the King because he considered the monarch to be in effect a prisoner of Phoumi. Souvanna talked vaguely about retaking [Luang Prabang] by force, but such a move is unlikely, inasmuch as he lacks the military resources to accomplish this while at the same time holding [Vientiane] against either the [Pathet Lao] or Phoumi forces to the south." ³³

³² Arthur Dommen, *Conflict*, 161-162, CIA SNIE 68-60, 12/06/60.

³³ CIA Bulletin, *The Situation in Laos*, 11/14/60.

Perhaps in desperation to retain their legal positions, "The Souvanna government and the communist-dominated Pathet Lao issued a joint communique on 17 November which expressed substantial agreement on major points at issue between the sides. The two parties agreed to a ceasefire in all areas loyal to the Souvanna government and to early formation of a coalition government to include the [Pathet Lao's] political front, the Neo Lao Hak Sat (NLHS). It was agreed that the government would accept aid from communist China and North Vietnam and send a delegation to these countries to negotiate for economic and cultural ties.

The communique indicates Savannah's acceptance of the [Pathet Lao's] major demands in the negotiations in [Vientiane] which began 11 October. His sweeping concessions appear to constitute an effort to gain assistance—in the form of bloc air and diplomatic support—to fend off efforts to unseat him. By reason of his agreement to accept aid from them, communist China and North Vietnam now are in a position to assist Souvanna legally in his struggle against the rightist forces of General Phoumi centered in [Luang Prabang] and Savannakhet.

The opening of the Laotian-Chinese border should not in itself facilitate appreciable Chinese overland logistic support to combatants in Laos. The boundary is in rugged, mountainous terrain, and only one major pack trail crosses the frontier. The main avenues of aid to [Pathet Lao] forces have been from [North Vietnam]. However, the agreement will permit Peiping, if it should choose, to supply Souvanna and the [Pathet Lao] directly by air to Vientiane.

Souvanna, immediately following announcement of the accord, left [Vientiane] for Sam Neua, presumably for follow-up talks with his half-brother Prince Souphannouvong, chief of the NLHS.

The Souvanna-Pathet accord might finally impel the King to act. There is some possibility that Souvanna's apparent capitulation to the [Pathet Lao] might cause the monarch to soften his scruples against unconstitutional action sufficiently to suspend the national assembly and form a new anti-communist government in [Luang Prabang].³⁴

Not long after the military takeover at Luang Prabang, powerful General Ouane Ratikone declared for the rightist Revolutionary Committee located at

Savannakhet, and additional troops at Moung Kassy continued to defect to Phoumist ranks. Enhanced by continuing support for Phoumi, the time seemed auspicious to move north.

The situation changed somewhat within a week:

"According to a source of the U.S. military attaché in [Vientiane], about 400 [Vientiane] troops, including two companies of Kong Le's Second Paratroop Battalion, left by truck for [Luang Prabang] late on 20 November for an attack on the royal capital. The source...said that these troops were to be joined enroute north by an approximately equal number of [Pathet Lao] troops. The commander of one of the columns in the attacking force is said to be sympathetic to General Phoumi's [Savannakhet] group and to be planning, if possible, to ambush a [Pathet Lao] company in his column during the operation. The report stated further that a departure base for the attack on [Luang Prabang] will be established at Moung Kassy, a town about 55 miles south of [Luang Prabang] on the road between [Vientiane] and the royal capital. The report contained no scheduled time for an attack." ³⁵

Amid the turmoil Souvanna Phouma continued to seek ways to avoid a festering conflict, unite all parties, and restore a modicum of neutrality in Laos:

"Premier Souvanna Phouma, following a two-day visit to Sam Neua, announced in [Vientiane] yesterday that he had signed an agreement with Pathet Lao leader Prince Souphannouvong [his half-brother] on ways to end civil strife in Laos. This agreement presumably formalizes the accords reached recently between government and [Pathet Lao] negotiators in [Vientiane] looking toward formation of a coalition government and the establishment of ties with North Vietnam and communist China. Souvanna reportedly also said he had obtained Souphannouvong's agreement to the inclusion of General Phoumi's [Savannakhet] Revolutionary Committee in a government of national unity. It seems highly unlikely, however that Phoumi would agree at this time to a coalition with the [Pathet Lao], although he reportedly has indicated willingness in principle to negotiate with [Vientiane]."

³⁴ CIA Bulletin, The Situation in Laos, 11/19/60.

³⁵ CIA Daily Brief, Laos, 11/22/60.

...a skirmish between [Vientiane] and Phoumi's forces southeast of Paksane on 19-20 November as the heaviest fighting in that area since late September. Although the two sides are said to have broken off action, the clash may be indicative of growing tensions in the area which could lead to more extensive hostilities." ³⁶

"King Savang has refused to act on Souvanna Phouma's proposal that the principal representatives from [Vientiane], [Savannakhet], and the [Pathet Lao] meet in [Luang Prabang] under the King's aegis to form a broad national union government...Although the King is unsympathetic to the Souvanna regime and is engaged in backstage intrigues against it, he appears unwilling to run the risk of decisive action and continues to wait for a military solution.

[Vientiane] troops apparently continue to advance northward from Moung Kassy toward [Luang Prabang]. Redacted. There is a report that 1,000 additional troops were to leave the [Vientiane] area on 27 November to join in the operation against [Luang Prabang]. The...withdrawal of this force would leave the defense of [Vientiane] almost entirely to the [Pathet Lao]...Pathet Lao troops in Sam Neua are moving westward to assist in the operation against [Luang Prabang]..." ³⁷

"[Redacted] who was supposed to command Souvanna's projected attack on [Luang Prabang] has defected to the [Luang Prabang] garrison, together with the three companies under his direct command. He claims that some 2,000 [Pathet Lao] were to participate in the attack. Souvanna has deferred giving the order for an attempt to take [Luang Prabang] pending the outcome of the current efforts for a political settlement." ³⁸

In the south, seasonal changes dried the land. Coupled with many military adherents rallying to his cause, Phoumi elected to commence his offensive on Vientiane. Since Route-13's damaged roads and bridges were largely repaired to allow vehicular traffic, Phoumi's U.S. sponsored thrust north to recapture Vientiane commenced in earnest by the third week in November. Air America cargo

³⁶ CIA Daily Brief, Laos, 11/21/60.

³⁷ CIA Bulletin, Situation in Laos, 11/28/60.

³⁸ CIA Bulletin, The Situation in Laos, 12/02/60.

planes and helicopters supported the movement. C-46 crews airdropped supplies behind the lines and trucks moved them to the front. U.S. Special Forces officers and sergeants attached to forward units acted as operational advisors for the first time in the evolving civil war. As Bill Lair had touted during his pitch for their use, Thai Border Police advisors (PARU) assisted in translation, communications, and as medical technicians. Air America helicopter crews, bivouacking and moving north with the troops, and flying eight to twelve hours a day, assisted Special Forces teams, RLA troops, and Thai 105mm artillery units assigned to the drive.

Difficult assignments while working in the foothills around Thakhet and performing flanking movements close to Kong Le's troops at the Nam Ca Dinh, again confirmed the need, and elicited pilot requests for, upgraded rotorcraft machinery to replace the grossly underpowered H-19's. Conscious that the helicopter program was still on trial as to its capabilities, and attempting to enhance payloads, Abadie often operated without a Flight Mechanic. With an urgent need for the H-19 pilots to prove they could successfully operate in the Theater, he considered a 200-pound mechanic and his heavy toolbox excess baggage, and measurably safer at the main base. In addition, he felt confident that he could perform all a mechanic's normal duties of refueling, greasing necessary zerk fittings, and directing local troops in loading and unloading the helicopter. However, he later discovered that the Filipino mechanics were highly disgruntled concerning their loss of anticipated flight time and associated pay.

Potential combat hazards during the operation dovetailed into reality during the move north toward Vientiane. For some time, heavily armed enemy gunboats ranged with impunity far south of the Ca Dinh River demarcation line. Abadie, while supporting RLA artillery missions in the role of a forward observer, was parked across the Mekong in a Thai rice paddy, roughly west of the Grove Jones tin mine, when he received savage recoilless rifle fire from patrol boats. At the time, he carried a U.S. Army West Point major, who wanted to pinpoint Kong Le's troops for effective artillery fire. Beating a hasty retreat while avoiding slashing rounds, Abadie and the major, who had never previously experienced combat, managed to depart the area without incurring injury or battle damage.

Within a day or two of the incident, again flying on the west bank of the Mekong for "safety," the two men conducted reconnaissance and spotting missions for RLA artillery guns. Using an 8mm film camera, Abadie recorded for posterity the distant guns firing north.

The northern movement continued, fraught with excitement, incidents, and danger. One day troops loaded Ab's ship with supplies for delivery to a forward position. Upon arrival, he noted that in hastily constructing the landing pad, the demolition troops had prepared only an immediate landing area, leaving two tall trees standing close to the site. Restricted to only one viable approach, Ab rolled the H-19 forty-five degrees on its right side to squeeze between the obstacles, then, sinking rapidly at a steep angle, the talented Captain managed to perform a hard, but successful landing.

*"Phoumi's offensive in the Nam Ca Dinh area...is apparently meeting with some success...now admits that Phoumi's troops have taken a second Paratroop Battalion outpost south of the Ca Dinh River. He said [Vientiane] forces were either dispersed in the brush or withdrawing across the Ca Dinh. Phoumi's attacks may lead Souvanna to oppose the proposed National Assembly session in [Luang Prabang]..."*³⁹

After winning one battle, Pathet Lao and Kong Le forces were unable to cope with Phoumi's superior weaponry. They withdrew under pressure of sustained artillery fire, while the RLA launched an amphibious attack across the Ca Dinh River. During the advance, immersed with periods of intense fighting, strategic Paksane town fell to Phoumi's superior forces on 8 December. The entire way to Vientiane now appeared open for Phoumi's troops. While the government-in-exile army consolidated and regrouped, Air America helicopter crews RON at the Paksane airfield. Enjoying few creature comforts, they bathed in the cold waters of the murky Mekong.⁴⁰

During the lengthy march from Savannakhet, Lao Army troops accomplished a

³⁹ CIA Bulletin, The Situation in Laos, 12/02/60.

⁴⁰ CJ Abadie Article *Air America Log*, 8-9.

CJ Abadie Interview, 05/30/98, 08/21/02.

CJ Abadie Email, 02/16/00.

majority of the work, assisted by Thai PARU teams. During the final phase of the operation, to hasten the goal of taking Vientiane, a PARU unit assumed a more active fighting role, accompanying an RLA unit north over land through Thailand. Moving up from Udorn to Nong Khai, another Thai team deployed to the large Don Chan Island opposite the capital, established a 60mm mortar position, and commenced harassing fire on the area. ⁴¹

By 4 December, a Soviet airlift, previously requested by Souvanna, and sanctioned by communist nations during November agreements, began from the Hanoi airdrome. Shipments of food, petroleum, and military supplies in Illyushin-14 planes to Kong Le's neutralist faction were calculated to help bolster Souvanna Phouma's beleaguered government which had been previously prevented from receiving critical supplies by an unofficial Thai blockade. Observers recorded fifty-five flights through 15 December.

On the eighth, Vientiane Chinaimo military garrison Fifth Region Commander, Colonel Kouprasith Abhay, took advantage of the situation and opted to align with Phoumi, whereupon he staged a coup and attempted to snatch the city from Kong Le's troops. ⁴² To distinguish participants of small unit skirmishes raging in the Vientiane streets between troops of Colonel Kouprasith and those of Kong Le, each faction wore different colored scarves or armbands (Kong Le's troops-red, Kouprasith's-white). By the following day, Kong Le still held strategic Wattay Airport, and was positioned to receive Soviet airlift supplies. Later, he moved back into the city when Kouprasith's troops withdrew. ⁴³

"Captain Kong Le, with elements from the Second Paratroop Battalion and some armored support, apparently regained control of the town of [Vientiane] in the evening of 8 December. Some hours after Colonel Kouprasith's early morning coup, Kong Le-redacted-fled [Vientiane] in the company of a ranking [PL] military leader,

⁴¹ Former PARU and Air America employee Pisith Indradat Interview with the Author in Bangkok, Thailand, 3/95. History does not readily record Thai participation in the battle.

⁴² Joint Chiefs of Staff, 51.

⁴³ Arthur Dommen, Conflict, 166.

which may suggest that [PL] elements were in his force when he retook the town that evening. Kong Le...placed Kouprasith under arrest; however, the units which supported Kouprasith in his coup apparently remain at Camp Chinaimo, a Lao army base a few miles south of [Vientiane].

A company of paratroopers taken from the pro-Phoumi {Luang Prabang} garrison was dropped near Chinaimo in mid-afternoon on 8 December; they have presumably joined forces with the units at Chinaimo. With Kouprasith's arrest, leadership of these units may have passed to officers more reliably loyal to General Phoumi and his [Savannakhet] group. Phoumi reportedly plans to drop another company of paratroopers and to bring a battalion on infantry overland from Paksane, which was captured on 8 December by Phoumi elements advancing from Pak Ca Dinh. When these units arrive, a showdown struggle between the opposing forces is probable, with the [Pathet Lao] possibly interceding on Kong Le's behalf.

Just prior to the Kouprasith coup, some twenty deputies from the National Assembly gathered at camp Chinaimo from where it would be an easy matter for them to skip across the river to Thailand. Combined with an approximately equal number already out of [Vientiane], more than enough deputies necessary for an assembly quorum would now appear to be available for a session either in [Luang Prabang] or [Savannakhet] for the purpose of registering a no-confidence vote against Souvanna Phouma.

Throughout the confusion of 8 December, Souvanna showed no sign of being ready to resign and with characteristic adeptness chose to consider both the Kouprasith coup and the Kong Le countercoup as an affirmation of support for his government..."⁴⁴

During the conflict, a CIA Special National Intelligence Estimate (SNIE) generated in Washington was pessimistic as to Lao's future. The portion available in the Pentagon Papers stated:

"The Laotian situation will remain one of confusion, drift, and disintegration...Laos is headed toward civil war."⁴⁵

⁴⁴ CIA Bulletin, The Situation in Laos, 12/09/60.

⁴⁵ Marek Thee, 361.

SOUVANNA DEPARTS HIS POST

As Phoumi's forces neared the administrative capital from both the east and west, and anticipated Pathet Lao reinforcements to bolster Kong Le from the north, Souvanna Phouma was unable to effectively govern and, despairing of a positive outcome, declared Vientiane an open city.⁴⁶ He then placed leftist Minister of Information Quinin Pholsena and the present military in charge. Like rats deserting a sinking ship, on 9 December, he and government ministers Boun Om, Tiao Sisoumang Sisaleumsak, and Inpeng Suriyadhay departed for the safety of Phnom Penh, Cambodia. "*Quinin visited Sam Neua on 9 December, probably to discuss [Pathet Lao] intentions with Prince Souphanouvong.*"⁴⁷ After cementing a formal alliance between Kong Le and the Pathet Lao--they had collaborated for some time before this--Quinin, accompanied by PL negotiator Phoumi Vongvichit and Kong Le's deputy, Lieutenant Deuane Sunnalath, departed for Hanoi on the 10th to solicit further communist support and additional war supplies.⁴⁸

*"An 11 December communiqué of the military committee that assumed control when Souvanna fled stated that it had, as of noon, returned all civil and military powers to the government--presumably to Quinin as the remaining minister."*⁴⁹

On the 12th, the majority of National Assembly deputies in session at Savannakhet produced a vote of no confidence in Souvanna Phouma's government. Over the next few days, King Vattana declared the vote legal, dissolved Souvanna Phouma's government, granted power to the Revolutionary Committee, and authorized Prince Boun Oum to form a new government. However, speaking from his safe perch, by

⁴⁶ Hugh Tuye.
Andrea Savada, ed. *Laos, The Battle of Vientiane*, 07/94.

⁴⁷ Joint Chiefs of Staff, 52.

⁴⁸ JCS, 54.

⁴⁹ CIA Bulletin, *The Situation in Laos*, 12/12/60.

15 December Souvanna insisted that the vote and new government were unconstitutional. Because the switch had not emanated from either the royal or administrative capital, he refused to resign his role as Prime Minister. He also claimed that the King's dealings with the Savannakhet Revolutionary Committee were far beyond his authority.

The previous day Ambassador Brown was apprised that:

"All restrictions were removed on the use of CAT aircraft in support of the Phoumi forces; The King or his governemnt were to be encouraged to request U.S. aid in any area required; and the Chief, PEO, was to deal directly with Phoumi concerning the conduct of military operations." ⁵⁰

While rightwing delegates voted, Russian Ilyshin (IL-14) aircraft continued shuttling goods into Wattay Airport. Previously they had landed thirty loads of POL (petroleum, oil, and lubricant). On the 11th observers reported seeing *"four howitzers unloaded from two Soviet planes and towed to an improvised gun park within an old aircraft revetment on [Vientiane] airfield."* Twenty-five flights continued through the 13th unloading a total mix of six 105mm howitzers, eight 120mm heavy mortars, ammunition, and North Vietnamese gun crews to help counter Phoumi's perceived large weapon superiority.

Soon after the initial shipment, and with the green light flashing from USG, Special Forces advisors jumped into the Ban Tha Deua crossroad north of Vientiane, along with planeloads of the First and Third RLA parachute battalions, which linked up with Kouprasith's infantry at Chinaimo army base.

Then Phoumi's troops marched and boated north from Paksane and joined with the paratroops and General Kouprasith's garrison located east of Vientiane.

An Agency bulletin reported:

"[Vientiane] continues under the threat of an early attack by General Phoumi's forces, which apparently are continuing their buildup in the area...the [Savannakhet] troops under the command of Phoumi are being organized into three

⁵⁰ Joint Chiefs of Staff, 53, 54, 56, 74.

groups for an attack on the capital from the north, east, and west and will have two batteries of 105mm howitzers for artillery support. Phoumi is said to be planning his attack on 12 or 13 December, the precise timing dependent on the arrival of his troops at their positions." ⁵¹ ⁵²

On 13 December, the main attack, employing infantry, tanks, armed riverboats, and artillery, commenced. With both sides exchanging artillery fire, the Soviet airlift moderated at Wattay Airport.

By late afternoon, wearing white scarves, Phoumi's troops and tanks penetrated Vientiane from Fort Chinaimo, roamed the center of the city, and battled the red scarfed Kong Le/Pathet Lao faction. Heavy fighting continued for three days. The sea-saw battle of the scarves and artillery barrages exacted a relatively high toll in civilian lives. Numerous buildings were burned, including the U.S. Embassy. The Constellation Hotel, where media types normally congregated to drink and concoct news stories, was hit several times. In addition to burned out vehicles and the clutter of junk created in the city center, infrastructure suffered with utilities badly damaged.

On 14 December, Phoumists shelled Wattay Airport airstrip, effectively ending the Soviet airlift, which ultimately shifted north toward the karst-dotted valley of Vang Vieng.

"The formation of a new pro-Western government in Laos, together with Phouma's success in securing substantial control of [Vientiane], excluding the airfield and other pockets, greatly increases the probability of aggressive [Pathet Lao] hostile activity throughout the country. The communist bloc has substantially increased its delivery capabilities to further assist Kong Le and [Pathet Lao] forces." ⁵³

Amid counter fire by Kong Le's artillery, in a form of urban warfare,

⁵¹, ⁵² CIA Bulletin, *The Situation in Laos*, 12/12/60.
Hugh Toye 159.
Arthur Dommen, *Conflict*, 166-168.
Andrea Savada, ed. *Laos: The Battle of Vientiane*.

⁵³ CIA Bulletin, Laos, 12/15/60.

Phoumi's troops moved through the city house-by-house, flushing out Kong Le's snipers and pushing them westward. Originally intending to fight a delaying action, while some of Kong Le's outnumbered men moved north to safer ground, a portion of his tough, battle-hardened forces stiffened their resistance, counterattacked, and actually retook parts of Vientiane that night. ⁵⁴

With the outbreak of fighting, and the battle for Vientiane well underway with questionable reports of several hundred people killed or wounded, CINCPAC feared danger to American personnel or an adverse commie reaction, and alerted Okinawa-based Joint Task Force-116 and other units in the Philippine Island area to stand by for action. The Seventh Fleet thereupon assembled and deployed to the seas off South Vietnam.

The flap envisioned implementation of CINCPAC OPLAN 32-60, Change 1, Phase 2-Laos, Third Alternative Plan. The first phase of the plan was always in force for SEA and *"provided deterrence to communist aggression..."*

The second phase identified an insurgency and a call for USG or SEATO assistance. This was to be followed by occupation of strategic areas, and enable local forces "to combat the insurrection."

Further phases depended on success of the indigenous troops or increased communist belligerence. ⁵⁵

By the 17th, with Vientiane surrounded by right wing forces, several hundred Neutralist troops began an unopposed, orderly withdrawal north along Route-13. As Kong Le proceeded north, several hundred additional men joined his ranks. During the movement, they hauled their military equipment toward Pathet Lao guerrilla units staged at Ban Kang, and beyond to the Soviet airhead at Vang Vieng. As previously noted, during the month Kong Le had formed a dubious alliance with the Pathet Lao, and during the trek received airdropped supplies of rice, salt, sugar, blankets, light arms, ammunition, radios, and other equipment from Soviet and Hanoi stocks.

"An American Air Attaché [flying the embassy C-47 on a reconnaissance mission]

⁵⁴ Arthur Dommen, *Conflict in Laos*, 169.

⁵⁵ Edward Marolda, 50: Joint Chiefs of Staff, 56-57.

photographed a Soviet IL-14 dropping supplies to Kong Le Forces near Vang Vieng..." ⁵⁶

On the same day, Phoumi declared Vientiane secure.

At that time, while elements of JTF-116 urgently steamed toward the region, contingency plans continued for American Second Airborne units and supporting Marine battalions to seize Vientiane, Seno airport, and other targeted areas. ⁵⁷

Even though written years after the fact, in order for the Author to present a somewhat fair and balanced narrative, Vietnamese history recorded a slightly skewed, but likely not altogether incorrect version of the battle. The account touched on more sensitive elements like U.S. Special Forces participation and the use of Thai territory that were avoided at the time for obvious reasons:

"...Meanwhile, after assembling more than 2,000 puppet troops, accompanied by Thai, South Vietnamese, and Philippine advisors and technical specialists, on 9 December they crossed the Mekong River from Nong Khai inside Thailand to Chinaimo and the western end of [Vientiane] city to prepare for an attack to reoccupy the city. ⁵⁸

On 11 December, the Phoumi Nosavan military rebels, operating under the command of American advisors, attack the capital from many directions. Neutralist army units in coordination with [Pathet Lao] forces and all classes of the city's population, including youth and students, fought back fiercely and courageously. Our artillery bombarded the Chinaimo Camp and the enemy artillery positions in Nong Khai inside Thailand.

Taken by surprise, the enemy's attack columns were stopped in their tracks. After six days of fighting, our allies and we agreed that, given the current

⁵⁶ Earl H. Tilford, *The USAF in Southeast Asia: Search and Rescue in Southeast Asia, 1961-1975* (Washington, D.C.: Office of Air Force History, United States Air Force, 1980, 1992), 32.

⁵⁷ Andrea Savada, ed. *Laos: The Battle of Vientiane, 07/94*. Edward Marolda, 51.

⁵⁸ Hundreds of Filipino workers participated in the Lao war performing various non-combat tasks. Some were advisors to the RLA; others were ground or Flight Mechanics.

conditions, it would be difficult for us to hold the city and to prevent the neutralist forces from being shattered...our allies decided to systematically withdraw all neutralist forces, a [Pathet Lao] company, and the Vietnamese advisory team...back to Vang Vieng. By mutual agreement between our allies and us, taking advantage of an opportunity as the enemy was massing his forces for another attack to recapture the capital, leaving many gaps open and undefended, our forces withdrew from [Vientiane] and advanced to liberate the [Plain of Jars] and Xieng Khouang." ⁵⁹

An Agency Bulletin reported toward the end of the month:

"Communist bloc airlift operations continue and remain consistent with what we believe to be a decision to provide sufficient support to Kong Le/Pathet Lao forces to prevent establishment of effective control over the country by an anti-communist government. It still appears unlikely that the communist bloc has decided to intervene openly with its identifiable military forces at this time." ⁶⁰

Within two days, unfolding events led Agency analysts to admit their error:

"...concluded that the rapid advance of anti-government forces on the PDJ northwest of Xieng Khouang town indicated a 'sizable aggression' from North Vietnam. The area is expected to fall to the communists no later than 1 January 1961." ⁶¹

CJ ABADIE

With the capital in rightist hands, and army units probing a short distance north of the city to discourage Kong Le from returning, Abadie and Flight Mechanic Bienvenido "Ben" Sabino deposited General Phoumi and his entourage at Tha Deua ferry landing on the banks of the Mekong opposite the small Thai town at Nong Khai. Emulating a Roman emperor's triumphant return to the Imperial City, to acknowledge his victory and bolster the populace's confidence in a right-wing

⁵⁹ Merle Pribbenow, Translator, Vietnamese Military History, 131-132.

⁶⁰ CIA Bulletin, Laos, 12/29/60.

⁶¹ CIA Bulletin, Laos, 12/31/60.

government, the general and his entourage Jeoped to Vientiane. ⁶²

During the return flight to Paksane, Abadie's engine began running rough from a faulty magneto. Unable to climb to a higher altitude or raise a Company radio station, he used the VHF radio to broadcast his problem "in the blind." Captain Ron Sutphin, testing a Helio Courier at Savannakhet, heard the call and responded to Ab's plea for help. Almost dark, Ron orbited at line-of-sight altitude to receive any further transmissions and monitored the harried Captain's progress until he reached the boundary of Paksane. After RONing and a magneto change the following day, the crew returned to Thakhet. ⁶³

This early cooperation between Air America aviators set in motion a positive trend of fixed-wing pilots' willingness to monitor and relay flight following messages for helicopters. Moreover, because of the substantial disparity in operating altitudes between fixed wing and helicopters, chronic radio problems associated with vibrating machines, antiquated equipment, leaking cockpits, and weather, high flying airplanes continued to relay messages to flight-following centers throughout the entire war.

AIRCRAFT FLIGHT WATCH SYSTEM

Aviation flight watch systems entailing extensive equipment and specialized personnel present expensive operating and maintenance considerations. Within the Thai/Lao Theater a Customer-driven need for secrecy always prevailed. Therefore, until the total number of aircraft expanded sufficiently to warrant one, there was no countrywide flight watch system, although an unofficial flight watch existed. Pilots looked out for each other, and the Operations Manager (OM) checked on late arrivals at his station. Normally, the Vientiane Operations Manager only became aware of a missing aircraft if an upcountry Customer sent a report of an incident, or by a very high

⁶² Years later the talented Ben Sabino became a helicopter pilot.

⁶³ Bill Leary Interview with Abadie, 06/10/90.

CJ Abadie Article *Air America Log*, p 9.

CJ Abadie Interview with Author, 08/21/0.

CJ Abadie Emails, 08/13/02, 08/28/03.

frequency (VHF) radio relay passed from one pilot to another.

Shuffling of avionics personnel and equipment continued for a number of years as operations and flight watch systems evolved. Taipei headquarters initially assigned personnel from Southern Air Transport and Civil Air Transport to make the system work. For instance, Bob Aubrey, a technician from Kadena, Okinawa, relocated to Udorn to set up theater radio systems. C.Y. Chu, Chief Radio Operator for CAT and SAT, arrived from Taipei to assist him. They assembled and installed the first line-of-sight Gonset very high frequency (VHF) radio sets at Udorn. The station officially opened in July 61 to support an expanding Udorn Madriver operation. On a temporary basis, a grounded Chinese fixed-wing radio operator manned the first system.

The Company eventually procured high frequency (HF) radios to communicate with planes and as a backup for helicopters. Before Flight Watch Stations became VHF operational throughout the theater, pilots often attempted to utilize high frequency radio equipment to report positions, end-of-day requests, or flight time on 8765 kilocycles. Antiquated radios installed in early Vientiane-based helicopters provided the basis for many HF communications problems. These problems continued later with H-34 models. Cockpits leaked under the pressure of driving rain that frequently soaked H-19 electronics, and enhanced HF radio failure. Additionally, like H-34s, the HF sense antennae required operation on the ground for proper transmission. Therefore, out of frustration, pilots seldom used HF for position reporting or an "operations normal" while airborne. Sometimes, at the high cost of time and fuel, pilots climbed to altitude before landing at sites to contact another aircraft to relay a report.

American Ralph Chu established most radio sites at major Lao cities with airports. These river town sites provided additional radio coverage, but large gaps in communications still existed. Weak helicopter VHF transmitters, relatively low altitudes flown, and mountain flight during the rainy season contributed to the problem. As a result, management encouraged VHF for basic air-to-air aircraft transmission and flight report relays between high fixed wing and lower flying helicopters. Still, with no other available

communications, outlying ROs used the Gonset equipment that lacked power output and range. Later introduction of single-side-band radios improved communications between ground stations. More modern aircraft also possessed this capability. Then carrier wave Morse code provided a means to forward pilot reports or relays to Vientiane or Udorn. This became the Flight Watch System's most reliable method of communication.

During October 1961, the first permanent radio operator, L.C. Chu, arrived to staff the Udorn station. Known as Sierra Zero Eight (S-08), Chu operated the station's two-voice (HF/VHF) and carrier wave circuits with Taipei. Shang Tang arrived on 23 November to complete a one-week familiarization before being dispatched to open the Luang Prabang station on 1 December.

Highly experienced, both Shane Tang and his wife had conducted radio operations while in the Chinese Army, and were later assigned to work with General Chennault during the American Voluntary Group (AVG-Flying Tiger) period. Amid only a handful of available and proficient radio operators, they sent and received both Morse and Chinese code (Morse code consists of 26 letters; Chinese possesses over one hundred ideograms). Later, during the formative years, Tang worked for the China National Aviation Corporation on the mainland, then Civil Air Transport, and Air America. After stints at Luang Prabang and Pakse, by then a key communication individual, he returned to Udorn to establish and supervise an enduring communications system. Tang also monitored personnel and the flight watch system for all outstation radio sites. He remained at the Udorn base until close of business in 1974.

Because of the clandestine character of the Lao operation, USG continuously demanded the highest degree of secrecy from Air America, CIA, and the U.S. Embassy Vientiane radio systems. Today, some individuals believe Shane Tang and other third country nationals never received sufficient credit for their long years of outstanding and

dedicated service to America during the Second Indochina War. ⁶⁴

VICTORY OF A SORT

Soon after fighting ceased, and with Vientiane firmly in friendly hands, newly designated Prime Minister, Prince Boun Oum, formed his cabinet. Further military initiatives stagnated while government officials celebrated the victory and deliberated over what course of action to pursue next.

Since no communist invasion materialized during or after the battle for Vientiane, urgency to act immediately in response to the crises wound down within U.S military circles. Therefore, on the 22nd, except for the helicopter carrier USS *Bennington*, which returned to Subic Bay for Christmas, CINCPAC ordered the Seventh Fleet to stand down from maximum alert status and resume normal operations, but remain in the South China Seas on a four-hour sailing notice. ⁶⁵

With the advent of a calmer situation, Air America helicopter and fixed wing operations returned to the Lao Capital. More reassuring to pilots and Company officials alike, the "powers-that-be" recognized value in the continued usage of helicopters as useful tools in the low intensity conflict. Although doubts within a few camps surfaced in future years as to the Sikorsky machine's efficacy in the Theater, which fostered political wrangling, the early operation tended to ensure employment of helicopters and their crews throughout the protracted Lao conflict. ⁶⁶

Following Phoumi's recapture of Vientiane, communist activity measurably increased. Kong Le's coup, and confusion and disorganization within the Lao army as to loyalty, allowed the Pathet Lao adequate opportunity to consolidate its positions in the countryside, and to recruit, train, and deploy its forces in the

⁶⁴ CJ Abadie Emails, 04/29/98, 04/30/98, 01/25/99, 01/29/99, 02/11/99, 06/10/02.
Wayne Knight Email, 05/05/02.

⁶⁵ Edward Marolda, 52.

⁶⁶ Bill Leary Notes of 06/10/90.
CJ Abadie Interview.

south and north. After disarming the Sam Neua garrison, and Kong Le's arms distribution in the Vientiane area, Pathet Lao assets greatly increased. In addition, Soviet airlift provided artillery, ammunition and Vietnamese technicians to support both Kong Le and Pathet Lao forces. Therefore, these better-equipped enemy units were ordered to increase military activity throughout the country.

Soviet, Chinese, and North Vietnamese efforts created a substantial logistics increase in North Vietnam near the Lao border. Some supply buildup was also noted in Sam Neua, where the communists consolidated their control. Aiding this and future logistic moves, the road from Sam Neua to North Vietnam was improved for vehicular traffic.⁶⁷

WASHINGTON DELIBERATIONS

On the last day in December, President Eisenhower and his close advisors, concerned about inroads of the communists in upper Military Region Two and upper Military Region One, met in the White House to discuss the latest intelligence regarding the evolving Lao situation.

From evidence gleaned from the Watch Committee, Deputy Director of Intelligence (DDI) General Cabell indicated that sizeable enemy forces were operating in northern Laos.

"About 1,500-2,500 troops were moving from the direction of North Vietnam into Laos and while the origin of these troops was unknown, it was estimated that the force comprised about five [PL] battalions, equipped with mortars.

General Cabell and Lyman Lemnitzer, the Vice Chief of Staff of the Army, showed President Eisenhower a chart that indicated the areas of [Pathet Lao] resistance and the directions of attack. The chart showed a large area of [Pathet Lao] control north of [Vientiane] and an arrow drawn from that area to the east and indicated that Sam Neua Province...was under [Pathet Lao] control and another arrow from that area was drawn to the west. They stated that if these two forces

⁶⁷ CIA Special National Intelligence Estimate SNIE 68-2-60, Probable Communist Intentions in Laos, 12/29/60.

join, they would cut Laos in half.

There was a third arrow that originated in Phong Saly Province extending southward into north central Laos. It was explained that this force appeared to be exclusively a [Pathet Lao] force, and it must be assumed that the entire Phong Saly province was in the hands of the [Pathet Lao]. The locations and direction of movement of some of the communist forces indicated that they had crossed the border from North Vietnam."

Before he could order military action, the President indicated that more tangible evidence in the form of aerial reconnaissance would be needed. This could be performed by Civil Air Transport C-46 or Thai T-33 pilots. In addition, the aircraft carrier Lexington was stationed in the Tonkin Gulf, and could launch aircraft with sufficient range to reach the target area without overflying North Vietnam. POTUS ⁶⁸ authorized the use of Thai and CAT planes for close-in tactical visual and photographic reconnaissance, and stated no objections to strategic U-2 recce.

The issue of stopping the Russian airlift was raised:

"...the Thais possessed the primitive T-6 training aircraft that could be armed and capable of shooting down a Soviet transport...Lao pilots were not yet trained and would not be for several weeks...there were two B-26s belonging to Thailand that could probably be made available within the next few days. The President authorized the use of these aircraft as soon as possible.

...the President stressed the need for coordinated and decisive action...the most important thing was to legitimize Boun Oum, solidify the allies on the U.S. side, and then we will see if we are faced with going to war...if war is necessary, we will do so with our allies or unilaterally, since we cannot sit by and see Laos go down without a fight." ⁶⁹

⁶⁸ POTUS: A modern acronym for the President of the United States.

⁶⁹ Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS), 1958-1960, Volume 16, East Asia-Pacific Region; Cambodia, Laos, Document 498, Memorandum of a Conference with the President, White House, Washington, December 31, 1960. 11:30 a.m.

During the Air America H-19 helicopter experiment, interested parties solicited Captain Abadie's opinion concerning possible introduction of H-21-HUP tandem rotor helicopters into the Lao Theater. Ab assumed a negative stance. Small hillside sites presented deficient landing pads for a larger configured aircraft. He also recalled from his U.S. Naval Training Command experience that the unwieldy HUP proved difficult to operate and afforded a limited payload. Therefore, he lobbied for the superior Marine HUS-1 (UH-34), as the only viable helicopter available in the U.S. military inventory with adequate capability to perform the required work. And, from all Customer indications, he believed that increased future paramilitary mission requirements, particularly in the mountains, justified additional air support and introduction of a superior helicopter. In addition to "normal" daily work, current requests and future projections from CIA, USAID, U.S. Embassy, medical evacuations, political requirements, and influences from the Thai side of the equation were considerations. Despite representing an unprecedented historical step in Marine Corps aviation, he believed that tapping a Marine squadron's helicopters for the Lao operation would be entirely justified. ¹

Apparently, high-level military brass, eager to become involved in the low intensity conflict, eventually concurred. After due deliberation at various military and government levels, on 16 December, the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) directed the Chief of Naval Operations (CNO) to arrange transfer and deliver four Marine HUS-1 helicopters from Okinawa to Bangkok. These aircraft would immediately replace Air America H-19s. Like the H-19s, they were bailed to Air America under contract number AF33 (600)-40818 to be utilized in Laos under the provisions of the ICA-39-007 contract. ²

¹ CJ Abadie Interview, 08/21/02.

² Edward Marolda, 52.
Joint Chiefs of Staff, 56.
Doctor Joachim Leeker, *Military Aid*, 10.

Harking back to the Roosevelt Administration-sponsored American Voluntary Group's (AVG) Flying Tiger days in China, the order marked a first in Marine aviation whereby the Department of Defense transferred a military unit's helicopters to a "civilian" company.

Implementing the JCS's momentous order, under the expediency and cover of widespread Naval movements during the battle for Vientiane, on 20 December, Naval officials deleted four Marine HUS-1s, Bureau Numbers 144647, 144644, 143975, and 143963, from HMR (L) 163 squadron inventory. ³ Flight crews flew the aircraft off the deck of the antisubmarine support helicopter carrier USS *Bennington*, and ferried them into the Royal Thai Air Force military side of Don Muang. Crews were then returned to the *Bennington* by a S2F aircraft. ⁴

The helicopters were assured to be in top notch shape when transferred. At least one ship, 144647, had recently been released from a major overhaul. On eight through nine November, Wayne Knight, flying from Shin Miewa near Osaka, Japan, Iwakuni, and Okino Jima, delivered the machine to Futema, Okinawa.

At Don Muang Airport, Company personnel accepted the ships at the dual-purpose Red Cap facility located on the Royal Thai Air Force military side of the airport. ⁵

³ Civilian designation of the Marine HUS-1 was Sikorsky S-58. Overall common military designation became UD-34D.

⁴ Edward Marolda, 52.
Bill Leary 1961 Notes.
John Fonburg Phone Conversation, 06/01/91.
Wayne Knight Email, 08/18/02.

⁵ Former Air America Bangkok, Thailand, Operations Manager Ray Shourds, Email, 8/27/02.

Jack Forney Email, 08/27/02.
Red Cap: A warehouse equipped with offices, Red Cap operated quietly for many years. Originally organized under Agency-sponsored Sea Supply to support Thai Border Police and PARU activities, it blossomed into a JUSMAAG supply waypoint for MAAG Thai. Roy Adams and Charles Cattanaach were JUSMAAG representatives at the facility. Master Sargent Robert Hines also journeyed from his Bangkok office to receive cargo consigned to Bangkok. Red Cap also provided an early maintenance facility to service Air America fixed wing, and then rotorcraft.

Personnel quickly "civilianized" the machines by merely spray painting over Marine and USG logos, and then stenciling small black identification letters--HA, HB, HC, HD--on both sides of the upper tail pylon sections. (The aircraft were phonetically known as Hotel-Alpha, Hotel Bravo, Hotel Charlie and Hotel Delta.) Selected Filipino maintenance personnel traveled to Bangkok from Vientiane to attend hasty familiarization and briefings on the more complex machine. The three Captains, sans Weinberg, still utilized H-19s when the Marine helicopters arrived. While Abadie worked the river regions, when alerted, Charlie Bade and Tom Moher flew two ships to Don Muang in order to exchange them for HUS-1s. After final transfer, the three surviving H-19s became the exclusive property of USOM Thailand, then subsequently training vehicles for the American-sponsored Thai Border Police program. ⁶

Following flight checks and abbreviated re-training, the two pilots launched for Vientiane. Maintenance Chief Jack Forney recalled Tom Moher's departure being temporarily delayed by an inadvertent release and dislodging of the right cockpit window and frame assembly. After returning to Bangkok on a regularly scheduled C-46 milk run, the pilots ferried the remaining ships to Wattay Airport. ⁷

Vice President of Flight Operations (VPFO) Bob Rousselot visited Thailand during the transfer. At that time, he verbally appointed Captain Abadie Company Senior Helicopter Pilot, one step below Chief Pilot. In a February memorandum, he confirmed the upgrading. ⁸

Despite Abe Rivero's mechanics' considerable experience in maintaining H-19s, and brief familiarization on the new ships at Don Muang, the men lacked overall technical knowledge about the vastly more complicated H-34 electronics system, particularly the sensitive Automatic Stabilization Equipment (ASE), commonly known as the "Black Box." All hands quickly recognized this deficiency.

⁶ Dr. Joachim Leeker, Aircraft of Air America.

⁷ Jack Forney Email, 8/29/02.

⁸ Bob Rousselot Memorandum, 02/18/61.

Therefore, within days of the helicopter delivery a small cadre of U.S. Marine Corps maintenance personnel, part of an active-duty mobile training team, offloaded to assist Air America personnel in learning, operating, and maintaining the aircraft.

Along with the maintenance people, a handful of active-duty Marine pilots, loaned to fulfill military regulations relating to checkout procedures, also temporarily augmented the operation. Superiors stipulated that they fly thirty to forty hours with Air America pilots to acquire exposure and first-hand operational field experience in the Lao theater. Then, should the balloon actually go up, the Corps could rely on them to form a nucleus of pilots in the invasion force. During their short period in country, the Marine pilots lived in the same compound as the Air America group. Following a short checkout, the Marines continued as copilots. They reportedly performed well in the lowlands and along the Mekong. ⁹

Mainly introduced to resupply FAR forces and counter the Soviet airlift to Kong Le, HUS-1 missions commenced immediately. Compared to the underpowered H-19s, Air America pilots regarded the superior aircraft a super dream machine. They could perform considerably more work with the helicopters, and thirteen-hour days became a normal occurrence. However, along with the added capability, pilots and Flight Mechanics did a lot of their own loading and unloading, and the job became more difficult. Within a short time, both Customers and Company management agreed that the helicopter provided a superior mechanism to fulfill Customer requirements in Laos. ¹⁰

EARLY HAZARDS DOWN SOUTH

Supplementing a group of Marine aviators, a Marine major arrived to serve as Tom Moher's "check pilot." To his dismay, the man soon discovered that Laos was not his cup of tea. Assigned to RON in the relatively quiet south, he, Moher,

⁹ Tom Moher Tapes.

CJ Abadie Interview, 08/21/02.

CJ Abadie Emails, 01/22/99, 02/08/99, 02/18/00, 02/19/00.

¹⁰ CJ Abadie Email, 01/22/99.

and Filipino Flight Mechanic, Montano "Moon" Centeno, crewed the ship to Pakse. During an initial supply mission below the southeastern Boloven Plateau in the Attopeu region, they encountered extensive ground fire while departing a hot landing zone. The deafening pings and slaps resounding from hits on the aircraft so alarmed the major that he suggested to Tom, *"You better land immediately. From the noise, I suspect the rotor blades have shed pockets."* Not convinced, Moher was reluctant to land deep in no-mans-territory. But, as the major had officially assumed Helicopter Aircraft Commander (HAC) status on the flight, Tom, observing strict military protocol, landed and shut down for a rapid inspection. Observing several holes ventilating the fuselage, but none overtly serious or impacting major components that would prevent further movement, they considered remaining in the unsafe territory to be the greater danger. They hastily departed and proceeded to the safety of the Attopeu airstrip. There they leisurely counted twenty enemy souvenirs, the worst projectile puncturing the tail rotor drive shaft. Beset with a wounded bird and no additional work remaining at Attopeu, they departed for Pakse, flying over the relative safety of the Bolovens Plateau.

After landing and securing at Pakse, the major informed Tom that he flew the aircraft well and regarded him checked out. Then, deciding that he had experienced a complete fill of Lao war games, he added, *"Nice to have flown with you Tom. See you around."* He then opting for the security of the Seventh Fleet, he boarded the first available plane out of the country.

Pilots flew relatively innocuous missions out of Pakse unless occasionally assigned to work remote regions. At such sites, with intelligence and the military situation murky, and loyalty to a remote government not strong among the people, danger often proliferated. One such mission sent Moher, Punzalan (Punz), a Special Forces trooper, and a Lao paymaster to a distant site southeast of Attopeu. Located near the Kong River, close to the tri-border area of Lao-South Vietnam-Cambodia, the area later encompassed what would be called the Sihanouk Trail. During a recon followed by a circling approach, Tom observed flattened fences and a camp largely destroyed by fire. When no one onboard seemed overly concerned, and with no smoke or people visible, Tom considered the ville safe, and landed. The paymaster stepped out and looked around. Within seconds, he leaped into the cabin section, rolled

into a tight fetal position, and attempted to hide under a seat. Punz, observing the unusual behavior, relayed his concern to the pilot. Tom, still completing his paperwork, looked out his open window. Noting guys fifty yards away staring at them, he instructed Punz to encourage them to approach the helicopter. While the crewmen waved and gestured, one of the "friendlies" lowered his rifle toward the machine. Finally realizing something amiss, Tom grabbed the controls, wrapped on power, and lifted off the ground. At this critical juncture, the American in the left seat shoved a gun in front of Tom's face and started blasting at the bad guys. Unnerved by the major distraction and intense noise in the confined cockpit, Tom chomped him hard on the wrist. His uncivilized tactic worked and the shooting ceased in the helicopter. Then, skimming along the ground until well away from the hornet's nest, he retraced the long route to Pakse. After Tom halted on the laterite parking ramp, the spooked paymaster immediately disappeared. Inspection revealed four holes in the tail pylon. Because of the hairy episode at the supposedly friendly site, Tom directed pointed questions at the Customer, and the buzz of conversation at the debriefing sounded like a military mail call. Much to his disgust, Tom discovered that the Customer had failed to establish standard radio communication with the camp that morning and, because of prior radio problems, had omitted this important fact during the briefing. Later information from indigenous spy sources indicated that "bandits" had attacked the camp. Curiously, no one in this area called the enemy Pathet Lao at the time. ¹¹

ABADIE

Further problems confronting crews pertaining to timely intelligence and its dissemination emerged when the Vientiane Customer dispatched Abadie and Marine Corps pilot Newell Sly to work in the Paksane area. At the river site, they boarded a Lao disbursing officer with kip for field troops, who comprised a variety of ethnic backgrounds. After topping off the three fuel tanks, they followed Route-4 north, continuously ascending to maintain sufficient terrain

¹¹ Tom Moher Tapes.

clearance and avoid damage from potential small arms fire. The Lao Army post lay far to the north, beyond the Ban Done Valley at an elevated, remote mountain site. Upon entering a valley, they climbed to 7,000 feet to maintain cloud clearance. Through a broken cloud layer, they glimpsed a marker panel in a broad level area. (At this time Ab was not aware that, depending on enemy presence, troops only used smoke as a final option, for it provided a good aiming point for enemy mortars).

Abadie spotted a number of troops gathered in a wooded area to the north, but activity appeared benign. Confident of a positive situation, circling tightly around the signal, Ab descended. However, once on the ground, he became somewhat uncomfortable when no one except the individual who had spread the panel on the ground approached the helicopter. Nevertheless, still considering the area safe, he shut down. While the Flight Mechanic tinkered outside the helicopter, he and Sly walked toward the camp. Suddenly, "all hell broke loose." Machine gun and rifle fire erupted. Ricocheting rounds whistled through the trees. Then mortar fire started splashing nearby. Displaying fair accuracy, the initial round exploded between the trees and the H-34. The fire appeared very close, with the enemy adjusting his sights to destroy the helicopter.

The terrified paymaster dashed toward his allies still holding tightly to his kip stuffed briefcase. Ab yelled to a similarly white-faced Sly, "*Come on! Let's get the hell out of here!*" Racing fifty yards to the ship, they swiftly cranked up both engine and rotors, hovered, spun around, and spiraled upward to altitude in a tight circle. Then, while an enemy unit overran the position and the remaining RLA fled, Abadie turned south toward the river.

While debriefing program chief Bill Lair about the nearly disastrous incident, Lair divulged to Abadie that a Lao Alouette pilot had previously refused the mission. His rejection had constituted the sole reason Lair sent Abadie. So, Ab and his running mate had learned the hard way, but, through a stroke of luck, commonsense, and a little expertise, they had managed to survive the ordeal. On the upside, at a minimum cost, the hairy incident afforded the crew an especially hazardous lesson in the steep learning curve of the Lao war and stimulated future caution while dealing with certain Customers. With his worst incident past history, Abadie was no longer naïve relating to such incidents. In the future he

interfaced carefully with Customers. He now knew what deficiencies in Customer briefings, or a reluctance of a few field operatives to adequately inform pilots of all aspects pertaining to a mission, might cause. In his mind, a perceived "need to know" requirement offered little excuse for withholding information that might position his helicopter, crew, and passengers at risk.

Throughout the war, with a few less than desirable results, other examples of questionable Customer briefing practices occasionally arose to complicate field operations.¹²

ENEMY PRESSURE AND USMC FLAPPING

During the holiday lull, on the 29th enemy attacks began with an encircling maneuver. The skirmishing dislodged RLA units from key positions on the northeastern Plain of Jars in Military Region Two. The subsequent capture of strategic crossroad outposts on New Year's Eve was followed by the loss of Khang Khay that led to a rout of the entire Plain of Jars. By the second, Kong Le, et al. rolled up the Xieng Khouang airfield and forced the evacuation of Special Forces advisors and RLA from Phong Savan (Victor-21). The rapid losses, with seemingly little resistance, created substantial dismay throughout Commander-in-Chief Pacific (CINCPAC) and Chief of Naval Operations (CNO) headquarters.¹³

The dangerous situation was also a source of consternation for those Air America fixed wing crews staying at the Erawan Hotel in Bangkok and flying guns and ammunition to airfields on the Plain of Jars. On the day in question, while chatting with pilots of a C-46 being unloaded, Helio Courier pilot Captain Ron Supthin observed a large dust cloud in the distance. Taking off to determine the cause, he radioed back to the field that an enemy truck convey was approaching the field from the west, and the plane crew should depart. Word of the imminent attack was slow filtering south to incoming C-46 pilots. When Captain John Plank arrived

¹² CJ Abadie Interview at the Author's House, 05/30/98.
CJ Abadie Interview at his house in Tickfaw, Louisiana, 08/21/02.

¹³ Edward Marolda, 54.
Andrea Savada, ed. Laos: The Battle for Vientiane.

at the airfield and attempted to land, Sutphin advised him of the situation. ¹⁴

ANOTHER FLAP

Anticipating the worst possible scenario for Laos, including the fall of the rightist government, members of the former command strongly advised the Joint Chiefs of Staff headquarters that only immediate military intervention could prevent the imminent fall of the country. In Washington, Chief of U.S. Naval Operations (CNO), Admiral Arleigh Burke, considered any lack of resolve a precursor to the loss of Thailand and the rest of Southeast Asia. ¹⁵

Because of joint conclusions and capitulation of the RLA presence on the Plain of Jars that potentially paved the way for further enemy thrusts toward Vientiane, on 31 December Task Force 70.4 mobilized at Subic Bay, Luzon. Consequently, the USS *Bennington* (CVA-20), with hastily mustered HMR (L) 163 personnel aboard, steamed from port during the early hours of 1 January 61.

Reacting to continuing turbulent events in Southeast Asia, the squadron had previously shuttled in and out of Cubi Point Naval Air Station numerous times since embarking on the *Bennington* out of Futema on 4 December. During *USS Bennington's* transits of the South China Sea in 1960, the ship, tasked with an anti-submarine warfare mission, interacted on readiness exercises with the nuclear submarine *Sargo*. As expected, *Sargo* won most of the "Snoop and Poop" drills.

Leading up to the current movement, at 2200 hours on the 31st, Squadron Duty Officer (SDO) Lieutenant Wayne Knight received an urgent phone call from the *Bennington's* skipper informing him that the anchored ship would soon depart Subic Bay and charging him to immediately commence loading aircraft. It took only a second for Wayne to realize that the official marching orders constituted a daunting task. ¹⁶ Preparing H-34s for the short ferry flight represented only a minor problem. The Maintenance Department would manage this job. However, he

¹⁴ Jesse Walton's Letter to Neese Hicks, *Air America Log*, Volume 22 #1, p 7 1st quarter 2005.

¹⁵ Edward Marolda, 55.

¹⁶ This is exactly what happened to the Author at Cubi Point more than a year later.

considered mustering all squadron pilots on a holiday night a major challenge. Aware that Marine squadrons throughout aviation wings always contained a small number of tee-totalers, he searched the area for sober individuals. Fortunately, he found many junior pilots still at the Cubi Officers Club enjoying a late dinner and New Year's Eve entertainment. He briefly explained the circumstances, and assigned a few pilots to fly all twenty-one helicopters on board the carrier, while three grounded ships remained on the hangar deck. Compounding his problems to round up all remaining squadron pilots, virtually all field grade officers--eight majors--disappeared into Olongapo City to celebrate the New Year. By 2400 hours, Knight discovered the missing senior men, including Marty Wagenhoffer, Jim Dunphy, Joe Sadowski, Walt Sienko, and Charles Chambers, at the Willows, a favorite watering hole located close to the main gate. But, following his entreaty that they all return to base immediately--mainly due to their advanced sodden condition--none believed the recall genuine. It was all a cruel fantasy. Further attempting to convince his addled superiors of the recall's authenticity, he reminded them that any missing movement constituted a serious charge in the Manual for Courts-Martial regulations. Finally, all except one of the revelers, Commanding Officer Chuck Chambers, grudgingly returned to base and prepared for the movement. The carrier onboard delivery (COD) liaison flight ferried Chambers to the carrier the following day.¹⁷

Crew Chief Corporal Lloyd Hill was in the crew that flew aboard the *Bennington* on Yankee Papa-83. He recalled that many personnel were scattered throughout the area and as far north as Baguio. Several returned in time to fly aboard while the ship was underway.¹⁸

Another account reveals the dislocation the movement caused for personnel ashore. That same night new Third Class Seaman William E. Bauer found himself

¹⁷ EW Knight Letter, 07/27/91.
EW Knight Emails, 05/07/00, 03/18/02, 06/29/03, 10/08/03, 10/10/03, 10/20/03.

¹⁸ Lloyd Hill, Phone Call 01/02/96.

assigned Shore Patrol duty in Olongapo City. As an airdale, he incorrectly believed those possessing his particular MOS rating never pulled this duty. However, he soon walked the streets with other experienced military police. At 2200 hours, while boisterous revelers roamed numerous establishments, military policemen attempted to apprise personnel of the *Bennington's* General Quarters declaration, and the fact that the ship would shortly depart Subic Bay for points unknown. Skeptical shore patrol, sailors, and Marines disbelieved the proclamation at first. *Who (expletive) would dare pull a stunt like this on New Year's Eve?* They all considered it the ultimate joke, which complicated the roundup and required a lot of convincing. Accommodating military personnel too inebriated to walk, shore patrol stacked men like cordwood into the rear of a pickup truck. Naturally, the human heap contained only the largest and heaviest individuals. Shortly afterward, with almost all hands on board, the ship left port. By 0400 hours, the *Bennington* was steaming far from Luzon's shores. ¹⁹

Some personnel missed the initial sailing because of other factors. On the day of the recall, squadron pilot Hal Clark had left the base for an abbreviated shopping trip well to the north in Baguio. At the time of his return to Cubi, no mode of air transportation remained to ferry him to the carrier. He ultimately boarded a destroyer, which overtook the *Bennington* within three days. A Breeches Buoy transfer completed his itinerary to the ship. ²⁰

Bennington's skipper correctly perceived the panic departure from Subic Naval Base yet another CINCPAC alert pertaining to events in the confused Lao situation. He also believed that USS *Sargo's* crew still enjoyed New Year's Eve in Olongapo, and that after the *Bennington's* hasty move to sea he might trick the submarine captain and achieve a trouble-free South China Sea transit without another embarrassing intercept. He reasoned wrong, for the *Sargo* also immediately put to sea and "sank" the *Bennington* twice during the crossing. ²¹

¹⁹ William Bauer, "Happy New Year 1961," USS *Bennington* Crew's Stories Internet.

²⁰ Hal Clark Phone Conversation, 11/07/03.

²¹ EW Knight Letter. 07/27/91.

LAOS

From a Phoumist viewpoint, the situation in Xieng Khouang Province was utter chaos, and daily becoming more confused. Early in January, strengthened by an aggressive Soviet airlift and the capture of vast quantities of Royal Lao Army munitions, the enemy controlled the major market and artery towns of Nong Het, Ban Ban, Khang Khay, and all strategic road junctions on the Plain of Jars along Route-7. With the RLA on the run, Kong Le requested the assistance of four North Vietnamese battalions. Two battalions then bolstered his forces on Route-7 and along Route-13. A third battalion encroached on Tha Thom and the fourth camped north of the Plain. During the remaining days of January, the demoralized FAL continued to abandon outlying garrisons at Nam Bac, Tha Vieng, Tha Thom, Moung Heim, and Phou Pha Thi.

"The liberation of the [PDJ] and Xieng Khouang was a strategically important victory. We were able to link the [PDJ] with Sam Neua to form a solid base area for the Lao revolution and enable Prince Souvanna Phouma's legitimate government to survive." ²²

By 6 January, in Western eyes, the tenuous Plain of Jars battlefield situation appeared to stabilize. Consequently, with all communist objectives achieved within this immediate field of action, the Lao situation eased in Military Region Two, apparently leading to measurably reduced tensions. ²³

To support recent gains, Soviet airlifts from Hanoi continuously supplied Pathet Lao and Neutralist forces at the Xieng Kouang military pierced steel planking (PSP) airstrip, constructed by French engineers in the center of the Plain of Jars during the early 1950s to counter Viet Minh thrusts into the country during the First Indochina War.

While Kong Le consolidated his positions on the Plain of Jars, JTF-116--including carriers *Bennington* and *Lexington*--sailing the waters off South Vietnam

²² Merle Pribbenow, *Vietnamese Military History*, 132.

²³ Edward Marolda, 57, 58.

Andrea Savada, ed., *Laos: The Widening War*.

Arthur Dommen, *Laos: Keystone of Indochina* (Boulder & London: Westview, 1985) 70.

reached its maximum state of war-related readiness. In addition to establishment of a tactical operations center in the compound of the United States Overseas Mission (USOM) Vientiane, the Department of Defense issued plans for possible land deployment of the Okinawa-based Task Force. However, with the current Lao situation seemingly defused, France's refusal to participate in any Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) military intervention, and the requirement for airpower reduced, the *USS Bennington* stood down and returned to Subic Bay by 9 January. ²⁴

USG REACTION

Prior to departing their positions in January, the Republican Eisenhower Administration published a comprehensive intelligence report regarding USG Lao policy--called a White Paper in Washington speak. The gist of the paper reversed the government's previous hardline philosophy toward Laos, leaning toward a more neutralist status for the country. USG's recommended objective then counseled a firm assurance of Lao independence and neutrality under Souvanna Phouma.

Concurrently, 400 additional U.S. Army Special Forces personnel, working in small teams, supplemented covert PEO advisors. Within a few months of entry into the theater, these forces actively recruited, trained, lived, and worked with fiercely independent Meo tribesmen. In conjunction with Thai and CIA operatives, they initially became active along the upper reaches of Route-13, advising Meo participants in the protracted war in the Kiou Cacham (Site-04) area. ²⁵

At the President-elect's first official transitional briefing on 6 December, Eisenhower and Kennedy considered that as a strategic buffer state, a neutral Laos, wedged between Thailand, Vietnam, China, and Cambodia, might represent the most logical course to pursue in Southeast Asia. However, it would constitute a disaster to permit a left-wing faction into any newly constructed Lao government.

During the final Eisenhower-Kennedy meeting on 19 January, the subject of Laos highlighted and stimulated almost all discussions. Although President Kennedy

²⁴ Robert Futrell, 58.

²⁵ By April Special Forces Sergeant Jack Matthews attempted to raise Meo home guard units called ADC-Auto Defense Choc.

had previously been briefed by the CIA Director, Eisenhower reminded him that the current situation in strategically positioned Laos constituted a major crisis that required his immediate attention. Lying between communist China, North Vietnam, Thailand, Cambodia, and South Vietnam, Laos formed a strategic pivot point in Southeast Asia, and the free world was obliged to defend it against communist aggression. He went on to indicate that communist China and North Vietnam were resolved to destroy Lao independence, and harbored long-term designs on all Southeast Asia. The Soviets also had supported the Pathet Lao with considerable supplies. Despite this, the U.S. Government under the Eisenhower Administration intended to preserve Lao independence. Ike stressed that any communist takeover of Laos would accelerate pressure on Thailand, Cambodia, Burma, and the western flank of South Vietnam. Along this same vein, because of what happened in China, he again cautioned President Kennedy not to allow communist politicians to enter a Lao government. If all efforts to attain a political settlement failed, unilateral intervention by the U.S. appeared the only option. Although a preferable solution in any intervention, Southeast Asia Treaty Organization forces could never offer an effective military deterrence because of French and British allies' constant waffling and lack of resolve over the policy.

Jack Kennedy commented on the seriousness of the Lao and Southeast Asian problem, and inquired if the situation appeared to be approaching a climax. Eisenhower replied that events were confused, but it was clear that the U.S. was obligated to support the existing Boun Oum government.

The Lao discussion ended with Ike musing about the low state of Lao troop morale in the country. He found it perplexing that communist philosophy seemed to generate so much more dedication among communist soldiers than that of the free world people.²⁶

Overall, the confusing Lao situation presented a dilemma for any logically thinking human, especially one slated to assume control of the U.S. government as

²⁶ U.S Government, *The Pentagon Papers*_(Gravel Edition, Volume 2) pp 635-637.
Marek Thee, 362.
Arthur Schlesinger, 135, 269.
CIA/RR-GM-59-2, 09/23/59.

Commander in Chief the following day.

By month's end, with the advent of Phoumi's victory in Vientiane, Kong Le's movement into the countryside, Soviet air supply, and Pathet Lao posturing, Republican Administration policymakers had worried that the communists would soon take control of Laos. Consequently, an alarmed USG began to consider use of the Seventh Fleet as a deterrent.

As transition to the new Democratic Administration proceeded, President Kennedy received additional briefings on the large number of U.S. advisors present in Laos. He realized that any further escalation there might require a major United States involvement on the Asian continent. Consequently, a gloomy scenario faced his new administration as communists continuously gained substantial territory throughout the country. Advisors pointed out that if Western interests abandoned Laos, the enemy would control a major artery, Route-13, which paralleled the Mekong River for many hundreds of miles. This road would provide an easy access to other free nations in Indochina. Additionally, any overt administration of requested military aid to the RLA proved tricky because of the vocabulary and structure of the 1954 Geneva Accords. Adding to these dilemmas, pressures in neighboring South Vietnam continued to escalate, and the numerous trails winding through the Lao countryside supporting the logistical requirements of the insurgent Viet Cong. Viet Cong required close monitoring.^{27 28}

Complicating President Kennedy's first days in office, State, CIA, and Department of Defense personnel disagreed on proper courses of action. Therefore, Kennedy established a talented Lao task force requiring concise daily reports, and sought a viable plan from his advisors to salvage the beleaguered country.²⁹ He discovered that top U.S military leaders, still unhappy over the restrictions,

²⁷ Roger Hilsman, *To Move a Nation: The Politics of Foreign Policy in the Administration of John F. Kennedy* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1967) 129, 147.

²⁸ Arthur Schlesinger, 277.

²⁹ William Leary 1961 Notes.

humiliations, and failure of the Korean War, were adamantly opposed to any token operations in Laos. If necessary to commit U.S. forces there, they insisted on total utilization of available assets, to include divisions of troops, massive air power, and potential use of nuclear weapons.

Of course, while hedging their bets with the new administration, they understood that implementation of nuclear power was virtually an impossible demand. In addition to being politically unacceptable within the Cold War scenario, a large-scale conventional military solution seemed impractical, as the 60,000 men required to execute such an operation were currently unavailable. Because of military leaders' opposition to any Lao invasion, and other pressing world problems diverting the new administration's attention from Southeast Asia, and reinforcing the need for a delaying policy, the President and his advisors eventually developed a cease-fire solution--followed by formation of a neutralist coalition government under Prince Souvanna Phouma.

The introduction of four green Marine H-34 helicopters presented only a minimal U.S. escalation to the Lao strife, and little change to the overall military balance of power, but committing a fresh combat tool to the mix entailed some degree of political risk. However, the dismal military situation in the country tended to mollify and dispel negative connotations attached to the introduction of obvious combat helicopters. Before long, pilots, key Customers, and Company officials alike deemed helicopters to be highly satisfactory devices involved in the success of in-country missions. By January, the Air America VPFO commented to Captain Williamson:

"The Lao operation has gotten a bit warm recently. The H-34s are working out nicely, although there has been a shortage of spare parts. The machine has tremendous capabilities, and has already firmly established itself as the machine required to do the job."

He also noted the increasing numbers of air assets utilized in Southeast Asia as: eleven C-46s, four C47s, two C-45s, Helio Couriers, and H-34s. ³⁰

With the addition of four UH-34Ds, providing thirteen hours per day flight

³⁰ CJ Abadie.

time, Air America pilots had performed beneficial air transport work. As was the case during the H-19 operations, one pilot and a Flight Mechanic remained the standard crew. However, because of the machine's additional lift capability, and the fact that pilots and mechanics provided a considerable amount of cargo loading and unloading, the job became considerably more difficult. ³¹

³¹ Early message traffic generally specified H-34 terminology. Hence, the Marine designation HUS-1 eventually evolved to UH-34D. For the purpose of this work, the Author will use both terms interchangeably with H-34 predominating.

Following the failure to exploit his success over Kong Le's neutralist elements, Phoumi, instead of pursuing his adversary with superior numbers, chose to conduct extensive victory celebrations in the city. Under constant pressure from Washington to counter recent Neutralist and communist gains in the north, the Vientiane U.S. advisory staff prodded the Lao General Staff to follow up RLA gains and expand military activity.

When pressured, Phoumi had near term grandiose battle plans. Consequently, an outline of a three-phase battle plan was cabled to CINCPAC's Harry Felt and staff on 23 January. Phase One included dispersing and destroying enemy forces in the mountains between Luang Prabang and Vientiane by 31 January 1961. Phase Two was programmed to regain control of Sam Neua province by 31 March. Phase Three would return control of Phong Saly province to the existing government by 31 May. ¹

Before the end of December, the joint PEO staff fine-tuned Phase One to attack the first objective at Vang Vieng. The planners, sarcastically called "pin movers" by some observers, enthusiastically conceived and encouraged a three-pronged pincer movement to dislodge and destroy enemy units along Route-13; then recapture the Neutralist-Pathet Lao base at Vang Vieng, and move north through Moung Kassy to the Route 13/7 Sala Phu Khoun Road junction. The ambitious plan to open the road to the royal capital envisioned the eventual use of twenty Forces Armees du Laos battalions (A French term for the Lao army abbreviated as FAL). After reinforcing task force units already in place with troops from southern battalions, the movement tasked Vientiane forces to surge north up Route-13 toward Vang Vieng. Concurrently, a second unit from Luang Prabang, supported by 105mm howitzers and other rolling stock, would converge on the junction from the north. Colonel Kham Khong's troops from Paksane's Military Region Two headquarters, marching up Route-4 through Tha Thom and Tha Vieng, would cross northwest through the lower Plain of Jars, thrust through the Muong Soui salient, and attack the road

¹ Joint Chiefs of Staff, 12/23/60, 63.

junction from the east along Route-7. ²

An intelligence estimate issued at the end of December revealed that Kong Le's army forces of between 400 to 600 men occupied positions in the Vang Vieng area along Route-13. Several hundred additional Pathet Lao were located in the area or directly supported Kong Le. Since the fall of Vientiane, Soviet air had dropped about 150 to 250 tons of equipment and supplies to these troops. Phoumi's forces were moving north, but had not launched an attack to dislodge the enemy from their new positions. Kong Le did not appear to be preparing for a counterattack, but was only regrouping and reorganizing. Kong Le likely believed he could defeat Phoumi in the field and create a situation in which, aided by the Pathet Lao, he would recapture Vientiane. Failing in this venture, his forces were positioned to withdraw to other parts of Laos, or to disperse into small bands in the mountains. ³

By 3 January, Luang Prabang units were reported marching south toward Sala Phu Khoun. By the ninth, FAL units had "secured" the junction and were purportedly moving eastward toward the Plain of Jars, intending to link up with Kham Korn's troops. However, within ten days the junction was recaptured by the Pathet Lao. FAL forces withdrew, but were planning to counterattack. In addition to this setback, General Kham Korn's Paksane task force, besieged at Tha Vieng and Tha Thom by strong Pathet Lao forces and their northern friends, never reached the Plain. Following a week of heavy fighting in the Plain of Jars area, a FAL unit withdrew well southeast of Xieng Khouang Ville. Eventually all Phoumist columns failed to permanently converge, and the grandiose plan to eject the Kong Le/Pathet Lao elements from the Vang Vieng area failed.

After a protracted period, a Vientiane Groupment Mobile (GM), along with

² Joint Chiefs of Staff, 12/30/60, 68, 70.

Major General Oudone Sananikone, *Indochina Monographs: The Royal Lao Army and U.S. Army Advice and Support* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1979) 75.
Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 48.

³ CIA SNIE #68-2-60, Probable communist Intentions in Laos, 12/29/60.

U.S. Special Forces advisors, represented the sole unit to achieve even a partial success in the move toward Vang Vieng, where air intelligence revealed that construction workers using bulldozers had improved the airstrip.

By 12 January, Phoumi's forces, aided by newly introduced American equipment and the vastly improved capability of H-34 helicopters and crews to ferry, supply, and evacuate wounded troops, breached Kong Le's defenses along the lower Nam Lik. However, a previously destroyed bridge across the Lik River further impeded their cautious progress. RLA units subsequently forded the river only after Herculean efforts by Special Forces. ⁴

TAKING THE OFFENSE WITH AT-6 PLANES

In January, supplementing the effort to support government troops, bolster morale, and control Lao airspace, the Eisenhower Administration arranged transfer of four AT-6 Harvard converted training planes from existing Thai stocks to Lieutenant Colonel Thao Ma's tiny Lao Air Force. ⁵

In late December, unhappy with the unimpeded Soviet airdrops to nongovernmental elements, CINCPAC recommended an upgrading of RLG air capability. Without a maintenance complement, it was agreed that a contract with Air America maintenance would serve to maintain the AT-6s in Udorn. Civilian attired Americans would load the ordnance at Wattay Airport. As to pilot manning, less than a handful were already in training. *"As soon as five Laotian pilots had become proficient in the T-6, no further intervention by foreign aircraft would be tolerated and Lao pilots would be ordered to shoot down intruders..."* ⁶

⁴ Joint Chiefs of Staff, 73, 77, 79, 92.

Kenneth Conboy and James Morrison, *Shadow War: The CIA's Secret War in Laos* (Boulder: Paladin, 1995) 49-50.

⁵ These ships were later replaced by more powerful AT-28s.

⁶ JCS.

The original four Lao pilots tapped to fly the AT-6 received only a one-week transition to the antiquated aircraft and check out by Thai instructor pilots at the Korat, Thailand, airbase. Two days of tactical training followed at Kok Kathiem, Lopburi, where, equipped with .30 caliber machine guns and five-inch rockets mounted on wing hard points, they conducted air to ground exercises. On 7 January, the Joint Chiefs of Staff lifted all restrictions on the use of T-6 aircraft.

Based at Wattay Airport by the 10th, AT-6 pilots engaged in combat, striking Vang Vieng area targets with machine gun and rocket fire on 11 January. Initial sorties resulted in poor results because of purported mechanical deficiencies related to "jammed guns, and unspent rockets." There were also aborts largely attributed to a lack of pilot proficiency, or perhaps an abundance of intestinal fortitude.

AT-6 pilot longevity flying the machines proved quite short, for enemy anti-aircraft artillery (AAA) units, not intimidated by the introduction of the flying artillery, destroyed a majority of the original aircraft along with the pilots. But, under USG auspices, additional pilots and assets became available. New pilots would receive three weeks of ground training followed by forty hours flight training in light aircraft, and thirty hours transition to T-6 planes.

Although but a small step toward equity in the balance of power, it all counted, and the Lao Air Force now possessed baby teeth to counter the enemy.

Compensating for losses, additional T-6s were allotted to the RLAF, but because of a shortage of experienced pilots, Thai volunteers were clandestinely tapped from the air force to fly missions. One pilot, Boonrat Comintera, later flew UH-34Ds for Air America ⁷

After further airstrikes on enemy rolling stock around Vang Vieng on the 15th that encountered only light AAA resistance, Vientiane ground forces moved into and seized the area by 16 January. The drive

⁷ Joint Chiefs of Staff, 77, 81-82.

Ken Conboy, 48, 51.

John C. Pratt. *Royal Lao Air Force, 1954-1970. Project CHECO (Contemporary Historical Examination of Current Operations)*, 3-8, 09/15/70.



Lao AT-6 tail dragger "bombers."

then encountered firm resistance, which stalled further progress by retreating enemy units.

Western leaders had hoped the threat of T-6 interdiction would diminish Soviet air supply to the enemy. However, the planes proved too slow to attack the cargo planes, and enemy AAA defenses on the Plain of Jars too formidable to operate there. Consequently, toward the end of January, General Phoumi refused to direct the T-6 to the Plain. In the PEO staff's opinion, it was believed that a larger, more heavily weaponized plane like the B-26 was required, but there was doubt that Lao pilots would be able to operate the more sophisticated plane.

Another report to CINCPAC from PEO stated:

"...the effective use of the T-6s was seriously hampered by Phoumi's decision that the FAL pilots were the final authority on the conduct of any mission...FAL pilots had often refused to fly missions against legitimate targets on the basis of the alleged inadequacy of T-6 armaments and performance."

Because many suitable T-6 targets existed, there was a continuing recommendation that the use of bombs should be authorized. ⁸

IMPLEMENTATION

During the Route-13 operation, U.S. advisors, hoping to stimulate added momentum to the operation, envisioned using flanking maneuvers to envelop and deal Kong Le a smashing defeat. Part of the plan entailed airlifting the highly touted Pakse Tiger Battalion to a location west of Vang Vieng. ⁹

The plan scheduled other airborne elements to jump north, secure that area, and erect roadblocks. After accomplishing these assignments, the advisors exuded confidence that the RLA would seal off and annihilate the enemy. According to Captain Tom Moher, one of

⁸ Joint Chiefs of Staff, 106.

⁹ Tiger Battalion: The unit was previously trained and equipped by Pete Orr's Special Forces team.

the H-34 pilots participating in the operation, the battalion movement began with high expectations. Well-equipped and seemingly disciplined troops lined up at a camp north of Vientiane and boarded the helicopters. The first group into the landing zone consisted of pathfinders and Special Forces advisors designated to secure, clear, control, and marshal additional loads of troops north. The first wave of soldiers arrived without incident. Highly motivated, they departed the helicopters cheering and charging in a northerly direction. However, their enthusiasm soon waned. Senior Lao officers sequestered in Vientiane, unwilling to panic their charges, blatantly failed to brief junior officers and rank-and-file soldiers that they would soon oppose Kong Le's dreaded, battle-tested airborne troops. After learning this, the inevitable occurred. Without hesitation, the troops slung their weapons on their shoulders, and, reversing course, poured south down the road. By the third helicopter wave, pathfinders radioed the pilots that no combat troops remained in the zone. They had all fled south. The pilots already suspected this, for during the third shuttle they observed lines of troops waving and strung out for miles. After discharging the last bug-outs, H-34 drivers recommended that the pathfinders depart with them. The men were still reluctant to leave until incoming rounds splashed nearby. Their evacuation completed the operation.

The failed operation marked the first large military fiasco since Phoumi's successful November movement north from Savannakhet. The reluctance to engage in combat required a comprehensive reevaluation of the Lao fighting man's capability. Critiques subsequent to the aborted operation exposed one paramount finding: That, except for Special Forces personnel working in the field, who cited several deficiencies, a majority of other American advisors failed to comprehend basic Lao mentality. Instead, catch phrases "like the world's worst army" prevailed. Rationalizing low Lao intelligence quotients (IQ), the appraisal developed into a typical "cover you're a--" (CYA) bureaucratic cover-up. Inane questions proposed by advisors inquired how anyone could train such people to fight, who, as practicing Buddhists, historically loathed killing? They also cited a Lao superstition that a giant frog swallowed the moon during eclipses, dooming the world unless subsequently frightened off by copious gunfire. They never considered

that this curious thinking might represent a release from mundane life, and create fun. What could anyone do with people who believed Lao evolution began with an emergence from a pumpkin? All these explanations and theories for the Route-13 failure overlooked one obvious fact: Kong Le's paratroopers were also Lao, who never evidenced any compunction about fighting and killing either Pathet Lao or RLA soldiers. Trained by both French and American advisors, the sole common denominator for their success appeared to be excellent field leadership.¹⁰

WASHINGTON SPEAK

Consternation in Pentagon offices over the deteriorating situation in Laos prompted the Joint Chiefs of Staff to forward comprehensive conclusions and recommendations to Secretary of Defense McNamara on 14 January to help rectify the situation.

"Immediate and decisive action was required to defeat the aggressors in Laos or face the possibility of a neutral or communist dominated Southeast Asia. Should Laos fall to the aggressors, the communists would be in a position to dominate Cambodia and outflank the defenses of both Thailand and Vietnam...

...As a minimum goal the United States should take any action necessary to enable the Boun Oum/Phoumi Government to maintain control of the principal population and communications centers in Laos. The ultimate goal of the United States should be the development of a viable government, friendly to the United States, and in complete control of Laos..."

It was a common goal of the Kennedy Administration and other world leaders to maintain Lao independence and territorial integrity without escalation leading to a widening war.

By the 18th Hawaii-based CINCPAC leaders added several recommendations to stimulate a reversal to the downward spiral in Laos. Some were noteworthy:

"...augmentation of Laotian air support capability by increasing the RLG air force, freeing B-26s [bombers]--now on standby--for operations in Laos, and

¹⁰ Tom Moher Tapes.

converting three infantry battalions to parachute battalions..."

CINCPAC believed at this stage in the convoluted war that recapture of the Plain of Jars was paramount to any other efforts. Therefore, a plan was submitted to the Chief of PEO Laos (there was no existing MAAG in Laos at this time) for FAL to commence a battalion airborne attack ASAP, supported by coordinated ground attacks and airborne reinforcements. The plan stressed the use of Meo guerrillas and assumed sufficient Air America C-46 aircraft were available. ¹¹

Following a regimental field command change between Colonels Kouprasith Abhay and Oudone Sananikone ¹² at Vang Vieng, northern movement began again toward Sala Phou Khoun. A FAL battalion seized MOUNG KASSY by 25 January and moved to within ten miles of Sala Phou Khoun during the next six days. ¹³

During this phase of the operation, the H-34 pilot role became increasingly important in retrieving casualties from hastily slashed out landing zones only 60 yards behind front lines.

During the advance, Captain Tom Moher landed on an unimproved pad, where frightened soldiers, attempting to survive and fight another day, mobbed the helicopter. Frantic to leave the field, they indiscriminately stomped on their wounded comrades who were pre-loaded on the blood-splashed cargo compartment deck. While Tom's Flight Mechanic attempted to sort out the problems, mortar rounds impacted dangerously close to the helicopter. Without hesitation, Tom grabbed a handful of throttle, intending to jump off the side of the cliff and

¹¹ Joint Chiefs of Staff, 83-84, 86, 88-89.

Phoumi Nosavan looked down, on and did not trust, the Meo people, and was loath to supply them with military goods.

Author Note: Deeply involved in the long Cold War, the Author possesses no respect for communist ideology or methodology, hence the exclusive use of lower capitalization for the proper noun in the narrative.

¹² Major General Oudone Sananikone, *Indochina Monographs, The Royal Lao Army and U.S. Army Advice and Support* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History) 34-39.

¹³ Ken Conboy, 49.

mask the helicopter. However, the overloaded aircraft, unable to achieve adequate lift and sufficient altitude to achieve upward movement, began settling, and tore through surrounding bamboo stands. During the process, all four main rotor blades were badly damaged. After his return to Wattay Airport, the Air America Operations Manager requested a statement detailing the incident. Without attempting to shade or embellish facts, Tom reported exactly what had happened. Soon afterward, he received a blistering message from Taipei headquarters faulting him for the damage, and seriously questioning his pilot-in-command judgment. Incensed, he was convinced that the out-of-touch rear echelon pogues lacked even the slightest idea that actual combat now constituted the operational norm in Laos. Consequently, he fiercely rebutted management's censure. Countering the negative innuendos, his statement concluded that he would never deliberately fly through bamboo unless he considered his life endangered. He reinforced this assertion by declaring that while engaged in the critical combat situation at hand, he possessed limited alternatives. Moreover, given similar circumstances, he would most certainly employ identical techniques. He heard no further criticism from the "head shed." ¹⁴

MEDIA MEDDLING

During the movement up Route-13, Tom Moher encountered American NBC-TV newsmen Peter Kalisher, Grant Wolfkill, and another free-lance journalist. These gentlemen, plus Peter T. White and W.E. Garrett from the *National Geographic* staff, who formed a portion of a sizeable international reporter pool, were allowed carte blanche access in reporting the Lao war. Authorized to travel by any USOM means, the media types often solicited rides to the front lines on Air America helicopters. Because of their haughty attitudes and aggressive requests, Tom formed an early non-flattering opinion of the press in general, especially those individuals involved in gathering the news. Moher facetiously referred to them as lovely people stating:

"Demanding top priority on flights and access to the war, like Apostles

¹⁴ I always considered the Taipei headquarters too far removed from our Theater to adequately comprehend and access our problems in the field.

writing an all-encompassing Bible, they believed they pegged the entire world. Constantly asking probing, ridiculous questions that were really none of their business, they were quite abusive and insulting to busy local commanders charged with conducting the war."

Another incident further soured Moher's general opinion of reporters. One afternoon he landed at Wattay Airport carrying a load of dead and wounded individuals. Almost immediately after touchdown, concerned wives, children, and relatives gathered around the ship while medics scurried around carrying the soldiers from the cabin. Then, like vultures descending on decaying carrion, reporter Kalisher and photographer Wolfkill arrived and began shoving people back, preventing the work from continuing.

In an often-rehearsed dialogue designed solely for their own benefit, they shouted, "Don't take that wounded off yet!"

"Hold it now."

"Make sure the light is right."

"Get this picture."

"Move over here."

Incensed at the shabby treatment of the unfortunate souls, Tom climbed down from the cockpit and pushed the two reporters away pleading, "Please, have the decency to let these people offload their loved ones."

The reporters glared at Tom as if he just arrived from a different planet, and countered with their standard drivel, "But this provides us news."

Tom heatedly responded in his New York manner, "Hey, these people are suffering. It may be news to you, but they actually are suffering. Please have the courtesy to let them care for their folks. Take your photo opportunity off to the side, but don't interfere with this process."

The reporters' callousness regarding the dead and wounded that day was the last straw in Tom's mind. He firmly believed that anyone deriving his living from human suffering and catastrophe failed in human moral correctness.¹⁵ Whatever grudging respect he had fostered previously for any journalist reached a new low

¹⁵ In making this statement Moher rationalized, failing to realize that was exactly what we did by hauling the means to conduct war.

during this trying period. Regardless of which side won, rationalizing that because it afforded a news story, reporters always seemed to make light of anyone maimed by land mines, hit in ambushes, or killed during operations. He further observed correspondents frequenting the battle scene, cool, calculating, and deliberate, while recording all information to obtain by-lines and promote their careers. Tom listened to and read many by-lines, and more than a few nauseated him. ¹⁶

Phoumists recaptured the Sala Phu Khoun crossroads in early February, largely unopposed. ¹⁷ The junction had been held briefly from 9 through 19 January by two Luang Prabang units, which were subsequently forced back west to Kiou Cacham. ¹⁸

By 6 February, FAL units moved out to attack the western Plain of Jars on two fronts. Route-7/13 forces proceeded east and General Kham Khong's people again marched along Route-4 toward the Plain. However, while Meo from Padong attempted to interdict Pathet Lao supply lines, enemy offensives blocked further FAL advances at Tha Vieng. ¹⁹

CIA reported:

"...assessing the capabilities of the Kong Le-[Pathet Lao] forces in the Plaine des Jarres area, conclude that the enemy will fight a delaying action along Route-7 preparatory to making a major stand either at Moung Soui or on the [PDJ] itself...the force now in contact with government troops just east of the Phou Khoun junction of Routes 13 and 7 consists of about two battalions, supported by a battery of 105mm howitzers, a few 120mm mortars, and two to four armored cars. This force could be reinforced by an estimated four battalions (1,200 to 1,500

¹⁶ Tom Moher Tapes.

¹⁷ There was a small stone French hotel located in this vicinity. By the time I arrived in the Theater it had been largely destroyed by shellfire.

¹⁸ Joint Chiefs of Staff, 79, 91.
Ken Conboy 49.

¹⁹ JCS Chronological Summary Lao Crises, 1 Feb.-31 Mar. 6, 8.

men) for a sudden counterattack on the government forces; however, it is considered more likely that the bulk of this reserve will be used in the defense of Moung Soui or the [PDJ]. A potent factor in any delaying action would be the use of antitank mines, which the enemy has recently introduce into the fighting.

The assessment notes reports of intensive recruitment activity on the part of the Kong Le-[Pathet Lao] combine, both for new troops and work gangs to be used in road improvement and construction of defensive positions. The [Pathet Lao] are considered poorly trained, with North Vietnamese advisors in most cases providing tactical guidance down to the company level.

With regard to logistics, it is estimated that a minimum of 40 tons of supplies are being landed daily by Soviet aircraft at the [PDJ] airfield complex. This tonnage is apparently being moved in by truck via Route-7 from North Vietnam.

Despite the defensive tactics being pursued by the enemy in Xieng Khouang Province at the present time, the Kong Le-[PL] forces retain the over-all initiative in Laos through their ability to mount guerrilla attacks on widely scattered government posts..."²⁰

Further daily reports stated:

"The government advance along Route-7 toward the [PDJ] area has been slowed considerably by the systematic delaying tactics of the Kong Le-[PL] forces. The column has advanced only a few miles eastward from the junction with Route-13 near Phou Khoun...The enemy has also felled trees up to six feet in diameter, engineered landslides and rockslides in steep defiles, and made extensive use of landmines. In the Ban Tha Vieng-Tha Thom area of southern Xieng Khouang Province, little action has been reported; however, there are reports that the Kong Le-[PL] forces are sending reinforcements of about battalion strength to Ban Tha Vieng."

²¹

After establishing a temporary headquarters a few kilometers east of the road junction, the Phoumist Army advance, harassed by superior enemy artillery located on Phou Soun, slowed to a virtual halt during the next three weeks.²² As

²⁰ CIA Bulletin, Situation in Laos, 02/09/61.

²¹ CIA Bulletin, Situation in Laos, 02/11/61.

²² Joint Chiefs of Staff, 12.

Kong Le's forces slowly withdrew toward the Plain of Jars to link with Vietnamese troops moving in from the east, FAL consolidated positions along Route-13 between Sala Phou Khoun and Moung Kassy. ²³

Washington leaders opposed FAL inaction, for USG envisioned the RLA, after joining with Luang Prabang forces, vigorously pushing east and reclaiming lost Plain of Jars positions. Accomplishing this task would provide the U.S. a vastly improved bargaining position in projected Geneva peace talks. ²⁴

Within weeks following Kennedy's inauguration, Ambassador Brown was summoned to Washington to brief the President and the State Department on the Lao situation. JFK was particularly interested in Brown's assessment of principals. Brown was adamant that Souvanna Phouma was the only political entity available to unify the country. Phoumi Nosavan was a highly overrated commanding general. He considered Kong Le a confused and discontented person. Also, the King was an ineffective figure in influencing any military situation. ²⁵

²³ Ken Conboy, 51.

²⁴ Memorandum to the President from Walter Rostow, 02/28/61.

²⁵ Bill Leary, February 1961 Notes, UTD.

"The goal of modern warfare is control of the populace..."

Roger Trinquier *La Guerre Moderne (Modern Warfare)*.

Soon after the December 1960 recapture of Vientiane, Bill Lair, his five team Thai PARU contingent, including additional station personnel, and radio operators, relocated to the administrative capital. Planning to conduct operations from there, Lair rented two houses on a side road across the street from the Air America Gray House crew quarters, close to Wattay Airport. Flush with the latest success of helping return Vientiane to the rightist government, he impatiently awaited the opportunity to implement phase two of his master plan--that of further integrating PARU into the Lao conflict.¹ Lair's actual objective was to contact the aggressive Meo, a people considered possessing the most potential to counter the recent communist advance.

VANG PAO

"The Meo were the only assets they had to work with."

Bill Lair Comment to the Author.

Lair's timing was perfect. While searching for viable countering actions to enemy inroads in Laos, the U.S. Ambassador and his advisors had recommended to Washington that the CIA enlist indigenous tribal support to fight communism by initiating a covert paramilitary program that included guerrilla warfare. Toward this end, Lair's overall objective was to establish a face-to-face contact with Meo leadership, then conduct a parlay and attempt to discover if the Meo tribal society offered the maximum potential to thwart communist advances. Did they demonstrate a steadfast willingness to stage an active guerrilla resistance in

¹ Edward Keefer, Foreign Relations Series Volume Summary 1964-1968, Volume 24, Laos (Washington: GPO, 1998).

Military Region Two? He especially desired to probe Major Vang Pao's military assessment and commitment to such a possibility. ² After reading former Civic Action Program accounts filed at the U.S. Embassy, Lair was somewhat familiar with Vang Pao, a highly experienced and successful RLA Army officer, who boasted of family roots in the Nong Het area, east of the Plain of Jars. Over the years, he had demonstrated considerable wisdom, courage, and leadership ability in numerous combat situations. Perhaps more important, many clansmen in the region held him in the highest esteem and would likely go to battle with him.

A born leader, Vang Pao rose through the ranks and today would be called a "mustang" in the U.S. Marine Corps. Active with the French forces in 1947 and during the First Indochina War, the ethnic Meo attended noncommissioned officer (NCO) school in Luang Prabang (V-54). Afterward, assigned to Moung Ngan (V-01) near the eastern Lao-Vietnamese border, he impressed the right people with his actions against the enemy. Seeing leadership potential in Vang Pao, French mentors tapped the young man for the ANL officer candidate school at the Dong Hene (VS-54) facility on Route-13, in Military Region Three. Graduating and commissioned in 1952, he was then assigned to command a government army unit at Moung Heim in upper Military Region Two. He served at Victor-48 until Viet Minh forces crossed the border at a traditional invasion route and pushed his ANL charges south onto the PDJ in early 1953. A subsequent assignment to Nong Het (VS-03) with the Meo GCMA lasted about a year, until tapped to lead a unit of troops northwest to relieve besieged defenders at Dien Bien Phu. They failed to arrive before the remaining French and their surrogates capitulated to Viet Minh forces, but results were preordained, and it is doubtful they would have made an appreciable difference.

Returning to more secure bases in Xieng Khouang Province, Vang Pao quickly advanced to captain and became commander of Meo guerrillas in the province. Advanced officer training continued in Vientiane. This was followed by a counterinsurgency course in the Philippines. With this specialized training under his belt, in early 1959 Vang Pao became director of the non-commissioned officer

² Vang Pao: Unlike Western tradition, Vang was the family or surname name; Pao a first or forename. Vang Pao will be seen as VP in some narrative.

(NCO) school at Khang Khay on the northeastern Plain of Jars. His next assignment was as commanding officer of a Lao infantry battalion.

Following the Accords signing in 1954, the French withdrawal from Indochina presented a sizeable vacuum of Western interests in Laos that concerned USG. Although offered an opportunity by the French to assume responsibility for the organized Meo Marquis, other geopolitical events took precedence for America. When communist intentions to militarily and politically take control of Laos became evident, a few CIA agents were introduced to gather intelligence and provide assistance to royal government army and hill tribe units in the field.

Jack Mathews was one of these agents. Assigned to Laos for two years in the fall of 1958, he was secreted in the Program Evaluation Office (PEO) of the U.S Operations Mission (USOM). Mathews' initial tasks were to support and help train the RLA Parachute Regiment and the Second Parachute Battalion commanded by Captain Kong Le.

Mathews' initial contact with then Major Vang Pao occurred on the Plain of Jar's eastern perimeter at the Phong Savan (V-21) headquarters during May of 1959. At the time, Jack was involved in supplying Kong Le's battalion in Sam Neua, where they were engaged in fighting Pathet Lao forces on the border. This operation interested VP, as some of his men were also engaged with the Pathet Lao. The contact resulted in air-delivered supplies of rice, salt, and other consumables.

During his two-year tour in Laos, Mathews' modes of transportation to many locations in the country were Civil Air Transport and Air America aircraft. In over a hundred flights, he flew with Captains Bruce Blevins, Fred Walker, Art Wilson, Eddie Sims, Paul Holden, Jesse Walton, and other fixed wing pilots. He even rode with Bird and Son's pilot Dutch Brongersma to locations that could accommodate the C-45 twin engine plane.

Not long after Colonel Bull Simons' Special Forces training team arrived in Vientiane during 1959, Mathews recommended that such a team could be well served on the Plain of Jars to support Major Vang Pao's efforts to accomplish both conventional and unconventional guerrilla warfare, and produce a stay behind capability. An American White Star team was eventually located at Khang Khay.

When the versatile Helio Courier became available in early 1960, Mathews and

other PEO representatives traveled upcountry weekly to communicate with the Special Forces team at Khang Khay. He also interfaced with Vang Pao on the Plain of Jars and at Nong Het. During these trips, flown by Captain Ron Sutphin, the Helio Courier allowed Vang Pao and Mathews to visit rough strips and villages in the far reaches of Military Region Two. There Vang Pao attempted to recruit and rally the people in resisting communist attempts to sway the villagers to their method of thinking.³

Bill Lair's task to find Vang Pao was understandably difficult, for during the unstable and fluid period in lower Military Region Two, the major was highly mobile and no one could accurately pinpoint Vang Pao's location.

Not politically motivated, following Kong Le's coup, Vang Pao hoped to avoid entanglement in Vientiane military-political intrigues. However, he decided to act after the 2nd Pathet Lao Battalion rolled up two battalions of General Kham Khong's soldiers in Sam Neua Province, and pursued them south along Route-6 to Mounq Peun. Intelligence from area spies further influenced his decision by providing hard evidence of a major Viet Minh-Pathet Lao offensive calculated to capture the entire PDJ and employ the territory as a staging area and springboard to seize all of Laos. Since early October, VP had become extremely alarmed over neutralist attempts to extend support of Souvanna Phouma's government throughout Xieng Khouang Province and over the harmful effect a communist takeover might have on the Meo people for supporting French efforts during the Indochina War, asking for money and arms, VP elected to continue rallying to General Phoumi's cause.⁴ Moreover, he was confident that a reconstituted Meo guerrilla network, and closely patterned on the French-sponsored Marquis, eventually encompassing thousands of fighters, could drastically

³ Letter from Jack Mathews to Professor Bill Leary, 03/25/93. Fred Benson, *Hmong Studies Journal*, *Genesis of the Hmong-American Alliance 1949-1962: Aspirations, Expectations and Comments During an Era of Uncertainty*, 24.

⁴ VP: An acronym we used when privately referring to Vang Pao. VP will be used liberally in this and in all succeeding books.

⁵ Keith Quincy, *Hmong: History of a People* (Washington: University Press, 1 Ed) 172-173.

slow or entirely halt commie advances. ⁵

Vang Pao now began organizing a small Meo force at Ban Lat Houang, starting with Phoumist support, an Air America airdrop of rifles, and encouragement. Located close to the western mouth of the Route-04 valley leading eastward toward Xieng Khouang Ville, Lat Houang, a 1,000-person community, was the provincial capital of Xieng Khouang. ⁶ Vang Pao, a firm realist from the early days, sized up the immediate future, and began planning for an orderly Meo evacuation from the Plain of Jars when pressured by superior enemy forces. He calculated that by seizing and holding strategic commanding high ground surrounding the Plain of Jars and Route-7, he could temporarily provide safety for Meo families and enable his men to harass and cut enemy supply lines, thus severely inhibiting further incursions. ⁷

Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma, alarmed by rumors of a Meo coup in Military Region Two, dispatched Minister of Justice, Touby Ly Fong, the sole Meo representative in the Royal Lao Government, to parlay with VP. Before long, both Touby and hereditary Xieng Khouang Provincial Governor Chao Say Kham became concerned over the probability of a communist takeover of the province and negative implications for the country. They agreed to swing their influence to the Phoumist side. As Vang Pao already enjoyed support from many village chiefs in the area, the trio collectively persuaded the province's Neutralist Commander, Colonel Kham Hou, not to interfere with the coup. Then, as Neutralist Commander General Amkha disembarked from his plane to conduct a governmental fact-finding mission concerning the rumored rebellion at Xieng Khouang Ville, Vang Pao arrested him. Because Vang Pao's troops had received no wages since Kong Le's August coup, he exchanged the general to Phoumi for back pay. With part of the province once again in rightist hands, an elated Phoumi elevated Vang Pao in rank and appointed him regional

⁶ Ban: The Lao word for village. An assumed term, many villages are not prefaced by Ban on maps.

⁷ Author Note: After years of experience working in the area the Author believes that sites were not randomly chosen, but were located within some early 1950s French-inspired Marquis areas: Khang Kho, Padong, Bouam Long, Phou So, Phou Fa, Tha Lin Noi, and Ban Na.

commander.⁸

FINDING VP

From their close association, STOL Helio Courier and former Navy pilot Captain Ron Sutphin knew Bill Lair's strategy to obtain Meo participation in the conflict. Therefore, during an 8 January 1961 evening debriefing, and after a long day in the field, Sutphin informed Lair of Vang Pao's approximate location upcountry. That morning, after landing at Luang Prabang, he learned that Vang Pao had just radioed a message for assistance in evacuating his family from harm's way. Responding to the appeal, Ron flew to the hamlet of Ban Tha Vieng, located on the south side of the Nam Gmap. Bordered by Route-4, nineteen miles south of the Xieng Khouang Ville Valley, Vang Pao, with some of his troops and their families, had withdrawn to the site by the end of December, and were still in the area during the first week in January.^{9 10}

With high mountains protecting them to the south and west, the Meo regrouped in the general Tha Vieng area after sharp enemy thrusts forced them to leave the provincial seat. At the new location outside of Tha Vieng, they manually built a short STOL strip, leveling dikes through flat, dry rice paddies.

Sutphin's news encouraged Lair. Consequently, the following day, armed with this recent information, Lair entered the U.S. Embassy, presented his position to Chief of Station Jorgensen (COS, March 1960-July 1962), and requested permission to use one of the four newly arrived HUS-1 (H-34) helicopters and a pilot to ferry

⁸ Alfred McCoy and Cathleen Read, *The Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia* (New York: Harper and Row, 1991) 270, 271.
Arthur Dommen, *Conflict* 155, 162.
Keith Quincy, 173.

⁹ Following enemy pressure, Neutralist FAL forces withdrew south to temporary defensive positions around Tha Vieng and then east down Route-4 to Tha Thom, forty miles southeast of Xieng Khouang Ville.

¹⁰ Joint Chiefs of Staff, 77.

him and a PARU team to Tha Vieng. Official clearance for the trip materialized well past noon. When Air America Captain Charlie Bade, who normally only worked river sites, heard of the proposed trip to Tha Vieng, he protested that he lacked a map of the area, had never flown there before, and could not possibly journey that far from Vientiane. Maintaining a straight face, Lair countered, *"Don't worry, son. I know this country like the back of my hand. I'll be riding in the copilot's seat with you to point the way."* That revelation mollified Bade, but in actuality, Lair had never previously worked or flown in the Tha Vieng region either. He did, however, own a rare 1:250,000 contour chart of the area.

In order to avoid mountainous terrain and potential enemy hostile action, and to facilitate navigation, Captain Bade followed the Mekong River downstream to Paksane. Then, turning ninety degrees north, he generally followed the Nam Sane, while paralleling a Route-4 trace toward the FAL-controlled Tha Thom Valley. From there, he shifted direction northwest toward Ban Tha Vieng. Shadows already dotted the landscape when Lair spied the knocked-down paddy berms that Sutphin had described. As he directed Bade where to land, he recalled embassy personnel's admonition to ensure their return to Wattay Airport before dark.

A black pajama clad farmer Meo stood near the rough strip as Lair and Parnet rushed from the helicopter inquiring if the man knew Vang Pao and his whereabouts. The farmer nodded in the affirmative, stating that the commander was presently in the immediate area--probably at a nearby village. With the pilot clamoring to depart, Lair was also anxious to adhere to the embassy deadline, and requested that Colonel Parnet and his team remain overnight in the field, and attempt to contact the Meo leader. Parnet, whom Lair trusted and considered the toughest, gutsiest person he ever knew, agreed to stay. He reassured Lair that relaying positive findings would not be a problem, for his men carried radios with the capacity to contact Vientiane on the secure net. Despite pushing the helicopter to maximum speed (VNE), Bade and Lair landed at Wattay Airport well after dark.

The next morning Parnet forwarded a message to Vientiane requesting that Lair return to Tha Vieng. The team had encountered Vang Pao, and he definitely appeared like the man they sought.

Following the identical flight path conducted the previous day, Lair and another pilot helicoptered to Tha Vieng to parlay. During the meeting, Vang Pao and realistic tribal elders indicated that from earlier unhappy experiences with bureaucrats and military leaders in China and Vietnam, a majority of Meo people had realized that they could never live under communist domination without losing a substantial portion of autonomy and ethnic identity. It would effect a drastic and detrimental change to their way of life. They complained that the communists always religiously attempted to organize everyone, and their system would impart extreme hardships on a proud, stubborn, and independent society. Furthermore, they would resist this intensifying trend, or, failing in the endeavor, would soon vacate the area. And they were tired of moving.

Definitely exhausted and drained from numerous dislocations over the years, Vang Pao firmly indicated that his people generally possessed few hard assets and adequate weapons with which to fight. The rudimentary arms they owned consisted of diverse French types remaining from Free French attempts to support larger village home guard units to first resist Japanese occupation, and then the Vietnamese during the previous Indochina War. Such antiquated weapons could certainly never match the superior automatic assault rifles of the well-equipped Viet Minh. However, he contended that with the addition of modern weapons and utilization of guerrilla tactics, the Meo under his control would definitely fight for terrain and survival.

History's legacy often depends on current events, and in Military Region Two, this proved exactly the right time and right place to attempt a Meo resistance. Because communist forces had rapidly rolled up government-held territory in and around the Plain of Jars, Washington advisors recognized the urgency to initiate a counter force before enemy units moved south toward the populated Mekong River towns. Planners considered timing to be essential. With this goal in mind, Lair probed Vang Pao as to the maximum number of men he could immediately rally, and the number of arms required to support such a force. The mild-mannered agent also declared in simple and clear terms that VP would always remain in command of any endeavor, and that he would never pressure him regarding Meo operations. He would merely provide the means to train, supply, and advise



Many youthful Meo were recruited from numerous villages to prosecute the CIA-sponsored guerrilla war against the communists. They fought with outstanding valor and many died alongside peers, leaving a generation gap in the culture. Outfitted in green fatigues, not a typical Meo soldier, this boy slings an M-1 Garand rifle, almost as tall as the youngster. Boots were difficult to obtain to accommodate smaller feet, but used to walking barefoot, Meo had developed tough, calloused feet. The boy most likely failed to survive the war.

Don Babitz Collection.

his troops. His PARU would train Vang Pao's people in map reading, tactics, demolition, and the use of U.S. weapons. Without the slightest hesitation, Vang Pao replied that he could instantly rally 10,000 men.

Although the number of men cited seemed inflated, this elated Lair, who had always harbored the belief that VP would cooperate. Moreover, though exactly what he wanted to hear from the leader, after long hours of researching and assessing Meo history, possibilities, and potential, VP's declaration failed to surprise him. Enormously pleased, he envisioned his long years of planning toward this end finally about to achieve tangible results. ¹¹

BOOSTING THE PROGRAM OFF THE GROUND

As evidenced during the Savannakhet operation to retake Vientiane, Lair's tough PARU teams were anxious and well-prepared to perform the mission. Years of multifaceted training had well equipped his hard-charging PARU to stage similar operations in Cambodia, Burma, or any other country in Southeast Asia. They were always prepared for action, and he possessed the utmost confidence in their ability to complete any enterprise. Even as he considered this scenario, his men stood by at the apartment with all their equipment, ready and willing to launch in any direction at a moment's notice. From long association, his loyal team members never questioned his methods, or hesitated to execute the next task. They just performed. Now Lair's task, which he considered highly complex, entailed selling his ambitious Meo plan to the tough-minded Washington cabal.

His fears were unfounded, for, because of the current situation and urgency to act, top-level authorities were already primed for some kind of paramilitary proposition, and approval was far less difficult than he had envisioned. Indeed, Assistant Secretary of State J. Graham Parsons, Admiral Harry D. Felt, CINCPAC, Winthrop Brown, Ambassador of Laos, and others awaited his recommendations.

Upon his return to Vientiane, Lair reported his optimistic findings pertaining to Vang Pao's decision to resist communist aggression in Military

¹¹ Bill Lair Interview.

Region Two to Chief of Station, Gordon Jorgenson. By chance, Desmond Fitzgerald, Chief of the Agency Far East Division, had just arrived in the capital from Saigon, marking his second trip since the December recapture of Vientiane. Lair considered the visit a stroke of good luck, a propitious opportunity to explain VP's position, and attempted to interest the influential man in a Meo program. After the presentation, pessimistically reflecting on the success of his proposal, Lair considered the noncommittal Fitzgerald's initial impression slightly negative. The following day, Lair again met with his two superiors to further discuss aspects of the plan. This time, Fitzgerald enthusiastically revealed that he approved of his idea. Actually, he only reiterated a mirror image of Allan Dulles and other Washington observers' current opinions on the existing situation. Specifically, unless Meo guerrillas immediately acted to contain the contested area, all northern Laos might rapidly fall under communist domination. The U.S. needed to implement immediate action. Before Fitz departed for his South Vietnam headquarters, he advised Lair to compose a cable as-soon-as-possible (ASAP) delineating the entire Meo proposal, and forward this to him at the Saigon Embassy. That night, Lair laboriously typed and dispatched an eighteen-page informational letter, believing that would probably be the last he heard on the subject. Mindful of USG's convoluted routing system, Lair firmly believed that bureaucratic red tape and political waffling would stifle or perhaps bury any timely decision or enactment of the program.

He was wrong. The Chief of Station (COS) Vientiane shortly received a copy of Lair's cable from Saigon. The document included high-level endorsements, strongly recommending commencing immediate field action. The reply unmistakably cleared Lair to proceed with his goal. Long acquainted with the mechanism of governmental rusty, creaking cogs, such a rapid and positive response for the program totally amazed him. However, always a pragmatic person, he recognized that throughout human history all major measures are afforded an optimum time for implementation.

Initiating the program on a miniature scale, and to test Meo resolve, Washington sanctioned immediate training of 1000 to 3000 tribal men. Long before receiving the nod to proceed, Lair had anticipated such requirements. During extensive hours of preparation, he created a detailed table of organization (TO), supply pipeline, and training details for various contingencies. Coordinating with Agency supply personnel

at Kadena AFB, Okinawa, he requested specified weapons stocked there to cover a variety of situations. After his PARU specialists had tested light, but highly mobile and effective weapons at Hua Hin, Thailand, the Okinawa logistic unit prepared and rigged one hundred-man combat weapons bundles for airdrop. Currently, three of these complete arms packages, outfitted by PARU Team Q handlers, stood ready for delivery at Wattay Airport by Air America and Bird and Son cargo crews. Now a final decision remained regarding a suitable location to drop the combat load packs and initiate training.

After consultation and consideration for maximum safety and security, Vang Pao selected Ban Padong, an elevated village tucked into the northern foothills of Phu Bia Massif. Both Lair and Vang Pao realized that enemy forward observers lodged in outposts on the southern rim of the Plain of Jars would observe the initial airdrops. As a result, they estimated that only a three-day window of opportunity existed before the first hostile elements would attack forward Meo positions. However, the men believed that, with proper planning, PARU trainers could create several formidable units during the condensed training period. During past conflicts in the first Indochina War, Meo fighters had credibly established themselves as impressive opponents of the Viet Minh, especially when struggling to defend their homeland. The clans included a sizable number of men who, like Vang Pao, possessed former military organizational and combat experience. Furthermore, lingering from the extended French Indochina period and recent service in the Lao Army, a semblance of military infrastructure and discipline still existed within some tribes. The current flight into the mountains included many officers and noncoms previously stationed at population centers in and around the Plain of Jars.

Planning went into high gear. With Colonel Parnet leading the initial training unit, and four teams to follow, PARU advisors split the first group of 300 tribal males into three companies. To maintain integrity and loyalty, unit organization centered on the prevailing village structure by using headmen as company commanders. Considering an enemy attack imminent, trainers focused on pertinent subjects that stressed employment of new weapons, operation in squad-sized units, and ambush

preparation.¹²

FRENCH GUERRILLA WARFARE

At least a portion of Lair's Meo resistance plan, and the talent to create it, was most certainly conceived, developed, and inspired by the French Maquis system employed in the early 1950s. By then, individuals in the French high command had realized that a conventional method of warfare would prove unsuccessful in Indochina. Hence, under the auspices of General Jean de Lattre de Tassigny, and supported by young officers such as Major Roger Trinquier, new strategies of counter-guerrilla (counterinsurgency) warfare slowly evolved. Using hill tribes for troops, French intelligence personnel conceived and formed the Mixed Airborne Commando Group (MACG).

By 1954, with 40,000 guerrillas in place, the program had begun to achieve tangible results, ambushing Viet Minh supply lines, holding territory, and providing intelligence. However, before the 400 field officers could expand the Maquis to adequate numbers for the re-conquest of Upper Tonkin, Dien Bien Phu fell.

In Laos, French-led commando unit strength increased substantially in Sam Neua and Xieng Khouang Provinces. The network, initially limited to Military Region Two, eventually extended as far north as Moung Sing and south to Saravane.

When French forces began exiting Indochina, MACG officers generously offered to relinquish the entire paramilitary system to the U.S. military. Agency operative Lucien Conein, a former Office of Strategic Services (OSS) agent, forwarded this information to Washington but, at the time, Department of Defense planners were unable to anticipate future events in Indochina and unwisely wanted nothing to do with a French program. Therefore, as a stopgap measure, under the Saigon Military Mission, CIA operatives, with Civil Air Transport crews flying in supplies, established a paramilitary network in the north until the last French troops left Southeast Asia. Continuing until August, when CAT ceased supplying isolated French outposts, Trinquier radioed all MACG units in the Tai Federation to fight their way into Laos. Several thousand Tai entered Sam Neua and Xieng Khouang provinces into friendly Meo Maquis hands. Those left behind were never

¹² Bill Lair Interview.

seen again. Some Maquis operatives like Vang Pao transferred to the RLA. Others went home to a more normal farming life, and to form the core of village home guards (called ADC or Auto-Defense Choc).

With at least one published book to his credit, Trinquier became a leading international specialist in counterinsurgency warfare. His theories were well accepted, and eventually utilized in Laos and Vietnam. In 1962, American representatives visited him in Paris and offered him a choice position advising on Indochina mountain warfare techniques. Unfortunately, he refused the offer. ¹³

FIRST BLOOD-JANUARY 1961

To provide a temporary stopgap measure along front line positions, air drops commenced at Ban Khang Kho, located on a high ridgeline located close to the southern rim of the Plain of Jars. Observers rated Meo in this area, hardened by previous engagements, as the toughest around. By the 13th, the last of the promised arms delivery arrived. Enemy patrols struck the same day, but partisans controlled the Khang Kho ridge for two additional months before withdrawing to the safer heights of Ban Padong.

Located across the wide Nam Siam River Valley, seven miles south by air from Khang Kho, and deep in the bowels of protective mountains, training at Padong commenced on 17 January 1961. As expected, by 20 January, enemy units moved toward the site. Countering Meo companies streamed into blocking positions, installing booby-traps and creating ambushes that either killed or chased the hostiles back to the Plain. Incurring zero fatalities, the first large Meo action resulted in a resounding success, and greatly bolstered unit morale. Thus, within a relatively short period, it appeared that Lair's concept of conducting an effective guerrilla war in Xieng Khouang Province had succeeded extremely well. Consequently, the initial victory and following triumphs set in motion long range plans to expand the Meo

¹³ For additional information regarding the French inspired and led Meo Marquis during the early 1950s see Alford McCoy, 98-106. Roger Trinquier, *Modern Warfare: A French View of Counterinsurgency* (New York: Praeger, 1964) 16, 110. Ken Conboy, 6-8.



A scenic view of rugged mountains and densely wooded forests from an elevated tribal village, so common in Laos.

Ron Clarke Collection.



Early photo of youthful looking Meo guerrilla leader Vang Pao pointing to a position on a tactical map with his knife.

Don Babitz Collection.

program many-fold over the years.

INITIAL HUS-1 LOSS

During this period, an unfortunate HUS-1 accident marked the helicopter program's initial rotorcraft loss. On 22 January, the Customer assigned Clarence (Ab) Abadie to work in the Padong area, under the original ICA 39-007 contract. Bill Lair, who had previously flown with Ab in both the H-19 and the HUS, occupied the left seat of Hotel Delta (Bureau Number 143693) to assist with navigation. After an interim landing at the Paksane river town, they entered the relatively unfamiliar mountainous region to the north. Lair instructed Abadie to land on a narrow 3,600-foot ridgeline east of Padong that overlooked the Tha Vieng area, to embark Vang Pao and move him ten miles northwest to the Khang Kho ridge. The position, near Ban Pha Phia--later listed as Site-65--, provided only enough room for the width of a helicopter fuselage, and all four main rotor blades hung over the sheer hillside. The landing pad appeared to be recently hacked out of the jungle, but looked used, as empty fuel drums sat nearby. Then, as Lair pointed the way, the party flew diagonally across the valley to Khang Kho. Because of recent Pathet Lao advances, Vang Pao urgently wanted to discuss impending Padong troop movements to counter enemy movement with the ADC commanding officer. After performing a circling reconnaissance, Abadie selected a suitable section to land on the hilltop near the village. When Lair rejected the proposed spot, fearing potential danger from old, uncharted mines, Abadie chose an alternate landing zone, located in defilade on a slope to the south, below his original choice. Landing facing the hill, in the center of moderately high trees, Ab shut down and the party climbed up a winding trail to the village.

THE CRASH

At midday, following the parlay, Ab prepared to depart the confined area and deliver Lair, Parnet, plus three additional staff members to Padong, where they would help coordinate troop movements between the sites.

Concerned that departure from the tight hole might present a problem, Abadie carefully lifted Hotel-Delta to a hover, and then turned ninety degrees to the west.

Paralleling downhill terrain during takeoff, he planned to dive downward to obtain proper flying speed. Maintaining 2800 RPM, hover power appeared acceptable for departure. After ascending vertically above tree top level and turning further left, he rotated forward into a takeoff attitude. Well above the cushioning ground effect (OGE) downwash, and with other detrimental factors impinging lift performance, the aircraft rapidly began settling into the trees.

Lair, sensing trouble during takeoff, instinctively hyperventilated as the large ridge loomed in front of them. From his experience flying with other pilots, he estimated that the helicopter was too low, and perhaps headed into the trees. Confident that all former Marine pilots thoroughly understood mountain flying, Lair relaxed a bit, thinking that at the last moment Ab would pull up and zoom over the ridge.

Confronted with insufficient groundspeed and altitude to dive and fly out of the settling-with-power condition, and rapidly losing RPM, Abadie simply became a bystander during the incident. The die was cast. Any additional action at this critical point would accomplish little and only exacerbate the deteriorating situation. The ship plunged straight down. As the whirling rotor blades chopped through branches, they splintered and ultimately separated from the rotor hub. Then, with a searing jolt, the main landing gear struck the incline. Surprisingly, the machine remained upright, while bouncing off trees and tobogganing downhill. Subsequently, the right landing gear assembly collapsed and the remainder of Hotel Delta concluded its journey tilted to the right.

During the gravity-induced plunge and slide, aviation gasoline liberally gushed from fuselage tears, and an overpowering stench of fuel fumes permeated the cockpit. Concerned about a potential explosion and fire, Lair clenched his teeth, waiting for the machine to terminate its pinball gyrations, before he bailed out as if shot from a gun. Focused on a rapid exit, he failed to hear Abadie yelling at him, the Flight Mechanic, and the passengers to evacuate the potential bomb.

Once a safe distance from Hotel-Delta, Lair glanced back. Strangely, no one moved. Except for a muffled sound from the dying engine, silence prevailed. Then Parnet called out, "*Bill, you OK?*" Chastened, but relieved to hear his

friend's voice, he thought, "Gee, Parnet primarily considers my welfare and the first thing I think about is saving my worthless hide."

Concerned about the other helicopter occupants, he dashed to the cabin door yelling, *"You guys better hustle out of there. I smell gasoline and it might blow anytime."* Finally, the passengers squeezed from the cabin section, but Abadie, still secured in his harness, appeared dazed and suffering from shock.¹⁴

Still apprehensive, Lair shouted again, *"Ab, you better get out of there!"* Due to the aircraft angle, the pilot scrambled out the left window and climbed the hill. Then he ambled on wobbly knees to the nearest tree and plopped down. Placing his head in his hands, he thanked God for saving them. Thinking that Abadie was crying, Lair misinterpreted the Captain's pose. After surviving the trying experience, and pumped by excessive adrenaline, the elated Lair never felt better in his life. Therefore, puzzled at Abadie's demeanor, he inquired. *"Ab, what's wrong? You just climbed out of that beast safely. You should be happy we survived."*

Ab, realizing that he had no valid excuse for his pilot error, actually felt like crying. He patiently said with much concern, *"Bill, I'm going to lose my job."*

Exasperated, Lair countered, *"No, you won't lose your job. I know Bob Rousselot quite well and will write him a letter and explain the circumstances regarding the incident. Don't worry about your job."* Then, when Ab looked relieved, Lair asked him what happened during takeoff.

¹⁴ As Abadie related to the Author in later years, unknown to Lair at the time, following the crash and ensuing slide toward destruction, Ab's head, only minimally protected by his military helmet, which was notoriously deficient in protecting the individual's parietal section of the skull, liberally jerked and bounced off the rotor brake assembly and window jam. Although he experienced no pain, much later, he discovered that he had suffered a slightly crushed or fractured vertebrae in his neck and lower back. After incurring such trauma, one could understand why he cleaned up the cockpit slowly, and marveled that he was even able to secure the engine.

Abadie simply replied, *"I lost my turns."*¹⁵

Since the Khang Kho ridgeline represented the most forward friendly location affording an excellent view of a portion of the southern Plain of Jars, resident Meo maintained a company of local home guard ADC troops at the site. An antiquated U.S. Army "Angry Nine" (AN-9) radio provided intelligence communications with Vang Pao's radio operators. Described as a "big voice or key set," the bulky World War Two device required constant manpower to maintain rotation of the dual manual crank generator. Despite the sobering circumstances of the day's events, observing two scraggly Meo operate the radio amused the Westerners. While one man sat and wildly turned the two arms of the generator, the other pounded on the transmitting mechanism, screaming into the microphone in guttural half English, "Alo-Alo." Despite the idiosyncrasies of the outmoded device, they eventually established contact with the Vientiane Embassy and relayed details of the crash. However, radio operators there, relatively naive in helicopter terminology, failed to comprehend the non-airworthy state of Hotel Delta, and continued inquiring about the necessary parts required to restore the machine to flying condition.

The Filipino Flight Mechanic, despite badly injuring his back, possessed enough presence of mind to remove his toolbox while departing the wreck. Abadie, aware of enemy units' proximity to the ridge and their potential to capture radios containing discrete Air America frequencies, borrowed the shaken mechanic's tools. While two twelve-year-old Meo boys provided security with rifles as tall as, or taller than, the youngsters, he spent the remaining afternoon removing critical aircraft parts and other readily accessible components, and carrying them up the hill. With day trips still the operational norm, pilots carried no RON or survival gear onboard their helicopters.

¹⁵ Hindsight: During takeoff, depending on aircraft load factor, RPM in a throttle manipulated reciprocating engine helicopter must be constantly monitored and maintained at a steady setting to ensure sufficient power and lift for a successful transition to flight. Any large pedal turn would require additional pilot attention to compensate for RPM changes and a reduction of lift to the anti-torque device. Additionally, one could speculate the problem could have been fostered by a combination of contributing factors: an out of ground effect condition, density altitude, load, and adverse winds.

RON

Since no helicopter was available to retrieve the crash victims and Vang Pao until morning, the men were obligated to spend the night. Consequently, the village headman invited the visitors to "enjoy" a night of native hospitality. At sundown, all family members and guests entered the house. The group included a dog, a horse, and several pigs. Supper consisted of rice and greens served in a large communal pot. Without benefit of utensils, the headman dipped food from the container with cupped hands. In turn, every guest followed his example. From Abadie's perspective, the final dipper enjoyed all the "seasoning" benefits from other's soiled hands. The practice revolted him but, rather than starve, he attempted to choke down the mess. Throughout a long, miserable winter night, the combined animal and unwashed human stench became so overwhelming that Abadie, despite the intense cold, huddled near a small opening in the bark wall.

Lair and Pranet spent a relatively more comfortable night than Abadie. As highly honored guests, the village boss man offered them a separate room that included a western style bed. However, it lacked a mattress and consisted of only hard boards. Making matters worse, their host provided only one blanket to ward off the penetrating cold. Therefore, while vying for warmth, the friends passed the night unconsciously tugging the covers back and forth.

Charlie Bade arrived early the following morning to retrieve the survivors. Before his arrival, Ab instructed the locals to clear the hillside landing zone allowing Bade to takeoff with a proper drop-off instead of risking a climb out over trees. Later, when convenient, maintenance personnel recovered major components from Hotel Delta, but the damaged fuselage would lie rotting for years subject to the elements. The loss of the machine constituted the first of many UH-34 strikes in 1961.¹⁶

Vang Pao, thereafter skeptical of Abadie's piloting ability, arranged to never

¹⁶ UH-34 strike: Aircraft destroyed and removed from the helicopter inventory list. Parts of Hotel Delta were recovered in 1965 to be utilized in rebuild operations at the Udorn maintenance facility.

fly with him again. ¹⁷

REPLACEMENT AIRCRAFT

Responding to an urgent request to restore Air America's helicopter inventory to its original level, the Department of Defense (DOD) ordered an additional Marine HUS-1 deleted from Far Eastern stocks and bailed to Air America. Consequently, Bureau Number 145745 HUS-1 was removed from the inventory of Okinawa-based squadron HMR-162. Field replacements for Air America ostensibly required delivery of relatively pristine aircraft, or those most recently out of overhaul. In reality, this was not always the case. During the highly sensitive movement, Sergeant Bert Palmer observed Technical Sergeant Alva Cobb depart with the ship. At the time, no one had ever heard of Laos and, to preserve a semblance of secrecy, simply referred to the machine as "going south." The helicopter arrived at Don Muang Airport on 2 February. ¹⁸ Returning to the squadron after several weeks, Cobb informed Palmer that Air Force pilots flew the aircraft to Bangkok in a C-124 Globemaster. Then the Okinawa crew and civilian personnel, aided by hydraulic ramps, laboriously offloaded the machine through the two nose-mounted clamshell doors. Then it was reassembled and test flown. Constrained by a pervasive "need to know," he related no more concerning the aircraft disposition. Consistent with the sequential lettering system (with no thought of ever requiring more than twenty-eight alphabet letters) the ship assumed the identity of Hotel Echo.

After returning to Okinawa, Cobb recounted a colorful incident that occurred at the Bangkok Erawan Hotel during the rebuild stage. It involved Master Sergeant Peter Hillock, who accompanied the others in the capacity of a MAG-16 group coordinator. One night after work, while drinking heavily in the bar, Hillock still wore his orange flight suit. Venerated Thai monks also wore similarly colored saffron robes. Hoping to avert an international incident,

¹⁷ Bill Leary Notes of 06/10/90 CJ Abadie Interview.
 CJ Abadie Interview at Author's House in Metairie, Louisiana, 05/30/98.
 CJ Abadie Emails, 02/06/99, 02/08/99, 02/12/99.
 JJ McCauley Letter, 01/28/91
 Bill Lair Taped Interview with Author in Bangkok, Thailand, 6 Nov. 1995. CIA Chief of Station at Udorn Thailand until 1968, the majority of the segment is attributed to Lair.
 Ken Conboy, 61-62.

¹⁸ Joe Leeker The Aircraft of Air America.



Marines preparing to unload a stripped replacement HUS-1 from the cargo bay of a USAF C-124.
Knight Collection.



Lacking adequate ground handling equipment, sturdy Marines manhandle a HUS-1 out of a C-124 Globemaster's nose cargo compartment.

Knight Collection.



A final photo in the sequence of MABS Marines unloading a HUS-1 from a U.S. Air Force C-124.
Knight Collection.

and theorizing that the culturally sensitive Thais might perceive Hillock's orange coverall as mocking their bonzes and religion, a U.S. Navy captain attached to the American Embassy summarily ejected him. Not dissuaded by the superior officer's action, the staff sergeant returned later even more soused than before, and told the captain off. ¹⁹

The Air America helicopter operation required an unrestricted pipeline and a constant stream of replacement parts. After being ordered and forwarded from Japan, helicopter components arrived at the Marine Corps wing supply depot on Okinawa, from where they were normally redirected to active squadrons. However, Air America priority requirements disrupted this procedure. On one occasion, Crew Chief I.W. Maze helped push a stand-mounted transmission from the HMR-162 hangar to the group hangar area. After a plane landed at Futema, he and others loaded the component into the large cargo bay for transfer "South."

Additionally, an all-encompassing overhaul facility existed at Shimnawa, Japan, near Kobe, where maintenance personnel produced zero-time helicopters slated for Air America. Japanese performed the work with a small contingent of Americans assisting. Navy test pilots certified the aircraft airworthy and returned them to the fleet. Fitted with internal fuel tanks, Burt Palmer participated in a HUS-1 ferry to Okinawa. Despite the danger involved in a long single engine flight over water, he considered the duty to be choice because of liberal per diem, and the fact that Shimnawa was an excellent liberty town. ²⁰

AGENCY FIELD ADVISORS JOE HUDACHEK AND BILL YOUNG

Shortly after PARU units trained the first Meo volunteers, Bill Lair reluctantly dispatched a pair of American "round eye" agents to Padong. Because no one could accurately project the duration required for the Meo operation, to maintain a degree of Western invisibility from snooping reporters, his original plan had envisioned using only Thai

¹⁹ Apparently, Pete Hillock survived the incident, but likely lost a stripe. I had become acquainted with Pete during my Okinawa tour.

²⁰ Burt Palmer Emails, 03/14/04, 05/15/04.
Burt Palmer Interview with Author at Hernando, Mississippi, 05/19/04.

personnel. Mainly because of the obvious contrasting physical appearance between Occidental (round eyes) and Oriental races, he considered that requirement a necessary step. Lair soon discovered that he required field coordinators equipped with special skills: those able to interpret, monitor, oversee, report, and funnel pertinent intelligence to Vientiane regarding the Meo operation. Therefore, despite Lair's aversion to employing Americans within such a sensitive environment, the men became the first of a handful of operatives to help implement the project code-named "Momentum."²¹

Senior Agency man Joe Hudacheck arrived first at Padong. A U.S. Army major during World War Two, many associates considered him one of the world's finest demolition experts and an excellent instructor, given an American environment. Before being tapped for Laos, he had worked for Bill Lair at Hua Hin, Thailand, training PARU in the finer arts of blowing items to smithereens. However, once in the mountains, peers discovered the older man to be high strung, and unable to provide the finesse necessary for the difficult job, one which required extraordinary patience training illiterate and naive Asians. Attempting to organize the stubborn Meo by using the same methods employed with Americans seemed to particularly frustrate him. Within a few months, he evidenced distrust of everyone, while increasingly displaying nervous and paranoid tendencies. Eventually, after bogging down with logistics problems, and no longer being able to cope with normal daily routines, Hudacheck suffered a nervous breakdown and departed Southeast Asia.

THE CURIOUS AMERICAN

Bill Young arrived soon after Hudacheck. Air America Chief Pilot at Vientiane, Fred Walker, flew Young to the site in a Helio Courier. Captain Walker was a large man--so large that in the confined Helio cockpit his knees jutted humorously up around his chin, almost restricting his ability to manipulate the control yoke.²²

A unique young man, Young marked the third generation of a Southeast Asian-based

²¹ Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 61.

²² Bill Young two-day taped interviews with Author at the Princess Royal Hotel Chiang Mai, Thailand 10/19/95.

missionary family. His grandfather had initially worked in Burma. In the forties, during World War Two, his father became involved with the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), an organization that evolved into the CIA in the late fifties. Except for some education in the States and a short stint with the U.S. Army 82nd Airborne, during his formative years, his father's work had encouraged close contact with various tribal children, exposing Young to numerous cultures that included various languages and dialects, an experience that adapted Bill to life with hill tribe people.²³

Bill Lair had known Young since the early 1950s, when he employed the eighteen-year-old to utilize his extraordinary linguistic talents with local dialects and close family ties with local tribes. It was during a period when the first Royal Thai Government-sponsored PARU operation, calculated to smash an opium smuggling camp reputed to be operating in the hills outside Chiang Mai, was about to commence. During the successful operation, Lair conceived the idea of recruiting hill people and training them in various aspects of counter guerrilla warfare.

During the first months, the PARU group gathered intelligence from police and other local people, as to the general location of the opium camp. Further information revealed that after harvesting the opium crop in Burma, yearly pony caravans arrived at the heavily fortified smuggler camp and offloaded the cargo. Local villagers would then journey to the camp to purchase the product and hatch their deals for distribution. Even during the off-season, selected peddlers from local hill tribes frequently entered the area to sell chickens, eggs, vegetables, and other necessary commodities to the 400 Chinese troops staged there. These were remnants of the former 93rd Chinese Nationalist Army (KMT) who first crossed over into Burma after the communist Chinese armies moved into Yunnan Province in 1949. Hoping to acquire current intelligence relating to the disposition of the site and defenses, Young and Lair recruited and trained a Meo youngster who, as a trusted food supplier, had access to the Haw base.

Employing the boy's critical information, during the middle of the night a hundred-man PARU Company, under the command of Captain Saneh Sittapan, scaled the steepest and least defended side of the mountain encampment and attacked. Utilizing the element of surprise,

²³ McCoy, 265-266, 302-304.

without too much effort, the PARU unit soundly routed the smugglers. In addition to scattering the menacing band in this area of the North, they captured a considerable opium stash and many crew-served weapons. Other smaller Border Police patrol (BPP) operations followed over the following six months. ²⁴

In 1960, Young briefly became involved in the Lao equation. Following Kong Le's August coup, while he was on an Agency assignment in Bangkok, handlers directed him to journey into the Lao countryside to obtain intelligence and assess the situation. However, Young disliked flying, particularly in the old Bird and Son C-47. Unhappy with the conditions he observed in the country, he soon terminated Agency employment and returned to Chiang Mai to assist his father in establishing a northern Thailand citrus culture. ²⁵

By January 1961, Lair, desperately requiring competent individuals with Thai-Meo linguistic skills and field experience, once again contacted Young and requested that he tackle the Padong assignment. Young agreed, primarily for reasons based on former working relationships with Lair, which entailed mutual trust and confidence. He believed that with the easy-going Lair as his supervisor and mentor, he would have no problems. However, such rapport did not extend equally to other Americans, for he always proffered his own ideas and methods on how to administer programs. His methodology additionally baffled unwitting peers, who failed to comprehend the inner workings of the complex man: mainly that, despite a distinct Caucasian appearance, he possessed Asian thought processes.

During the early period, technologically ignorant natives displayed wild and undisciplined conduct while boarding helicopters. Perceiving available space, they simply piled on. To the consternation of the pilot or Flight Mechanic, they often invaded the electronics barrier, slipping into the tail cone area, reserved for only electronics equipment. At first, it puzzled Americans as to why so many people desired to leave Padong. Gradually they discovered that the more commercially minded locals wanted to journey to Vientiane, where they stocked up on consumer goods to trade or sell in the Padong area. Late one afternoon Young waited in the left seat for an infrequent visit to Vientiane. As usual,

²⁴ Bill Lair Interview, 11/06/95 & Notes.
Bill Young Interviews.

²⁵ Bill Young Interview.

the customary mobbing and sorting process took a considerable period to resolve. Following takeoff, he glanced out and observed a teenager, probably rejected from the cabin section, perched on the left wheel strut. Concerned that the guy would drop to his death, he informed Captain Tom Moher about the hitchhiker. The lengthy and laborious loading process had already consumed considerable remaining daylight, so Moher, not wanting to waste any more time, sneered, "OK, we'll give him a breezy ride to Wattay." For forty minutes the youngster sat facing aft, enduring the icy windblast and holding on for dear life. The incident provided a real study in human desire to persevere and survive. ²⁶

Vang Pao's long term strategy visualized creation of ten guerrilla resistance zones in Military Region Two, each consisting of two dozen or more Meo villages. The zones strategically ringed the Plain of Jars, or associated arteries leading from North Vietnam. He designed these areas to closely monitor enemy road movements and coordinate plans implemented to sting, and possibly contain them, at his choosing. Over time, a large number of enemy casualties attested to the plan's success.

WASHINGTON

Soon after the Democrats assumed office in Washington, President Kennedy noted a dearth in his administration of individuals knowledgeable and available for advice regarding Southeast Asian geopolitical affairs. To correct this deficiency, he established a substantial unit, named the Lao Task Force, to plan and advise him on Lao policy. To the detriment of other pressing world and domestic problems, he spent much of the following two months on the inherited Lao crisis.

The Lao Task Force proposed several plans early in February: The King could declare Lao neutralization, reestablish a neutral nation commission (NNC), and persuade Phoumi to conduct a Plain of Jars offensive, encourage SEATO movements within the region, or deploy a U.S. military unit to Thailand. The thinkers particularly stressed improved Soviet relations to alleviate the situation. Based on these recommendations, JFK approved and set in motion most provisions, except sending troops to Thailand, which was sensitive to the basing of

²⁶ Bill Young Interviews.

foreign troops on its soil. ²⁷

After RLA withdrawal from the Plain of Jars in December, the former French Foreign Legion post on the northern portion of the PDJ at Khang Khay reverted to a joint Neutralist/Pathet Lao/Vietnamese "field technician" stronghold deep in enemy territory. Toward the end of January, leftist politician Quinim Pholsena established an opposition government there on the northeastern Plain of Jars. For months, parallel rival governments controlled their respective parts of Laos. With the King's blessing, but complicating the historically confusing Lao political situation, neutralist leader Souvanna Phouma, who never legally resigned as Lao Prime Minister, returned from Cambodia in February. After consulting with his small cabinet and military commander Kong Le, in what seemed an increasingly Lao norm, he resumed leadership of the rival government in exile. Acceding to geopolitical desires, with Souvanna firmly in place, the major international powers officially recognized and supported each respective government (The U.S. Thailand, Britain, and France-Boun Oum; India, the Soviet Union, and China-Souvanna Phouma). The arrangement provided an unappetizing and dangerous dichotomy in that the opposing governments possessed all the ingredients for a civil war, potentially leading to a confrontation between the U.S. and the USSR. ²⁸

Unsettling reports from the field constantly distressed Washington advisors. By the end of February, they admitted that a better-organized and better-equipped North Vietnamese enemy continued to thwart RLA movement onto the Plain of Jars. Indeed, the policy of using the Pathet Lao as small guerrilla units had drastically changed since capturing the PDJ. Operating under a joint command, with the additional strength of increasing numbers of Kong

²⁷ U.S., Congress, Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, the U.S. Government and the Vietnam War: Executive and Legislative Roles and Relationships, Part 2, 1961-1964, Chapter 1, *The Decision to Stand Firm in Vietnam, What to do About Laos?* (Washington: U.S Government Printing Office, 1985).

²⁸ Hugh Toye, 162, 163-164.
Arthur Dommen, *Laos: Keystone of Indochina* (Boulder & London: Westview, 1985) 66, 69.

Le's troops, existing or recruited Pathet Lao augmented troops already in the area. Over time, assisted by a North Vietnamese unit, these men were shaped into regular battalions. High priority Soviet field and AAA guns delivered by airlift, crewed by Lao, remained under Vietnamese control.²⁹

Since the FAL captured Sala Phou Khoun junction on 4 February and commenced pincer movements from the east and south, Western observers measured Phoumi's army movements along Route-7 toward the Plain of Jars comprising only a few disappointing kilometers. On 11 February, the advance was delayed by enemy resistance on the heights of Phou Soung, only four miles east of Sala Phou Khoun.³⁰

More troubling to the task force, because of a current intelligence deficiency, it proved impossible to speculate when the enemy might launch a counter offensive. On the upside, optimists believed the RLA would hold their present defensive positions.

OPERATIONS FROM PADONG

With a successful paramilitary training program underway at Padong, authorization for expansion to counter enemy advances logically followed. Despite continued misgivings over employing "round-eyes" in Laos, in order to help implement continued expansion and recruiting, Bill Lair dispatched trusted old timer advisors Jack Shirley and Tom Fosmire upcountry in March. Well qualified for the task, both men had participated in past Agency Sea Supply operations conducting PARU training at Camp Narasuan outside Hua Hin, Thailand. Tony Poshepny (AKA Tony Poe), a tough-minded, brawny former Marine with clandestine experience in Korea and Indonesia, who would eventually become a living legend in Laos, followed. Pat Landry, Tom Ahern, and Brian Mills also eventually joined the mix. With PARU teams leading the way, the small cadre, acting on Vang Pao's counsel, established additional recruiting and training facilities at elevated remote sites throughout the region.³¹

²⁹ Joint Chiefs of Staff, Chronological Summary of Significant Events Concerning the Laotian Crisis, Second Installment: 1 February to 31 March 1961, Historical Division, Joint Secretariat, 19 May 1961, 6.

³⁰ Joint Chiefs of Staff, 8.

³¹ JCS, 12.

The futility of inept Lao troops holding territory against any enemy pressure soon became evident. Toward the end of the first week in March, liberally supplied by road and airdrops with upgraded Soviet weapons, forceful Neutralist and Pathet Lao attacks commenced against forward FAL units. Counterattacks began with platoon-sized probes and artillery. With FAL companies weakening, the enemy committed larger units. Within a few days, they forced a government withdrawal west to the Sala Phou Khoun road junction.³² When ordered to counterattack, demoralized frontline troops resisted commands, jettisoned their weapons, and dashed seventeen miles south to Moung Kassy. Others moved west along Route-7 toward Kiou Cacham.

The government's military situation continued to deteriorate. By 10 March, FAL troops abandoned Moung Kassy and moved further south to Ban Thieng. There, where the troops perceived relative safety, U.S. Special forces Field Training Team-59 (FTT), Team Moon, attempted to hastily motivate and re-forged the defeated unit into a cohesive fighting force. They considered stiffening measures imperative, for it appeared that after only a few days of fighting, hostile forces possessed the capability to move on either Luang Prabang or Vientiane.³³

³² Ken Conboy, 62, 63.
Joint Chiefs of Staff, 38.
Hugh Toye, 165.

³³ Major General Oudone Sannikone, *Indochina Monographs, The Royal Lao Army and the U.S Army Advice and Support* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1979), 76.



CIA map (3/16/61) depicting the area of hostilities in Military Region Two on the upper Route-13 highway. More fighting progressed to the east south of Route-4 near Ban Tha Vieng. The Meo garrison at Padong was located a few miles west of Tha Vieng.

A CIA Bulletin reported:

"...military pressure by Kong Le-[PL] forces west of the [PDJ] continues to increase. Moung Kassy, an important point on the [VTE]-[LP] highway, is reported to have been occupied by the enemy on 10 March. This report follows the withdrawal earlier this week of government troops from the strategic Phou Khoun road junction north of Moung Kassy. The Kong Le-[PL] forces evidently are continuing to press this initial advantage, but information as of 0500 EST today is insufficient to tell whether they have embarked on a major effort against government forces in the area." ³⁴

By the 11th, RLG incurred further losses throughout the country: in the Military Region Three border region in central Laos, positions at Lak Sao and Nape changed hands.

Communist pressure led to deterioration of RLA positions in the Route-13 area, and over the next few days the Kong Le-[Pathet Lao] combine continued exploiting their success along the [Vientiane to Luang Prabang] highway. This led to concerns regarding a threat to [Luang Prabang]. More disconcerting, the build-up of enemy forces on the Plain of Jars continued unabated. ³⁵

Politics always had to be considered:

"There are reports that the Lao government delegation arriving in Phnom Penh today for additional talks with Souvanna Phouma will also meet with [PL] representatives..."

Peiping and Hanoi seem particularly disturbed by the Phnom Penh meeting between Souvanna Phouma and Phoumi. While avoiding any direct criticism of Souvanna, they are re-broadcasting [PL] statements clearly intended to remind Souvanna that his position would be weak were it not for the support of pro-communist military forces in Laos..."

A 13 March [PL] broadcast likened the recent Phoumi-Souvanna communiqué to the 19 February proposal of King Savang for a neutral nation commission and note that Souvanna had already rejected this proposal. The broadcast declared that the [Pathet Lao] would 'oppose all concessions which are against the interests of the nation.'" ³⁶

³⁴ CIA Bulletin, Laos, 03/11/61.

³⁵ CIA Bulletin, Laos.

³⁶ CIA Bulletin.

ROUTE-4

Besides counter-attacking government forces on Route-13, the communists planned to contest other government advance routes, and in turn move toward the Mekong. By the second week in March, local spies filtered information to Vang Pao's intelligence units at Padong regarding enemy movement south from the provincial capital of Xieng Khouang Ville. The agent had observed sizable convoys preparing to make their way south on Route-4 to reinforce troops located north of the government Ban Tha Vieng blocking position. This could only present dire consequences for RLA forces stationed at Tha Vieng and Tha Thom. To counter the movement and preserve their lowland positions, Vang Pao and his advisors hastily conceived a night interdiction mission.

With Joe Hudacheck handling demolitions, and Bill Young the fire teams, Vang Pao organized a substantial strike force. Before long the agents, a single PARU, and 300 Meo humped overland southeast to a high point overlooking the Tha Vieng lowlands. While the Meo busily established defensive hilltop positions, the three honchos helicoptered to the valley floor, where a forward FAL battalion camped. After consultation with Lao officers regarding the attack plan, the trio walked up the hill to rest and await the following evening. At that time, they planned to move east onto a north-south section of Route-4, emplace numerous explosive charges, locate ambush fire teams along portions of the improved road, and, during the early morning hours, hope for a substantial kill.

The mission unraveled almost immediately, for the enemy also possessed reliable intelligence resources. Learning that substantial Meo irregulars were camped in the area, the enemy reacted swiftly. First, they viciously attacked the FAL battalion, scattering troops in all directions, and then switched attention to the Meo. Desiring to minimize casualties for an impending surge toward Tha Thom, and possibly Paksane, Pathet Lao interpreters enlisted villagers from the sparsely populated area to forward messages encouraging Meo troops to discard their weapons and leave. They also clearly stated that their primary targets were the American advisors. However, Vang Pao's loyal troops refused the entreaty and the battle commenced. In less than twenty-four hours, 300 artillery rounds pounded suspected friendly positions. Radio intercepts suggested that not only indigenous Lao participated in the attack; Young heard both Vietnamese and Chinese voices adjusting 105mm howitzer fire from forward observer positions.

Through his field glasses the following morning, Young observed long enemy lines

winding slowly through dense jungle and hills toward his position. At this point, unsure about Meo deployment and readiness to engage, the enemy cautiously moved forward. Therefore, for a few hours, Meo gunners directed all available friendly fire toward the advancing units. Then, after expending their final rounds, the besieged force dispersed into small elements, departed the mountain, and began exfiltration through enemy lines toward Padong.

Young, Hudacheck, a Thai NCO, and six Meo guides comprised one evading unit. Equipped with four ground-to-air HT-1 hand-held radios, they discovered the communication devices useless in an area too hostile for air supply. To ensure maximum cover and concealment, they traveled only at night. For information concerning enemy movement, they relied on older local people who, unconcerned about the current fighting, remained in the contested area to tend their pigs. The group carried no food during the trek, for prior planning had conceived a mission of short duration, and they had consumed the last kernels of rice while still on the mountain. A large stream they paralleled and eventually crossed provided little sustenance. Fortunately, Young, astute in jungle survival, always carried a few tins of condensed milk. He punched small holes in the top of a can, swallowed a little and liberally chased it with water. Then he shared his stash with the others. The experiment worked. Within twenty minutes, effects of the mixture surged through their deprived bodies, raising blood sugar levels to energize the group sufficiently to continue their forced march. Carefully rationed, the cans' contents provided the human body high energy and satisfied hunger for short periods. Young believed that the bovine nourishment ultimately saved the group.

Traveling cautiously, it required several days out of radio contact to approach Padong. Eventually, concerned individuals at the headquarters base dispatched troops to search for the lost unit, but Young's group was already ascending the lower slopes when they met the descending units.

Although the main objective of the mission failed, only slowing the enemy advance toward Tha Thom, few Meo were lost. Predictably, most casualties stemmed from concealed and undocumented booby traps, around which individual Meo displayed careless tendencies.³⁷

An Agency Bulletin reported at the time:

"Kong Le-[PL] forces are continuing their pressure on government forces both north of the Phou Khoun junction and south of Xieng Khouang. In the former area, forward elements of

³⁷ Bill Young Interviews.



After abandoning Tha Vieng Lao government troops withdrew east to the vicinity of Tha Thom.
CIA Map, 03/21/61.

government forces reportedly were under fire from 105mm artillery on 17 March, possibly signaling a new enemy push there.

Laotian Army troops in the vicinity of Ban Tha Vieng were withdrawing on March 17th toward Tha Thom..."³⁸

Intelligence reports continued:

"Government units in southern Xieng Khouang province apparently have largely completed their withdrawal to Tha Thom, where they are preparing defensive positions. Government partisans [Meo] operating in the general area continue harassment of Kong Le-[PL] forces.

...a government battalion at Kam Kout [in Military Region Three], some 70 miles east of Paksane has abandoned its post in the face of [PL] attack of unknown strength on 20 March.

A press report from [Vientiane] alleges that the [Pathet Lao] be allowed to form 'states' out of the areas they now control and that these along with all other Laotian provinces be represented in an elected national parliament. This formula may have been advanced with official sanction out of desperation over the military situation as a trial balloon to elicit the attitude of the [PL] toward a political settlement, following the breakdown of talks with Souvanna Phouma. As such it would be in character with the Laotian inclination toward compromise. It may, however, have been devised unilaterally...; in this event, it would be a further indication of the confusion now prevalent in the government in [Vientiane]."³⁹

³⁸ CIA Daily Brief, Laos, 04/18/61.

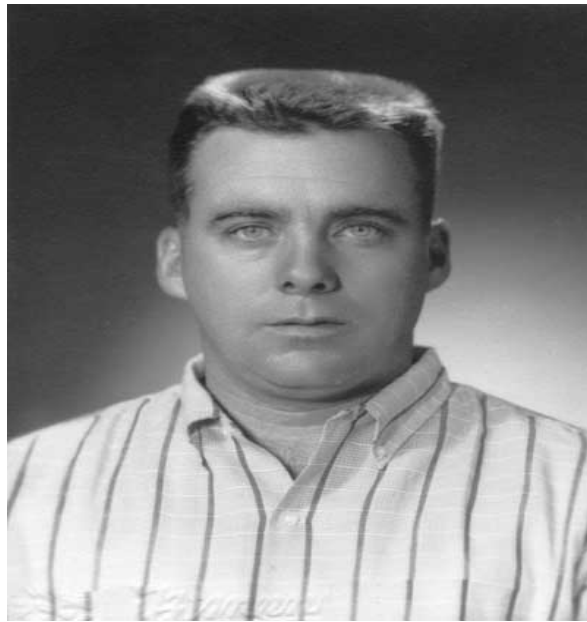
³⁹ CIA Daily Brief, Laos, 04/21/61.

Following an abbreviated period flying as co-pilot with "Old Timers," temporary duty (TDY) Marine pilots on loan to Air America returned to their unit. With the advent of Wineberg's release and Marine departure, one helicopter remained unmanned until Hotel Delta's January loss. Until this time, maintenance personnel had cannibalized scarce spare parts from extra aircraft. Then, with the addition of Hotel Echo in February, the H-34 fleet returned to four and, with a positive flow of parts and components from Okinawa stocks, management considered hiring an additional pilot.

JJMCCAULEY

Toward the end of January 1961, George Doole, Air America Chief Executive Officer in Washington, phoned USMC Captain Jack J. McCauley at the Marine Corps Air Facility Santa Anna, California, and offered him a helicopter position in Vientiane, Laos. J.J. knew about the Air America operation, for he had attended Vice President of Operations (VPO) Bob Rousselot's second meeting the previous year on Okinawa, soliciting volunteer pilots for Laos. At the time, despite the allure of good pay and high adventure, McCauley's family considerations prompted him to decline the offer.

By October 1960, disillusioned with the Marine Corps, he had written to his friend CJ Abadie seeking employment. However, until the CEO's call he had heard nothing, and had nearly forgotten about the Company. Doole informed him that Abadie had previously forwarded the letter to Taipei and it had worked slowly through Company channels to Washington. J.J., unfamiliar with Doole or his lofty position in the Company, emphasized his enthusiasm for employment. This satisfied Doole. He advised the captain to resign his USMC commission immediately and standby at his duty station for additional information. Because considerable time remained to complete McCauley's military tour, he was skeptical about an early out. Nevertheless, he still submitted a termination request. By 23 February, three weeks to the day after McCauley had talked to the Air America CEO, the station adjutant called to inform him of his separation, and that he must leave the reservation by mid-afternoon. Incredibly, as if by magic, Washington personnel had quickly bypassed all bureaucratic red tape and the



Captain Jack "JJ" McCauley

following morning he found himself onboard a commercial flight to the Far East. After a few days at Taipei headquarters processing, meeting principals, and attending escape and evasion classes, he departed the head shed and arrived at Wattay Airport before noon on 3 March.

Following pleasantries and conversations with Abadie, McCauley judged that his former squadron mate was in the process of phasing out his line pilot career. To the new arrival, it appeared that Taipei was presently grooming Ab for expanded managerial duties. While still a squadron member of HMR (L)-362, Abadie had often flown with J.J., and was cognizant of his flying ability. He scheduled the new arrival for training after lunch. Satisfied with his proficiency after J.J. performed thirty-five full autorotation landings, Abadie declared him ready for an upcountry checkout. After a two-day weather delay, following an area familiarization, over the next six days, McCauley embarked on six days of whirlwind activity. He flew day and night, mostly with Charlie Bade and Tom Moher, while Ab wired Taipei requesting McCauley's immediate upgrading to Captain. Bob Rousselot, incredulous as to such an abbreviated checkout period, deferred to the judgment of his Senior Helicopter Pilot.¹

During this period, one of Bill Lair's mixed Lao-PARU teams roamed the area northeast of Paksane gathering intelligence. Having been recently challenged, they were on the run. Lair assigned Abadie and McCauley to retrieve and return the men to Vientiane. Customer personnel, yet in the infancy stages of establishing intelligence systems, and with the Lao field situation highly fluid, had discovered that current information was scarce, and frequently inaccurate. In addition, Royal Lao troops changed sides when expedient. Therefore, as RLA troops were not considered as reliable as hill tribesmen, pilots always suspected their motives and actual allegiance. During briefings, Abadie, recalling the Kong Le defection and his own past narrow escapes from the hands of the enemy, often questioned which faction the Lao forces supported. With this in mind, they launched.

After a minimal search, they discovered the team in an abandoned hut on an open, hilly rice paddy. As the helicopter approached, someone produced smoke, but failed to display the pre-briefed signal cloth. Unsure if the ground situation comprised a trap, or whether the team was unduly cautious about area security, the crew continued to circle. Finally, after a

¹ Bill Leary Notes, 06/10/90.
CJ Abadie 08/21/02 Interview.
JJ McCauley Letter, 1/15/91.

correct signal panel was displayed, the duo performed a cautionary low pass that flushed the remaining members of the team from the hut. At this point, Abadie recalled his hairy incident north of Paksane. Despite his apprehension, he effected a landing and hasty pickup without incident. As the men hustled into the cabin, he judged that they had spent some time in the field, for they appeared disheveled and carried little onboard the helicopter. ²

When McCauley arrived in Vientiane, there were no visible U.S. military personnel present. However, Americans packed a building within the center of the city. By April, the men revealed their military status, donning uniforms and insignias substantiating what many pilots suspected.

McCauley was busy. Most of his flights were in support of Vang Pao and his people. Until Padong fell, he worked with Captain Frank Chance and his four-man team at the site. Case Officer Bill Young conducted most briefings in the field. ³

As the Company hired additional pilots to man equipment, the list of characters in the helicopter program expanded. This trend continued throughout the years in Southeast Asia. Fortunately, most problem personnel eventually weeded themselves out before hurting themselves or others.

Shortly after J.J.'s upgrading to Captain, former U.S. Navy pilot Patrick Grady Sullivan arrived in Vientiane to complete occupation of the five-bedroom house. Without consideration or consultation with Abadie regarding the man's flying qualifications, George Doole, perhaps as payment for a political favor, had hired the son of a politician, or a high-ranking military person. Although considered a nice person, "who would do anything for you, or help in any way," over time the other pilots considered Sullivan a very different sort of individual. Some described him as one who would fit perfectly into a California flower child commune. Before long, he gained a reputation as a complete weirdo. Additionally, his flying ability, subpar to others, relegated him to a second pilot status for several months. Because of the oppressive heat and high humidity characteristic to the Southeast Asian region, H-34 pilots wore cut off shorts and "T" shirts while flying. In contrast, Pat's

² CJ Abadie Emails, 02/03/99, 02/08/99, 02/18/00.

³ JJ McCauley Letters, 1/15/91, 4/25/91.

Bill Leary Notes from McCauley Interview.

clothing consisted of a heavy camouflage suit supplemented with a huge trench knife. While others drank beer and yakked after supper, he meticulously and compulsively unpacked and packed his personal survival kit.⁴

Because of the endearing political "Old Boy" system in Washington, Abadie's constant attempts to replace Pat with a more proficient and suitable aviator for the demanding job continued to be unproductive. Later, likely after being shot at or upgraded to Captain, as Sullivan apparently realized that he possessed an inadequate experience level, latent paranoia surfaced in the man. Constantly worried, and living on Coke and cigarettes, he chewed his nails to the quick and started losing his hair. Despite all this, he continued to be untouchable until well into 1961.⁵

During the early HUS-1 period, the Udorn Maintenance Department, in cooperation with Operations, was eager to promote tender loving care to the equipment, so they assigned pilots and Filipino Flight Mechanics to the same aircraft whenever possible. A Filipino ground maintenance crew performed intermediate fifty-hour inspections at Wattay Airport, with heavier work completed at the Air America maintenance facility on the military side of Don Muang Airport in Bangkok. Staying overnight in the cosmopolitan city, the ferry crew usually enjoyed a movie every two weeks.

In the spring of 1961, Regional Maintenance Chief Jack Forney visited his workers in Vientiane to monitor their progress and facility problems. Because of the great emphasis on area fixed wing operations and his relative inexperience with rotorcraft, Forney failed to regard a handful of helicopter maintenance problems as a large issue in his overall agenda. He and Tom Moher engaged in heated daily discussions concerning Moher's aircraft's elevated in-flight engine cylinder head temperature. Red-lined at 262 degrees, the gage

⁴ For some time no formal Company survival kits existed in the supply system. Therefore, pilots carried personal weapons or survival items scrounged from U.S. military personnel or other sources. Abadie carried a Ruger .22 automatic pistol, a knife, and a personal survival kit.
CJ Abadie Email 02/05/99.

⁵ JJ McCauley Letters, 1/15/91, 1/25/94.
CJ Abadie Interview, 05/30/98.
Jim Coble Email, 03/14/02.
Tom Moher Tapes.

constantly read 260 degrees. Forney stubbornly argued that the reading satisfied prescribed limits, and declared the aircraft acceptable to fly. His explanation only frustrated Moher, who worried and complained every day about what he considered an engine maintenance problem.

Marking his first trip south, on 24 March, McCauley ferried Hotel Alpha to Bangkok for required maintenance. Abadie, summoned to the city on pressing business, accompanied him in the left seat. Once they cleared the Mekong River, Ab climbed down into the passenger compartment to keep his Thai girlfriend Lek company. Flight Mechanic Ben Sabino, who enjoyed flying, replaced him in the cockpit. North of Don Muang Airport, to avoid a customs violation because his girlfriend Lek had illegally entered Laos, Ab reentered the cockpit and selected a convenient bus stop north of Bangkok for her continuing journey. ⁶

Two days later McCauley flight-tested Hotel Golf, one of two additional helicopters that had arrived at Don Muang by the 17th. The following day he ferried the airworthy aircraft to Vientiane.

Sometime later, while flying his personal helicopter, J.J. discharged Ab's girlfriend at the same bus stop. However, this time a Thai air force general, returning to the city from Don Muang Airport, spotted and reported the helicopter landing. Suspicious Thai authorities immediately contacted Air America management concerning the unauthorized landing. By the time J.J. ultimately returned to Vientiane, word of the landing had already bounced to top management and back, and he discovered himself in serious hot water. Bob Rousselot, embarrassed, and not even a little amused by the incident, expressed his displeasure, but J.J. never divulged that the episode involved Ab's girlfriend. ⁷

KATHY'S TRIP UPCOUNTRY

Several months had elapsed since the Kong Le coup, and all Air America helicopter and fixed wing aircraft returned to Wattay Airport to conduct operations. Heavy operational requirements rarely afforded the men time off to visit their families in Bangkok. Therefore, the mercurial Kathy Moher, jealously convinced that Tom maintained a mistress in Vientiane,

⁶ JJ McCauley Letter, 1/28/91. Abadie later married Lek.

⁷ JJ McCauley Letter, 1/15/91.

resolved to secretly journey to the capital and catch him in the act. Toward this end, she acquired a Lao visa, a ticket on Thai Airways, and departed on her wifely quest. Kathy had never previously visited the city, and what little she knew about the Lao she had gleaned from questionable Japanese newspaper and magazine articles. This lack of knowledge led to serious confusion, particularly when she arrived at the Wattay Airport terminal and observed red beret soldiers. To her, red hats signified communists. Convinced that she now found herself in the middle of a Red tide, the frightened girl resolved to sit tight, and then, at the proper time, re-board the plane and leave.

When Lao military officials demanded to see her passport and documents, she refused, indicating that as an American citizen, she did not have to take any crap from commies, and she would never part with her treasured credentials. Much of the immediate communication problem stemmed from the limited English capability on both sides. Reaching an impasse, exasperated authorities finally coaxed the inflexible woman to a corner and deposited her in a chair. Thoroughly alarmed, Kathy believed she was about to die, but, in true bushido, she vowed to expire bravely. Furthermore, she resolved not to submit to any brainwashing techniques or interrogation, for as a proud American and Japanese, she would never tolerate the slightest intimidation.

Unaccustomed to aggressive Asian females, the agitated soldiers were at a complete loss as to how to settle the issue without creating an international incident. Part of the chaos diminished when they enlisted the Thai airline captain to discuss the situation with her. Before long, he realized that the obstinate girl intended to visit her husband, and that he worked for the Air America Company. After further inquiry, officials discovered that the office for information was situated at the PEO section in the USOM compound. Following a few phone calls, the captain identified the correct location. Then he hailed and paid a samlor driver to pedal her there.

Surrounded by a high steel security fence that was topped with barbed wire, the USOM compound contained several buildings. Guarding the front gate, elite paratroopers demanded proof of an elevated security clearance and, failing to receive one, refused her entrance. The feisty Karate black belt recipient refused to take no for an answer, especially from commies wearing red berets.

"My husband Tom Moher works for Air America. I want to see him." Then, thoroughly exasperated, the slightly built female told the bewildered troopers to go to hell, and

arbitrarily stomped through the gate carrying her luggage.

After additional false starts, she eventually arrived at the Program Evaluations Office where, since February 1959, "General" John A. Heintges and his subordinates operated as "Sheep Dipped" civilians under the United States Operations Mission (USOM) umbrella.⁸

Kathy logically assumed that if he was truly a general, then he certainly knew Tom's location. She informed the secretary that she needed to see the director immediately. In turn, the woman inquired if Kathy had arranged an appointment. After the former "commie" harassment, this proved a minor obstacle. She simply walked past the secretary into Heintges office. Then, in her best broken "Engrish", she explained to the flustered man that no one knew her husband's location, and, since generals knew everything, "Where was he?"

Curious about the sudden intrusion, nonplussed General John inquired, "*I beg your pardon?*"

"My husband, Tom Moher, works for Air America, and I demand to know where he is. I have tried to discover this for more than an hour and no one has told me a damn thing."

Heintges, described by subordinates as an inordinately stiff man, one not having been queried by anyone like this in a long time, said, "*Oh, come right in, young lady.*" Forming an instantaneous liking for each other, they conversed pleasantly while he offered her coffee. Kathy disliked coffee, but, as an alternative, requested a good stiff drink. After that, the general said he would show her the town. They drove around the city viewing temples, monuments, and various buildings still displaying battle damage from the December fighting. Then they stopped at his house where he offered her shower facilities, while he mixed martinis.

At 1600 hours, following the day's flying, Tom secured his helicopter on the Air America portion of the Wattay Airport parking ramp. Soon transportation arrived with a message stating that General Henteges requested his immediate presence at his quarters. Tom, still uninformed about what had transpired in Vientiane, anxiously pondered what events might have occurred that day to rate such a lofty invitation. After a short drive in the general's personal vehicle, Moher found himself in front of a beautiful villa. As he tentatively stepped out of the vehicle, wondering what to expect next, both the general and Tom's wife

⁸ Victor Marchetti and John Marks, *The CIA and the Cult of Intelligence* (New York: Knopf, 1974) 109.

surged out the front door to greet him.

"Hello Tom. How are you?"

"Honey. Honey."

A little suspicious at this point, Tom judged both people to be about half smashed. While building Tom a large welcome drink, the general explained that after talking to Kathy for a couple of hours about her problems at the airport and at USOM, meeting Tom constituted a distinct pleasure. He continued that he found Kathy a most charming lady and thought the world of her, and that he would do anything in his power for both of them. Tom, pleased that the general and Kathy had hit it off so well, suppressed any anger he harbored over her brazen, and unannounced arrival. Then, following a few drinks and small talk, as a parting gesture of goodwill to cement the blooming relationship, General Henteges placed his official staff car and driver at their disposal for a few days. ⁹

Air America pilots still lived in the six-house USOM compound north of town. With access to post exchange (PX) and commissary commodities, and a liberal overseas cost of living allowance (COLA), USOM personnel lived exceptionally well in well-appointed homes. By contrast, the Air America pilots resided in merely a shell with few conveniences except an old stove and kerosene icebox. The stove eventually became a booby trap on which Kathy managed to burn an arm. When they arrived, Ab and his girlfriend were conversing at the kitchen table. Upstairs, Pat Sullivan compulsively organized his survival kit. Charlie Bade read in his room.

Courtesy of the general's vehicle and driver, Tom and Kathy enjoyed the sights and sounds of the capital for several days. During one occasion, Tom introduced her to an English-speaking Lao friend who maintained a book concession at the commissary, and at several bookstores in town. Tall, angular, with a handlebar moustache drooping over his mouth, the dynamic speaker, a devoted communist, talked to anyone who wanted to listen to or debate the ideology. Thoroughly briefed and indoctrinated on the subject, he expounded convincing commie theories as the only solution to Southeast Asian problems. At the time,

⁹ Growing up in New York City with an extensive internal transportation system, Tom Moher did not know how to drive an automobile. He never learned.

Tom, not yet familiar with Indochina, neither agreed nor disagreed with him. Over the next few days, they socialized, but Kathy, harassed for years by communists in Japan, placed a tiny wall between them.

Regarding her primary mission to Vientiane, Kathy's attempt to uncover Tom's mythical girlfriend failed miserably. Hence, appearing slightly depressed, she departed for Bangkok.^{10, 11}

¹⁰ Tom Moher Tapes.

¹¹ Author Note: In future years, of all the curious, colorful, and often puzzling female characters passing through the Air America scene, Kathy Moher was at the top of the list, performing a vital role within the local helicopter communities' social whirl.

Considering his Laos Task Force (composed of State, Defense Department, and CIA types) proposals to support the Meo and FAL attempts to reacquire the strategic Plain of Jars, on 23 January, President Kennedy, contingent on advice from the Joint Chiefs of Staff and Vientiane Embassy personnel, approved several planning measures. A portion of the provisions included augmenting U.S. airlift in Southeast Asia by using suitable USAF military or contract aircraft (CAT) to support Phoumi's Plain of Jars offensive. Another facet included introducing twenty Sikorsky H-34 or Kaman H-43 helicopters for use by "civilian" airline Air America. Pressure on Phoumi to sanction guerrilla operations was encouraged by both Meo and Thai Dam forces in upper and lower Military Region Two. ¹

MILITARY MOVEMENT

The USS Seventh Fleet sailed again on 2 February for the waters off South Vietnam. The alert would result in the USS *Bennington* and other ships circling the waters off Tourane, South Vietnam--also known as Danang--until the 24th. In the event that orders arrived from command to move inland, an "expert" tactician planned helicopter squadron deployment to Udorn, Thailand. Curiously, part of the flight path was plotted over enemy held positions around Tchepone, Laos, in Military Region Three. To preclude any appearance of hostility toward an unknown adversary and the close proximity to the coast, no flight operations were scheduled during this period. Even daily Carrier Onboard Flights (COD), an administrative mission normally delivering mail and movies, ceased. This deprivation caused consternation among movie aficionados forced to view identical flicks several times. ²

¹ Joint Chief of Staff, 95, 97, 98, 100, 101. This operation became labeled Millpond.

² Flick: Slang term for movie.

One day Lieutenant Don Babitz announced that he had just discovered a new supply of films, which he soon would screen in the pilots' ready room, an air-conditioned portion of a ship reserved for pilot briefings and relaxation. Anxious for any diversion to diminish shipboard boredom, most pilot officers filed into the briefing room with soaring expectations of fresh entertainment. They should have known better. Don, a likeable but consummate prankster, had discovered movies in sickbay, and treated his peers to gory World War Two training films in living color, depicting battlefield amputation and stump treatment procedures. After realizing the comic's ruse, only a couple of die-hard movie addicts with little else to do remained to view the films. Babitz was shamed tremendously. In order to avoid peer rebuke, he resorted to hiding out in his room for a short period. ³

POLITICAL DECISIONS

With the Royal Lao Government's loss of the Sala Phu Khoun Route 13/7 road junction, enemy movement south on Route-13 toward Vang Vieng, and serious countrywide pounding, frustrated Washington movers and shakers charged with formulating Southeast Asia policy. They recognized, as did President Kennedy, that all previous USG military and diplomatic efforts had failed to stop the communists. Despite years of extensive RLA training efforts, and substantial U.S. Government funds expended through various agencies, most lowland Lao still exhibited a demonstrable lack of motivation, fortitude, and fighting ability. Exacerbating these deficiencies, the country possessed very few military leaders worthy of merit. Therefore, short of all-out war, the situation required draconian measures to buy time, maintain a secure Vientiane to allow a basis for negotiation, and bolster RLG military efforts to hopefully prevent communist control of Laos. Although already over committed in Southeast Asia, the U.S, fearing total defection to the communist camp, also desired to

³ EW Knight Letter, 07/27/91.
EW Knight Emails, 10/10/03, 07/05/04, 08/14/04.

display resolve to other nations in the area by maintaining a free Laos. Somehow, the U.S. needed to thread the fine needle between intervention and retreat, and ultimately conclude the problem with Lao neutralization. Therefore, after a discouraging briefing regarding the deteriorating situation in Laos by Admiral Harry Felt, CINCPAC, on 3 March President Kennedy instructed the Joint Chief of Staff Chairman to formulate a military plan for recapture of the enemy held Plain of Jars, which was fast becoming an armed munitions storage area. ⁴

From a correspondent who gathered information through mainly scuttlebutt, limited U.S. Embassy public relations statements, and conjecture, *Time Magazine* was about to publish an article that revealed the extent of the communist buildup of supplies and munitions on the strategic Plain of Jars:

... "The entire Plain Des Jarres is bulging with Russian armaments and swarming with Vietnamese. The Ilyu-shins, which are lined up 18 deep at Hanoi airport, flown in by the hour, bringing 45 tons of equipment a day. About once a week, a convoy of 50 Gorky trucks rolls in over primitive Route Seven from Vinh in North Viet Nam. The rebels have more than 60 Gorky trucks. 40 Soviet jeeps, about 25 command cars and six Russian armored cars. They have Kalashnikov [AK-47] submachine guns, Simonov carbines, Degtiarev light machine guns, ZPU anti-aircraft machine guns, as well as Russian assault guns and 60 and 81-mm mortars. In the hills around the plain are new Russian 85-mm cannon [called a "Long Tom"] manned by Viet Minh 'technicians.' The Viet Minh are everywhere. They drive trucks, operate radios, build roads, teach tactics, and run a 300-bed hospital..." ⁵

⁴ Joint Chiefs of Staff, 34.
Arthur Schlesinger, 278-279.

⁵ The number of flights from Hanoi was substantially higher than the two sorties a day noted a month earlier by a Western observer.
JCS, 5.
Internet, (Time.com Print Page): *Time Magazine-The Russians in Laos*, 03/10/61.

THE MILLPOND OPERATION

Within a week of the President's instructions to submit comprehensive plans calculated to stop the enemy and capture the Plain of Jars, the Joint Chiefs of Staff retrieved, dusted off, and forwarded ambitious battle plans toward that end. Named "Concept for the Recapture of the Plaine des Jarres", items included interdicting lines of communication (LOC) by aircraft and Meo forces, then FAL pincer attacks, and finally a helicopter vertical assault to retake the Plain of Jars. In order to accomplish the maneuver, additional outside materiel and men were required. Key recommended items included rapidly expanding the ranks of Meo irregulars, introducing sixteen sanitized B-26 bombers to interdict and bomb selected enemy Plain of Jars targets, supplementing the four existing H-34s with sixteen additional Department of Defense helicopters bailed to Air America under USAF contract AF33 (600)-40818, and hire, or otherwise obtain, sufficient crews to support their operations. Also required for the airlift were four C-130s, three DC-4s, and one C-47 aircraft. ⁶

Armed with several viable options, but seeking further advice for subsequent actions in the Lao dilemma, President Kennedy convened a high-level, multi-agency conference at the White House that incorporated representatives from State, Defense, CIA, and CINCPAC. From contingency plans developed earlier by his Lao Task Force, leaving the ultimate war option on the back burner, during the 20 to 21 March National Security Council meetings, the President again sanctioned and agreed to several less offensive items. He tailored these measures to gradually increase military aid to the country along general legitimate parameters of the Geneva Accords, thus shading clandestine operations. The limited aid included transfer of sixteen additional USMC HUS-1 helicopters to the Royal Lao Army (read Air America), expansion of the successful Meo program in Military Region Two, and utilization of USAF C-130 turboprop cargo planes to more efficiently supply the war effort. One covert action included increased Lao reconnaissance flights. Another specified a "black" transfer of sixteen B-26 bombers and crews to the remote Thai air base at Takhli. Among its multiple uses, including U-2 reconnaissance flights over our adversary's territory, Takhli was one of several bases

⁶ Joint Chiefs of Staff, 41.

constructed with U.S. funds to recover crippled B-52s in case of general war.

Committed to a hurry up mode because of the urgent situation, leaders considered timing to be critical. Therefore, anticipating workforce demands to immediately crew U.S. Marine helicopters with experienced military aviation personnel, on 13 March the Department of Defense resolved to "seek sixteen volunteer pilots from the Marine Corps before turning to other services." They considered tapping a similar number of volunteer crew chiefs.⁷

Depending on future requirements and duration of the Lao situation, the Air America organization planned to utilize "Sheep Dipped" military volunteers for about six months, giving the Company adequate time to process and hire permanent "bona fide" civilian pilots and mechanics to satisfy the Geneva Accords protocols.^{8 9}

In order to provide a deniable cover story for projected increased military activity, Air America officials expanded the bilateral ICA-39-007 contract with the International Cooperation Agency (ICA) under the Programs Evaluation Office (PEO) of United States Operating Mission Lao (USOM). This designated Udorn, Thailand, the main operation and maintenance base for the helicopters—"in order to fulfill certain customer requirements." Planners initially anticipated that eighty American employees and other third country nationals could conduct and sustain the operation.¹⁰

Responding to the feasibility of utilizing the Udorn Royal Thai air base facility to bypass Vientiane political constraints, but actively support FAL Plain of Jars recovery operations, an advanced military party had previously arrived from Hawaii in February. The

⁷ Joint Chiefs of Staff, 47.

⁸ JCS, 47.

⁹ Sheep Dipped: An intelligence term relating to the process of overtly sanitizing and removing military personnel from active duty, but covertly retaining them in administrative files.

¹⁰ According to statements from Wayne Knight, there is ample evidence that government types solicited Marine volunteers even before the 14 March message was issued. Agency personnel anticipating early requirements for the helicopter movement might explain this.

task included an assessment and report on the feasibility of the airfield and surrounding area to house a Marine Corps aviation unit and support twenty HUS-1 helicopters that Air America's understaffed maintenance department was not presently equipped to maintain. The team would also negotiate with Thai officials for blanket use of the Royal Thai airbase.¹¹

When approved in early March, the plan went quickly forward to provide combined maintenance, administrative, logistical support, and training for the sizeable undertaking until Air America personnel could assume control and maintain a self-sustaining operation. This would entail utilizing U.S military personnel possessing expertise in *"airfield operations, flight-line and aircraft maintenance, base support operations, and related functions."*¹²

After presidential deliberation and approval on 9 March, by 11 March *"JCS requested CINCPAC to supply [Air America] 16 H-34 or HUS helicopters at a time and place mutually agreeable, and to be prepared to move the necessary maintenance personnel for 20 helicopters to Thailand when directed."*¹³

Two days later, CINCPAC alerted Marine Air Base Squadron 16 (MABS-16), located at Futema, Okinawa, of the unit's possible transfer to Udorn, Thailand. The squadron was notified to be prepared to deploy to Udorn on forty-eight-hour notice in order to establish an operational base and field maintenance facility for twenty HUS-1 helicopters and spare parts for thirty days--later to be extended to 120 days. Movement was to be completed within six days of receiving an execute order. The operation initially envisioned several hundred Marine and Navy personnel to be functional, but political constraints ultimately limited the number of Marines to 300 maintenance personnel, including nine officers under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Richard W. Johnson. Tradition dictated that throughout Marine Corps history, within a relatively short time and in a less than desirable environment, superiors expected MABS personnel culled from seven supporting detachments to afford basic human and

¹¹ Madison Memorandum to Customer Lyle Williams 3 Apr. 61.

¹² Joint Chiefs of Staff.

¹³ JCS, 10. Four H-34s were already working out of Wattay Airport in Vientiane, Laos.

maintenance services for the Air America helicopter program. ¹⁴ This incorporated petroleum, oil, and lubricants (POL to be trucked in from Bangkok by civilian organizations), vehicles and motor transport, carpentry requirements, latrines, tower control, radar facilities, and a multitude of additional items. With Air America's needs in mind, attached Headquarters and Maintenance Squadron-16 (H&MS) personnel would provide class C and D heavy maintenance personnel, and specialty tools beyond normal field requirements. This included heavy component build up capability such as quick engine change units (QEC); avionics and sheet metal repair; and the like. Specialists in the fields involved included Blackie Peckin, B.B. Sterns, Red Morgan, and others. ¹⁵

By the 17th, Thai government officials acquiesced to allow basing American helicopters and B-26 bombers in the country. ¹⁶

With this politically sensitive hurdle overcome, intending to demonstrate USG's limited show of force policy, Headquarters Marine Corps, at Washington's behest, on 18 March (19 March Okinawa time), issued the word to the MABS unit to proceed to Thailand on Saturday the 22nd. Paving the way, first elements of MABS-16, augmented with a few people from H&MS-16, were immediately ordered into the field. While White House staffers in Washington nervously contemplated an unsavory war and worldwide disfavor should the plan fail to achieve

¹⁴ Detachments included: MABS-16; MABS-17-tactical airfield fuel system, air freight, and the R4D-8 plane; a communications company from the 3rd Marine Division; an infantry platoon, 3rd Marine Regiment, 3rd Marine Division; engineer platoon, 3rd Pioneer Battalion, 7th Engineer Regiment; Marine Aircraft Tactical Control Unit 1; Marine Wing headquarters Group-7, Communications and Postal support.

¹⁵ Joint Chiefs of Staff, 42, 45.
Wayne Knight Letter, 07/27/91.
EW Knight Email, 08/07/02.
Burt Palmer Email, 05/15/04.

¹⁶ JCS, 45, 47.

desired results, the first Marine support personnel arrived in Udorn.

Beginning during the evening of the 22nd, the major airlift from Okinawa to the Udorn airfield commenced. It was envisioned to be completed in four days, with MABS prepared to receive airworthy HUS-1 aircraft by the 27th and to immediately support helicopter flight operations. Five C-130s and four C-124s from the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing and the USAF 315th Division were targeted to conduct the movement.

With the operation far from secret, news media types gathered at the airstrip for the arrival of the MABS unit. Monitored by U.S. Embassy personnel from Bangkok to ensure that no unauthorized contact was made or pictures taken, reporters and photographers remained for several days filing and fabricating stories for their individual news outlets. As the airfield was located on flat terrain, Thai villagers observed the Marines at work on their temporary camp.

Starting from scratch, but hardly uninitiated in field operation problems, as items continued arriving by USAF and Marine air, Marines rapidly erected a general-purpose tent city in the allocated area. Living quarters were first addressed, and then a mess hall, sick bay, and office tents followed. Initial food supplied to the troops for ten days were the time honored "C" rations, then bulk "B" rations were made available. These were replaced by fresh food airlifted from Bangkok, and dried stores delivered by narrow track railroad. The temporary camp was completed within three weeks and was employed as the prime operating source for two months until a permanent camp was erected.

On the evening of the 23rd a 20,000-gallon tactical airfield fuel dispensing system arrived. The bladder type fuel farm was erected by the following day and was receiving civilian contracted 115/145 octane aviation gasoline from tank trucks driven north from Bangkok.

To assist the operation the squadron deployed diverse rolling stock. These included, but were not limited to, six two-and-one-half ton trucks, five quarter ton trucks, ten water trailers, two aviation crash-rescue fire trucks, and one D-4 tractor type bulldozer.

Since the founding of the U.S. Marine Corps at Tun Tavern in Philadelphia in 1775, U.S. Marines have cherished their time off. Therefore, to elevate morale, a measured liberty policy was later instituted when the base facility was running fairly smoothly. So as not to inundate local town people with too many lusty American youths, liberty was restricted to no more than 100 men at a time. Compared to Okinawa, prices for consumables and people pleasures

were considered reasonable. Depending on the negotiator, the three-mile trip into town was conducted by friendly pedicab samlor drivers for three to five baht (U.S. equivalent fifteen to twenty-five cents). The only viable bar in town worth patronizing was operated by an enterprising Thai army lieutenant. Open air restaurants served strong, cold bottled Thai-brewed Singa beer for seven baht (thirty-five cents) a bottle, and a plate of delicious, but highly seasoned food for an equal amount. Although English conversation was limited, the Marines found town locals to be warm and friendly people.

Two to three-day R&R visits to Bangkok were not sanctioned until May and depended on space available travel on the facility's twin engine R4D-8. While overnighting at the Metropole Hotel, the men discovered Bangkok to be a little more expensive than Udorn, but not unduly so.¹⁷

The MABS unit reported that by the 26th the unit was *"ready to receive and service aircraft."*¹⁸

By 22 March, JCS hierarchy in Bangkok on a fact-finding mission reported:

"The military situation in Laos was critical and would progressively worsen unless additional action was taken." Reasons cited included problems with FAL leadership and General Phoumi.¹⁹

Once set in motion, the activity fostered yet another flap in the annals of U.S. Naval-Marine Corps history. As C-124 and C-130 plane crews continued ferrying MABS and H&MS personnel from Kadena to Udorn, CINCPAC ordered Okinawa-based Joint Task Force-116,

¹⁷ George Hofmann, *Operation Millpond: U.S. Marines in Thailand 1961*, (Historical Division of the USMC, Quantico, Virginia, 2009) 8, 11, 13, 14, 17, 18, 24-26. The Author supplemented some of this narrative with information from his personal observation.

¹⁸ Joint Chiefs of Staff, 54.

¹⁹ JCS 61.

JCS 74.

previously brought to alert status on 9 March, to action status level. Over succeeding days JTF-116 reformed. Consisting of Marine air and ground forces, it was augmented with U.S. Army and Air Force units. Impressive Seventh Fleet assets, including three carriers already prepositioned in the South China Sea area and the Gulf of Siam, moved toward pre-assigned stations and waited for the "balloon to go up."²⁰

With military readiness just short of a declared shooting war, the recent fall of Lao Army positions at Kam Keut in central Laos, and a U.S. Air Force liaison SC-47 downing on the Plain of Jars on 24 March, prompted President Kennedy to hedge his bets and prepare for any eventuality. Therefore, on 23 March, he scheduled a slot on primetime national television channels to address the American people regarding the importance of maintaining a neutral and independent Laos. He also hoped to convince Moscow's leaders of the options involved: cease-fire and neutralization, or American military intervention in Laos. In a terse message and with the use of a tripod stand holding a map of Indochina, Kennedy cited Pathet Lao attacks, and control of a greater portion of the country within the previous three months. He also stressed the presence of outside interference and substantial communist support to Pathet Lao forces, including more than 1000 Soviet air supply missions, infiltration of advisors from North Vietnam, and importation of superior heavy weapons. He emphasized that any Lao takeover created a serious threat to all Southeast Asia. He further asked for continuing international assistance in instituting a timely cease-fire, which might lead to an eventual political settlement. Without disclosing that he had already authorized military movement into the theater, President Kennedy stood firm in his affirmation that the U.S. would honor its foreign obligations.²¹

By 24 March, escorted by two destroyers, the Naval carrier USS *Bennington*, containing a squadron complement of HMR-163 HUS-1s and crews, steamed for the Gulf of Siam with the purpose of offloading fourteen Marine helicopters for movement to Don Muang airport.

During activity at Cubi Point, on Luzon, Philippine Islands, before the March embarkation, Lieutenant Wayne Knight, without being aware of details concerning the aircraft transfer, realized that something huge was afoot. While maintenance officer Major Jim Dunphy culled HUS-1 ships for the transfer, Knight and other

²⁰ JFK News Conference Number 8, 23 March 1961; Arthur Schlesinger 280.

²¹ President Kennedy television address to the nation.

pilots flew several test flights through 21 March, rendering the machines in airworthy condition. With complete discretion as to selection, most of the older pre-148 series "bent-leg" types received the nod over newer models equipped with the preferred "V-leg" landing gear. Other cannibalized hangar queens required considerably more maintenance effort to achieve a readiness status, but overworked mechanics completed the work in time for sailing. To many interested junior officers within the squadron, perhaps the most puzzling aspect of all the increased base activity focused on painters busily working behind the hangar. Specifically, for ships passing test flights to an airworthy status, work centered on eliminating fuselage stars and bars logos, and the squadron's identifying letters Yankee Papa, with olive drab paint. Discussion even ensued concerning a change to the distinctive orange turtleback covering the top rear of the transmission compartment, but it remained the same color. Obviously, the tested and freshly painted helicopters were being sanitized for something special, but what? Further speculation ceased when senior officers warned those asking questions to cease inquires and keep a lid on anything they might suspect.

RECRUITING

After two days at sea, rumors circulated regarding the presence of unfamiliar "civilians" on board the *Bennington*. Suspicious pilots correctly assumed that these strangers represented some important function relating to the recent aircraft activity and Lao flap. Soon afterward, squadron Commanding Officer Major Charles Chambers scheduled an "all pilots meeting" (APM) in the ready room.²²

To curtail further speculation regarding the men's presence, without divulging much else, he revealed that two individuals from the "State Department" had recently boarded the ship wanting to interview and select a large number of pilots and enlisted men for unspecified duties. He indicated that the duty constituted an all-Marine operation and the recruiters would only accept

²² Charles Chambers was an "Old Corps" associate of Air America's Vice President of Operations, Robert Rousselot. After retirement, Chambers worked as Rouss's assistant in the Taipei, Taiwan headquarters office.

bachelors. Despite this restriction, forty out of forty-eight squadron pilots volunteered.²³

During a two-day series of small group interviews involving only bachelors, two undercover individuals, U.S. Army officer Joe Strange, and a U.S. Navy commander, both dressed in nondescript non-military khakis, briefly outlined the volunteer program. USMC Master Sergeant Bud Erwin, from the squadron administration department, recorded notes and reviewed single pilot records. (Knight attended a meeting with Hal Clark and John Fonburg.) At these interviews, pilots learned about a possible future requirement for out-of-uniform duties in Laos. Following a cursory description of the positive aspects working in flat, rice paddy Lao terrain, but little else by way of political or tactical considerations, the recruiters offered attendees two hiring options. The first incorporated a temporary civilian (sheep dip) arrangement, by which volunteers turned in their dogtags and received official passports. During their military absence, seniority would continue to accrue, and they could return to military duty after six months, or upon completion of the Lao assignment. Temporary additional duty (TAD) allowance amounted to sixteen dollars per day. A more drastic second option involved resigning USMC commissions, and then, as bona fide civilians, separately negotiating a contract with Air America Inc. Since the "spooks" provided sparse information regarding the operation, a career decision to leave the Corps proved quite difficult for the young men. Adding to their dilemma, the presentation revealed no pertinent details relating to wages, or accident, or life insurance covering death or disabling injuries, while working in

²³ Author Note: The precedent of employing experienced former Marine pilots and sophisticated Sikorsky manufactured helicopters for missions in Laos had already successfully met the test in December of 1960 with the introduction of four HUS-1 aircraft. The advantage of captive audience Marines aboard ship, or within the confines of Okinawa, provided Agency personnel an adequate opportunity to contact and select crews already stationed in Southeast Asia. But, because of the difficulty to suppress the hint of war, money, and high adventure among intrepid warriors, even from remote settings in the Far East, the "word" rapidly filtered throughout the Fleet. By early 1961, only a rare head-in-the-sand ostrich type lacked rudimentary knowledge of the Air America operation. The Author first learned about the paramilitary organization at Jacksonville, North Carolina, during the fall of 1960. However, whispers remained strictly in house, with information generally unavailable to stateside Army and Navy personnel.

the civilian status. For this reason, all interested only volunteered for "temporary civilian" duty. Perhaps because of the mysterious tone and distinct lack of information by the briefers, except for one of their Okinawa-based counterparts, none of the pilots opted for total military separation. After committing to the project, and sworn not to reveal any details of the interview, they immediately became outcasts within the squadron, as the "in-the-know crowd." The unmarried provision incensed married pilots such as Ted Cash and Jim Schmidt, and the rebuff caused friction between the two groups.

A few days passed while volunteers remained in limbo and mechanics hurriedly completed sanitizing remaining helicopters on the hangar deck. All involved were excited and confident of their selection, but awaited official word of the duty. Then Major Chambers scheduled another meeting and informed the bachelors about recently abrogated ground rules. Specifically, under pressure and lobbying from other services for equal representation in the operation, the Joint Chiefs of Staff now stipulated Army and Navy helicopter personnel would also take part in the operation. However, the new game plan excluded Air Force types because their personnel possessed no H-34 experience.

The spooks eventually deleted a majority of Marine volunteers for the temporary duty, and Wayne Knight failed to make the final list. However, as the only rank-and-file type actually aware of the reason for Chambers New Year's Eve missing ship movement, other than his lack of seniority, Knight assumed that the New Year's Eve run-in with the commanding officer in Olongapo had quite possibly hindered his selection. ²⁴

²⁴ Wayne Knight Letter, 07/27/91.
EW Knight Emails, 01/07/02, 01/09/02, 10/08/03, 10/10/03, 07/03/04, 07/04/04, 01/16/05.
John Fonburg Letter, 06/02/91.
John Fonburg Phone Conversation, 11/16/91.
Jerry Buffington Emails, 10/04/03, 10/07/03, 10/21/03 (2).
Hal Clark Phone Conversation, 11/07/03.

ARMY AND NAVY PERSONNEL

Reevaluating an original decision to utilize only one pilot per helicopter, as was the current Air America civilian pilot policy, CINCPAC recommended a change from one to two pilots required in the cockpit, and thereby enhance safety.²⁵ Consequently, the final crew allocation desired for the sixteen helicopters included a total of thirty-four pilots and fifty crew chiefs. Instead of the original plan to use only sanitized Marine Corps crews, the new allotment would provide fourteen Marine pilots and twenty crew chiefs; the Navy ten pilots and ten crew chiefs; and the Army ten pilots and an equal number of crew chiefs.²⁶

Once Pentagon planners opted to utilize Army and Navy crews from major stateside service bases, catch up hiring proceeded at a brisk pace. Fort Benning, Georgia, accommodated two Army H-34 helicopter companies to support the infantry school. On the third Sunday morning in March, First Lieutenant Fred Sass received a call requesting his presence at base operations within the hour. Arriving at the facility, he found a majority of pilots from both units already present. Without divulging specifics, and in broad generalities, a "civilian" briefed the group pertaining to an overseas job. Stressing potential dangers involved in the projected work, he requested a show of hands from those interested. He further stated that married men with children should think seriously about their responsibility to them. Supporting the theory that military men readily respond to clandestine work, almost all present raised their hands.

Shortly after the Fort Benning meeting, Sass's helicopter unit relocated to Fort Rucker to participate in a large tactical airlift. While on the flight line, a truck arrived to transfer Sass and several other pilots to post headquarters. With only a few exceptions, the group was comprised of bachelors. At headquarters, the same "civilian" who had previously briefed them at Fort Benning inquired if they still desired to go overseas. All answered in the affirmative. Without mention of a pay scale, or other details, he informed the men that the Army would first discharge them, and then a Company named Air America, Inc. would employ them. Without prior knowledge of the Company, the men speculated about what the work entailed. He insisted that they pack only basic housekeeping essentials and leave behind

²⁵ Joint Chiefs of Staff, 51. Military pilots flew with two men in the cockpit.

²⁶ JCS, 61.

anything that might construe a military affiliation. Curiously, this requirement negated boots, fatigues, helmets, gloves, or any other necessary flight equipment. As a final shock, the man revealed that the next day they would fly to Washington for processing.

After returning to Fort Benning, with little time to prepare for the immediate movement, Sass solicited a friend to pack his household goods and store them for further disposition. Eventually, his father journeyed by bus from Florida to the Georgia base to retrieve his vehicle and belongings.

Once set in motion the wheels moved quickly. The following morning, Benning pilots boarded a U.S. Navy R4D bound for Washington. Others on the plane embarked at either Forts Knox or Campbell. After landing at a military air base near the Capital, a bus ferried the men to a non-descript bachelor officers' quarters (BOQ) at Fort McNair, located within the metropolitan area. Assembling in a large briefing room, the Army personnel discovered an equally large contingent of Navy pilots and crew chiefs already in attendance. Using a method similar to the one employed for the active duty Army personnel, recruiters had also hastily selected and gathered Navy people from various East Coast bases at Norfolk, Virginia and Quonset Point, Rhode Island. Men in dark suits briefed the enlarged group on what to expect next, and again informed them of the necessary service separation. At this time, they afforded all hands a final opportunity to reconsider their initial decision, and a few men dropped out. Following individual consultations, interviewers reduced the original number of volunteers by approximately half. Consistent with a restriction that frowned on hiring married men, Warrant Officer Edward Reid failed to make the final list. He was disappointed and quite upset, but his current family status prevented further processing.²⁷

A surprised Fred Sass survived the culls along with an apportioned assortment of Army pilots, Navy pilots, and mixed crew chiefs. Informed of their immediate departure for Laos, some in the diminished group, unschooled in Asian geography or geopolitics, responded, "*Hey neat. Just where the hell is Laos?*" Through media coverage, they knew about the Congo flap, and the considerable activity in the region, and the several missionaries recently killed there. Coupled with this information, plus the constantly evolving names of countries on the Dark Continent, they logically assumed their destination was Africa. Still, a puzzling uncertainty remained in some men's minds. They wondered why recruiters solicited and sorted

²⁷ He persisted, and within sixteen months Ed Reid was hired by Air America, spent the next twelve years in the Lao Theater, and excelled with the organization.

out volunteers at the very last minute. And, they continued to ponder why planners had not executed such a convoluted and laborious hurry-up operation earlier. Aside from considering the method consistent with normal military sierra, no logical answer ever surfaced.

While aviation personnel who had failed selection returned to their respective bases, on Friday 24 March, administration personnel processed crewmembers out of the military. Selected Army pilots included: James Beatty, Edward Shore, Richard S. "Kick" Twitchell, Donald G. Blankenship, Dominic L. "Gooch" Gucchione, Carl E. Lawrence, Charles H. Mateer, Walter L. Wizbowski, Neal E. Early, and Fredrick W. Sass.

Nine of ten Army crew chiefs selected--curiously none from Fort Benning--were: Richard Coddington, Carl Diggs, John Powell, Norman Harrington, Davis Lancaster, Scott Plank, Roy Talo, Roy Awtrey, and Dale Klock.²⁸

Intended by the JSC to equally represent the respected services, a partial list of U.S. Navy pilots included: John H. Smoot, Robert J. Campbell, Eric "Hal" Norfleet, Ronald E. Clarke, John Paul Combs, David O. Smith, James C. Alkire, and Shirley "Lee" W. Holt.²⁹

The men did not all arrive at Don Muang Airport in Thailand at the same time.

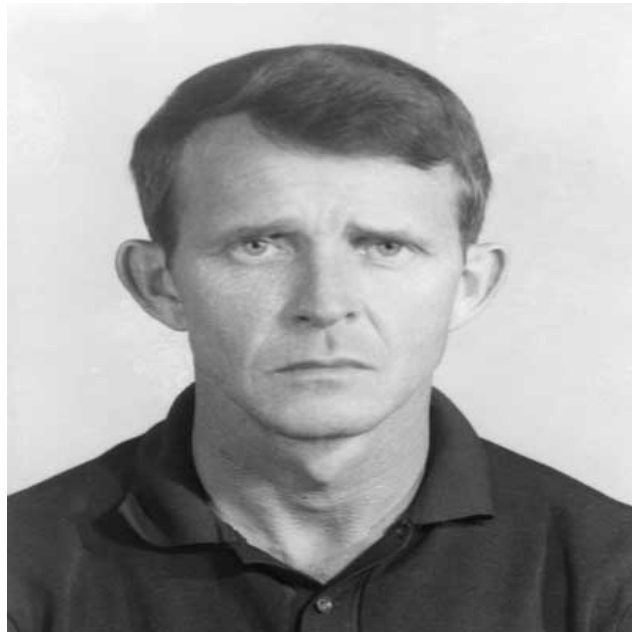
EARLY BIRDS

Ron Clarke was born and raised in Constantine, Michigan. Following high school graduation, he enlisted in the U.S. Navy. Scoring well above average on intelligence tests, and serving time as a mechanist mate at the Great Lakes Naval Base, he was accorded the equivalent of a two-year college education required to enter the NAVCAD flight training program at Naval Air Station (NAS) Pensacola, Florida. There were sufficient inductees to form two classes. In addition to preflight courses, after testing, Clarke was selected to become one of seventy members of the Naval Aviation Cadet Drill Team. Dick Crafts, one of two

²⁸ Fred Sass Emails, 09/03/02, 11/30/02.

Sass was able to provide all the Army personnel's names, for they were sent to Southeast Asia on orders which listed the names. One crew chief's name is missing, as he chose not to fly and worked on the ground.

²⁹ Shirley Holt, possessing a curious first name for the male gender, is the last entry; although the total number of Navy pilots is less than ten, the Author believes the list to be fairly complete in representing the total Navy pilot contingent.



Captain Ed Reid

class officers, did a commendable job of commanding the drill team. In addition to attending classes, the men marched at 189 steps per minute two to four hours a day. Each Friday they boarded an aircraft and flew to various places like Minneapolis, University of Maryland, Kent State in Ohio, Chicago, Notre Dame, New Orleans, and Los Angeles to perform at Disneyland. They always returned to Pensacola in time for Monday classes. Clarke considered the effort difficult, but enjoyed the conditioning, and rush of excitement while performing.

Following preflight classes, Clarke transitioned to the T-34 single engine trainer at Saufley Field, and then to the SNJ (T-6) at Corey Field. This was followed with multiengine work at mainside in the twin engine SNB (C-45), which included radio instrument training. Helicopter training took place at Ellison Field in the single rotor HTL-6 (Bell 47), and then in the tandem rotor HUP-2. The HUP was a difficult machine to fly, incorporated fabric-covered rotor blades in the lifting system, mounted a modified World War Two tank engine, and was stressed for seven "Gs." The sub-par aircraft was not designed to fly during instrument conditions.³⁰

After receiving the coveted "Navy Wings of Gold" and a Navy commission on 18 December 1958, Clarke was assigned to Helicopter Anti-Submarine Squadron-3 (HS) at Norfolk, Virginia. Flying the HSS-1 (equivalent to the Marine HUS-1), as instrument flying was not yet approved for helicopters, work was first restricted to sonar dipping at sea during the day and during fair weather. Unmarried, he billeted at the Bachelor Officer Quarters (BOQ). While there he occasionally associated with John Combs and Dave Smith.

During the year he was stationed at the Norfolk base, Clarke was assigned SNB (A twin engine C-45) check pilot status in order to conduct pilot instrument proficiency and qualification. He was also designated Helicopter Anti-Submarine Plane Commander (HAPC). A busy person, he attended and graduated from the Naval Justice School at Newport, Rhode Island.

In early 1961, Clarke was placed on a list of ten pilots slated to be sent TDY to the HS-1 Replacement Air Group (RAG) at Key West, Florida, for transition to the SH-3A helicopter. HS-3 marked the first operational squadron to receive the new ships. For a time, HS-3 would operate both the HSS-1 and the SH-3A, while the former helicopter was phased out

³⁰ While undergoing training in NAS Pensacola, the Author transitioned through the fixed wing T-34, T-28, SNB (C-45), and the Bell HTL-6 and Sikorsky HO4S (HRS, S-55) helicopters.

of the Navy inventory.

Clarke's life was about to drastically change. Mid-March toward noon, he and a new squadron pilot returned to the parking ramp after conducting a HSS-1 training mission in the Atlantic Ocean. Before securing the aircraft, with the rotors still turning, a breathless sailor leaped onto the left wheel and yelled up at Clarke, who was wearing the uncomfortable MK-4 survival suit (called a poopy bag)³¹ and his helmet. Unable to hear, he pulled his helmet away from his ear as the sailor shouted loudly, "*Mister Clarke, the Executive Officer wants to see you.*" Ron yelled back over the loud din of engine and transmission noise that he would go to lunch and then to the XO's office.

"*No sir, he wants to see you now!*" Clarke countered that being funky, he would first change clothes and then go see him.

Becoming frustrated, the sailor reiterated as loud as he could, "***No sir! He wants to see you now!***"

Finally getting the message, Clarke retarded the engine mixture control lever to idle cutoff, and told his student to clean up the cockpit. Then he struggled from the co-pilot seat to the ground, rolled the top of his poopy suit down and strode briskly toward the hangar and the XO's office.

He stomped up the stairs where the XO opened his glass door and motioned him inside. Then he said calmly, "*These gentlemen want to see you,*" and left the room. Two men dressed in civilian suits stood up, displayed their Naval intelligence identification cards, and introduced themselves.

With a minimum of small talk, they proceeded to explain that they were soliciting experienced helicopter pilots to fly a similar type aircraft as the HSS-1. The work would be conducted in semi-tropical mountainous terrain. The job paid 1,500 dollars per month. The nature of the activity dictated that if something happened to him, USG would deny any and all knowledge of him. That was the extent of the information provided. When Clarke indicated interest, he was instructed to return to his BOQ room, standby, and not speak to anyone. If

³¹ Poopy Bag: Naval regulations stipulated that these bulky, uncomfortable rubberized survival suits be worn while flying if sea temperature persisted below a certain level in order to prevent hyperthermia for a short time. This was also true for carrier shipboard operation. My squadron had the suits during our overseas tour, but as no one wanted to wear the hot, unwieldy items, the Skipper always arranged to log the South China Sea water temperature somewhat above the minimum limit.

selected, he would be notified by telephone.

Clarke did as directed. When the phone rang, he was told to arrive at base operations by 1900 hours. Appearing at the correct time, he discovered others waiting. The group boarded a plane and soon landed in Washington. People waiting at the airport drove the men to various hotels, depositing only two individuals to a hotel. Thus, began an accelerated whirlwind of activity.

The following morning the men were retrieved and delivered to a meeting room at the Pentagon annex where the Bureau of Naval Personnel Department was located. There were a number of other Navy applicants present. Only three pilots were selected: Clarke, Smith, and Combs. The other men were ordered to return to their units and remain silent as to what had transpired during the selection process. The selectees were shuttled to various indoctrination sites to complete obligatory paperwork, then to different clothing stores, and finally to separate locations for the night.

Thorough medical examinations were conducted at the Pentagon on the 18th. A series of vaccinations followed. The next step was transport to Washington National Airport, where tickets to Southeast Asia were issued and the three squadron mates boarded a Northwest Orient 707 for Minneapolis, Minnesota. The second stop was Seattle, Washington, and then Anchorage, Alaska, to take on fuel for the trans-Pacific flight. They departed the plane to stretch their legs on the tarmac but, unaccustomed to the cold and dark environment, they soon returned to the passenger cabin.

Allowing for the loss of a day crossing the International Date Line, the final leg on Northwest terminated at Haneda Airport, Tokyo, on 20 March. Met by "customer types," after clearing customs, a taxi driver took them to an authentic Japanese style hotel. After eating and enjoying a drink, they returned to the hotel because of an early Pan American Airways flight scheduled to their destination. A first for the men, the bed, a straw tatami mat and futon comforter on the floor provided an efficient mechanism for an excellent night's sleep.

Very early the next morning they boarded a Pan American plane for Hong Kong. Since there would be a considerable delay at Kai Tak Airport, while the plane was fueled and serviced before continuing to Bangkok, Thailand, busses transported the passengers to a hotel, where the men and women were separated and assigned to large rooms. Since water was

shut off in Kowloon due to perpetual scarcity, no bathroom facilities were available. People were told to stay in the room until notified. However, since Clarke wanted to purchase a camera, he and his companions sneaked out, went to town to shop, and returned in time to board the bus for the continuing flight to Bangkok.

The flight continued to Don Muang Airport, where the trio were met by handlers, and billeted at the Rama Hotel. The only briefing received was to obtain a physical at a designated location, after which they would be flown to an unnamed upcountry location.

On the 22nd, a doctor completed their physicals in a small office. Then they waited for further transportation to Don Muang airport. Later in the day, they were led from a building to a C-47 piloted by old timer Captain "Red" Fredricks, who conducted "milk runs" throughout the Thai-Lao system.³²

The trio arrived at Wattay Airport, Vientiane, shortly before dark. Following a hasty supper, they were hustled into a vehicle and driven to the Air America pilot house in the USOM compound a few miles north of town. There they met three of the H-34 drivers in attendance. (Abadie was away preparing for the influx of pilots.) Clarke knew his introduction to Southeast Asia had begun when he walked between an interior lighted table lamp, and the window and Charlie Bade shouted, half in jest, *"Don't do that! Never, never walk between a light and a window. Someone might shoot you."*

Clarke, Combs, and Smith thus became the first of several military "sheep dipped" helicopter pilots, known as temporaries by the "old timers," to arrive in the Theater during March 1961 and participate in the Second Lao Indochina War. The first to arrive, and living with and working with the original Air America pilots, Clarke sensed no animosity; the three of them were treated exactly like everyone else.

With one H-34 undergoing maintenance in Bangkok, there were only three ships on the Air America ramp at Wattay Airport. For almost a week before the main group of temporary pilots arrived in Bangkok, Clarke, Combs, and Smith flew upcountry with veteran Captains, receiving indoctrination in Company and Customer procedures, terrain features, and site familiarization. Flying with Charlie Bade and JJ McCauley, in a relatively short time, Clarke

³² Milk-run: Usually a non-invasive flight to established runways with supplies and personnel.



U.S. Navy temporary personnel. L-R, pilots Bob Campbell kneeling, sitting John Combs, Ron Clarke, Dave Smith. Unidentified Flight Mechanics to the rear.

Ron Clarke Collection.

was familiarized with a lot of Laos. Well suited for the job, he encountered minimum problems coping with the new environment or the aircraft. Prior to joining Air America, he had amassed considerable flight time and throttle twisting experience in HS-3 aircraft. Moreover, he had flown many cross-country flights, been a maintenance test pilot, and volunteered to fly squadron ships to the overhaul and repair facility at the Naval Air Station (NAS) Jacksonville, Florida. Additionally, he had served under an outstanding Skipper. When a person inquired if they could do something out of the ordinary with a helicopter, the commanding officer answered, *"You are Navy pilots. You can do anything you want. Just do not screw up, and if you do, walk east until your hat floats."* Consequently, the squadron complement of pilots had considerable freedom of action, and they flew safely.

At the end of the first week, the three Air America veterans departed Vientiane for R&R (STO), leaving Coombs, Smith and Clarke to accomplish missions. Flying single pilot, they carried old, worthless maps containing minimum, outdated detail, especially along border regions, and they initially flew without headsets or any method to communicate while in the cockpit. Depending on the scheduled mission they carried canned food obtained in the USOM embassy commissary. ³³

Because fuel was considered a premium at most sites and outstations, fifty-five-gallon drums of aviation gasoline were loaded by forklift in the cabin section prior to leaving Wattay Airport on a mission. A wobble hand pump and hose with a chamois were part of the flyaway kit. During the fueling process, a chamois was wired over the fuel nozzle hose, the theory being to help prevent rust, water and other contaminants from entering the tanks. ³⁴

Initial operations from Vientiane were mainly conducted behind or close to enemy lines. The territory Clarke navigated over seemed familiar him and he did not become disoriented. During the course of a day, "The Three Musketeers" proceeded to outlying areas carrying supplies, troops, military equipment, and the sort. They also performed evacuations, hauled wounded and dead, conducted reconnaissance flights, and search and rescue missions.

³³ After repositioning to Udorn, they were able to purchase military "C" rations for the field. At lunchtime a small hole was kicked in the ground, then a can was opened with the P-38 device. Next utensils were removed from the tinfoil package, which was filled with avgas from the water-check drain petcock valve located on the underside of the helicopter. This fuel was poured in the small fire pit, ignited, and the can of food placed over it. The result was a timely hot meal.

³⁴ This method of fueling was later proven flawed, and reverted to using a funnel and chamois type fueling process.

Clarke thoroughly enjoyed his eight months with Air America, and liked the people he worked with. He considered everyone, with only a few exceptions, capable and interested in performing a high-quality job. ³⁵

SHIRLEY

During March, Holt's Quonset Point, Rhode Island, based squadron, HS-9, was on a carrier that sailed into Norfolk, Virginia. He last flew a HSS-1 on Monday 20 March. While in port, people interviewed a few selected pilots. Bob Campbell subsequently disappeared. Holt was not interviewed but, having a curious nature talked to the team. He arrived in Washington on 22 March with six other individuals amid a whirlwind of activity. He attended interesting briefings eventually deemed fairly accurate. Later he received obligatory vaccinations and was afforded time to purchase civilian clothes.

Immediately following military separation, the men were bussed to the Civil Air Transport (CAT-AAM) office in the center of Washington, to deal with an innumerable spectrum of bureaucratic Air America, Inc. employment forms. In processing included signing contracts, designating beneficiaries, specifying preferred banks to accommodate their earnings, obtaining many required vaccinations, and a myriad of other items necessary to satisfy what appeared as an insatiable Company policy. Concurrent with satisfying required Company paperwork, all applied for instantly processed passports and visas. During this period, Air America personnel offered the men permanent Company employment status. However, because of the hurried nature and extreme urgency in hiring, and confusion as to Air America's true nature, its workings, or its operations in the Far East, no one opted to chance long-term employment with the shadowy company in such a nebulous situation. Hence, the pilots signed contracts designating them Reserve Captains over an indefinite period. They were happy and pleasantly surprised to note that their base pay, almost triple the military rate, would consist of 1,050 dollars per month, a small amount of per diem, and a provision of ten dollars extra per hour for flying over seventy hours. Deadhead pay was stipulated at a rate of five dollars per hour. Flight during the period from thirty minutes after official sunset to thirty minutes before official sunrise would be paid at a rate of two dollars twenty-five

³⁵ Ron Clarke Emails, 05/08/15, 05/22/15, 06/05/15, 06/06/15 (6), 06/07/15.



One location often frequented by Air America crews was Vang Vieng (Site-16) located on the Route-13 highway extending from Vientiane to Luang Prabang. Here government soldiers and tribals poise beside HUS-1 Hotel Echo at noon while waiting to load rice sacks and supplies for an outpost.

Ron Clarke Collection.

cents per hour. To those accustomed to meager military wages, the total sum was a huge windfall.³⁶

GOING ABROAD

As the main group of pilots had a strict deadline to satisfy, immediate overseas movement of Army and Navy aviation personnel commenced on 25 March. The Army cluster departed Washington on a recently introduced Northwest Orient twin-engine 707 jet. Following interim stops at Detroit, Seattle, and Anchorage they arrived in Tokyo where, after checking into a small hotel, they enjoyed a wild, boozy night in the neon glittering town. The following day, Swiss Air flew them, via Hong Kong, to Bangkok, Thailand.

In accordance with attempts to preserve the movement's clandestine nature, some of the Navy volunteers departed Sunday night 26 March on Pan American Airways One from Idlewild Airport in New York. With no scheduled layovers, the long Atlantic route flight required passenger and fueling stops at London, Frankfurt, Ankara, Turkey; Beirut, Lebanon; and Bombay and Calcutta, India, arriving at the Don Muang Airport Bangkok, on 28 March.

Despite flying on separate planes, both groups arrived almost simultaneously at Don Muang Airport. Thus far, coordination and planning proved excellent. However, once on the ground these ratings abruptly ended.

The aircraft carrying the "tourist youth group" taxied into the Don Muang commercial parking area during the early morning hours of 28 March. Used to operating olive drab, high polish H-34s, quite a stir occurred when the Army men observed a large number of green Marine helicopters lined up on a cross ramp between the commercial and military strips.

They debarked on portable stairs into the unaccustomed heat and humidity of Southeast Asia, and then walked a short distance to the terminal. Once inside the dingy, non-air-conditioned terminal, considerable confusion arose, for no one in authority met the unsophisticated young men. Not having been briefed on such an eventuality, few among them possessed any idea of what action to take next. Highly sensitive and apprehensive about breaching mission security, chaos reigned in the unfamiliar setting. They milled around, mumbled, stewed, or simply waited for events to unfold. After a while, some of the group's

³⁶ Shirley Holt Emails, 03/23/09, 03/26/09.

collective nervousness dissipated when one wag, recalling a class-B spy movie, suggested they search for a spooky looking guy wearing a red carnation. The comment elicited a hearty laugh.

Eventually, their contact arrived and a bus transported the exhausted group eighteen miles into Bangkok to attend a briefing at the prestigious Erawan Hotel.

Navy types billeted at the Roosevelt Hotel, which afforded nice accommodations near the Air America office. Other pilots stayed at the Rama Hotel. The Air America office had an exceptionally attractive receptionist who caused the young men's hearts to race furiously. They considered the woman a perfect introduction to the Thai people. ³⁷

MARINE MOVEMENT

More acclimated to the Far East environment from normal tours of duty, Marines found the Thailand transition far less taxing than did their stateside counterparts. After packing their belongings for shipment to CONUS, and relinquishing their identification cards and dog tags, just prior to midnight Captain John D. Fonburg, Donald Babitz, Newell S. Sly, Harold H. Clark, Edward Meixner, Paul F. Walton, and Jerry A. "Buff" Buffington assembled on the carrier deck. Then, boarding a CIA COD (a utility version of the S2F), they catapulted off the USS *Bennington* and proceeded to the military runway at Don Muang. Located on the east side of the airport complex, a wide, grassy, tree-lined median shielded the runway from the parallel commercial strip. ³⁸

Joe Strange, a clandestine character of European appearance, accompanied the group.

³⁷ Fred Sass Emails, 08/27/02, 08/28/02, 09/03/02, 09/20/02, 09/21/02, 09/24/02, 10/14/03, 11/30/02.

³⁸ John Haseman, *The Thai Resistance Movement During the Second World War*, Southeast Asian Studies, 17, 1978, 101.

During World War Two, allied resistance forces used this Royal Thai Air Force military strip to successfully ferry OSS agents into and out of Bangkok without alerting occupying Japanese authorities. Thai and Western agents merely taxied into existing hangars to discharge or embark their loads.

Strange, an undercover U.S. Army officer, had previously briefed and helped select the group. While waiting for a windowless panel truck to back to the cabin door, he assumed the spook role (a term used at the time for clandestine intelligence types), surreptitiously peeking outside to clear the area. Once lodged within the truck's security, the vehicle's driver spirited the pumped-up men to a large safe house near the airport. There, on the second floor, elated to be off the carrier and in the luxury of an air-conditioned room, they unwound for the remainder of the early morning swilling beer, bulling, or resting.³⁹

Following the group of seven, as during the December helicopter movement, under cover of darkness and the current Lao crises, other HMR-163 aviators repositioned fourteen squadron helicopters, bailed to Air America under U.S. Air Force contract AF33 (600)-40818, to the military section of Don Muang.⁴⁰ A few pilots involved in the movement were Dick Woodward, Harry Gast, Abe Wolson, Jim Dunphy, Ted Cash, Jim Schmidt, and "Lucky" Day.

While selected crew chiefs like Lloyd Hill remained onshore, other crewmembers returned to the ship on the S2F. Hill and other men were immediately flown to Udorn on a C-124 as an advance party to prepare the site's infrastructure for the influx of H-34s and crews. Hill's specialty was fueling (called POL). He helped operate the tactical fuel bladder system that was initially filled from fixed wing aircraft. Fuel was later trucked to the base from Bangkok. Enjoying an occasional weekend in Bangkok, after five months Hill rotated back to Okinawa, where he was quarantined pending a liver fluke examination.⁴¹

³⁹ John Fonburg Phone Conversations, 6/1/91, 11/16/91.
Jerry Buffington Emails, 10/4/03, 10/7/03.

⁴⁰ Joint Chiefs of Staff.
Ted Cash Phone Conversation, 4/17/05.

⁴¹ Lloyd Hill phone conversation.
Liver flukes could be obtained from eating uncooked fish sauce.



Captain John Fonburg

Despite all previous attempts to sanitize the aircraft, at a certain angle the sun revealed the white star and Marine lettering visible under the light coat of green paint. Therefore, work immediately commenced to finalize HUS-1 "civilianization." Workers again sprayed green paint over all military logos to supplement and cover the hurried Cubi Point and shipboard paint jobs. However, despite the touch up identifying scripts, their hasty efforts barely concealed the original raised lettering and military logos. Air America maintenance supervisors, assuming no further assignment of helicopters, failed to envision future requirements and did not foresee using more letters than those contained in the alphabet. Therefore, consistent with first HUS-1 markings, they stenciled small white uppercase letters prefaced by "H" (Hotel for helicopter) sequentially on each side of upper tail pylons. These characters constituted the sole identification.

Sometime during the movement, three field grade officers from HMR 163 arrived ashore to act as military strategists and to advise CIA or JUSMAG officials regarding USMC concepts of helicopter operations, and implementation of combat vertical envelopment. One participant, Major Martin Wagenhoffer, the former S-1 of the squadron, occasionally flew with the Air America group as a second pilot to observe the program. While flying with Jerry Buffington, Wagenhoffer, a large man, managed to initiate retreating blade stall, which resulted in the aircraft nose pitching upward to a forty-five-degree angle. With nothing but sky in the windscreen, the terrified Buffington recovered from the unusual attitude and flew the remainder of the mission. Major Walter Sienko, squadron S-3, also entered Thailand. In retrospect, Wayne Knight speculated that Sienko might have been among the first group to accompany the four HUS-1 transfers in December. Totally out of character, the major described the delights of Bangkok's massage parlors well before the March selection process. The man's knowledge of the area puzzled Wayne for a time. ⁴²

⁴² EW Knight Letter, 07/27/91.

EW Knight Emails, 08/07/02, 03/18/03, 06/27/03, 06/29/03, 10/08/03, 07/02/04, 07/07/04.
Jerry Buffington Email, 10/21/03.
George Hofmann, 10.

The following morning the Marine group departed for a small house on Suriwongse Road close to the Civil Air Transport office. Then, following a short trip through the interesting city, their handler ushered them into the Erawan Hotel's ballroom. There Don Rinker, Chief of Air America Security, instructed them in the use of creative writing. Then after shading recent Seventh Fleet backgrounds and indicating they had "recently arrived from the States," the seven men completed obligatory Company forms. ⁴³

By the time the U.S. Army and Navy contingent reached the Erawan ballroom, the U.S. Marines had nearly completed the employment forms. With a mix of considerably more than 50 Army, Navy, Marine pilots, mixed crew chiefs, several unidentified shadowy types, and various MAAG Thai personnel, Joe Madison from the Taipei office and C.J. Abadie conducted a briefing related to the next day's flight activity to Udorn. ⁴⁴

With the influx of military machines and men imminent three days previously, Bob Rousselot had appointed CJ Abadie as Acting Manager of Helicopter Flight Operations. Although he was still expected to fly and remain qualified, Rouss indicated that Ab would have to devote more effort to administrative duties, while managing and supervising helicopter flight operations. As a salve to the enormous task that lay ahead for Abadie, the VPO added that he had faith that the appointee would perform a good job in this advanced supervisory assignment, while obtaining considerable knowledge about the Company on his way up the corporate ladder. ⁴⁵

During the briefing, Abadie divulged that because of the urgent Lao situation, and intense pressure from higher-ups to get the ball rolling, all airworthy helicopters would fly

⁴³ John Fonburg Phone Conversation, 6/1/91.

⁴⁴ CJ Abadie Interviews, 02/19/00, 08/21/02.

⁴⁵ Bob Rousselot Memorandum, 03/25/61.

north to Udon the next day. This site would constitute their base of operations. While preparing crew assignments, he asked those assembled to indicate any previous aircraft commander status. The inquiry caused confusion within the ranks, for Army pilots were not familiar with the Marine terminology, Helicopter Aircraft Commander (HAC), and only assigned crews by pilot, co-pilot, and crew chief. Despite all being H-34 qualified, only Army pilot Fred Sass raised his hand. Consequently, Abadie scheduled Fred to ferry Hotel India with Charles Mateer as co-pilot. He then selected the remaining HACs from the pool of Marine and Navy pilots. Some resentment evolved over this election, and it marked the first instance of minor service differences.

Following the briefing, weary Army personnel discovered that there were no available rooms at the prestigious Erawan Hotel. Hence, handlers sought last minute accommodations at any unfilled lodging in the bustling city. Distributed to what all generally considered "number 10 roach hotels," the complaining jet-lagged personnel contented themselves with an opportunity to shower and relax. ⁴⁶

INTELLIGENCE OVERVIEW

While Air America pilots rested and waited impatiently to commence the historic movement north, the Central Intelligence Agency disseminated a comprehensive National Intelligence Estimate (NIE 50-61) regarding the Southeast Asian Mainland twelve-month outlook. There was an abundance of information and support for introducing additional assets into the Lao blender. The report included information regarding six countries throughout Indochina, but was heavily weighted on the deteriorating Lao situation. It cited as contributing factors: foreign intervention, domestic strains, and detrimental aspects pertaining to an unstable, political, social, and economic structure:

"..By far the most serious problem is the deteriorating situation in Laos...The Pathet Lao probably have a greater military capability than they have yet chosen to exercise. They could sharply step up the action at any time and probably achieve a series of local victories. This would increase the likelihood of the disintegration of the Laotian Army and the subsequent collapse of the non-communist position....The loss of Laos to the communists,

⁴⁶ Fred Sass Email, 08/27/02.

or perhaps even the division of the country, would almost certainly incline the Thai [leaders] toward accommodation to communist power in Southeast Asia [damaging the U.S position and influence]."

To recapitulate, by way of an abbreviated history, which might assist the reader in better understanding the reasons additional helicopters and crews were introduced into the Lao conflict at this time, the intelligence overview produced at the time stated that Laos was a country divided by two opposing factions. The pro-communist side controlled most of the country in the Military Region Two provinces of Xieng Khouang, Houa Phan (Sam Neua), and in Military Region One, Phong Saly, and a large portion of Luang Prabang. The enemy was busy consolidating military, political, and administrative authority in the northern areas without encountering effective government resistance. They were also organizing their controlled territory along the lines of communist ideology. Despite Phoumi Nosavan's Western-aided recapture of Vientiane in December from Kong Le's forces, and the subsequent installation of a rightist government, Pathet Lao, Soviet, and Chinese leaders still claimed Prince Souvanna Phouma as the country's legal Prime Minister. Therefore, a government in exile was installed at Khang Khay on the northeastern Plain of Jars with Khamsouk Keola acting as temporary Prime Minister while Souvanna Phouma remained out of the country. Curiously, Laos became a unique country in that it had two governments claiming power and supported by opposing superpowers.

In stark contrast to the smoother running, but dictatorial communist Pathet Lao system operating within captive audience areas, the Royal Lao Government of Prince Boun Oum and General Phoumi Nosavan was deemed ineffective, unstable, and increasingly corrupt. The government was deemed hardly representative of the people, and efforts to raise non-communist support were largely unsuccessful. National Assembly representatives were mostly indifferent in providing government support. Therefore, the military situation forestalled important social and political reforms.

The military situation in the country slipped into intermittent civil war. Pathet Lao probing actions, RLA withdrawals (an alternate method of describing panicked retreats), and regroupings largely characterized military actions. Since Pathet Lao and Kong Le troops seized the Plain of Jars in January, the strange bedfellows concentrated their strength in that area and North Vietnamese Army "advisors" attached to Pathet Lao units conducted major military training, and tactical guidance. North Vietnamese artillery crews worked to assist and train PL counterparts. A substantial logistic buildup continued in Xieng Khouang and

other areas by a massive Soviet airlift. Additional supplies were trucked in from North Vietnam along Route-7 and other communist controlled arteries.

On the plus side, the Royal Lao Army contained superior troop numbers and possessed more modern military equipment than the Pathet Lao army. However, internal security and lack of transportation (especially in the air) prevented the Lao army from concentrating its strength in trouble areas. In addition, the RLA continued to be poorly led, and generally lacked the will to fight. Even bolstered with American advisors, the Lao General Staff had been excruciatingly slow to initiate effective military operations, and there were no plans to retake the strategic PDJ and Xieng Khouang Ville in the near future.

A more alarming fact in the scenario concluded that the Pathet Lao Army, and its controlling North Vietnamese masters, probably possessed a far greater military capability on both the Plain of Jars and Bolovens Plateau areas than first perceived. Enemy attacks on government concentrations at Luang Prabang and widespread guerrilla operations throughout Laos were considered a possibility, particularly in Military Regions Three and Four.

The Lao crisis had increasingly become a matter of contention among major powers, and ultimate resolution rested in non-Lao hands. Southeast Asian countries were well aware of negative developments in the Lao crisis, and that a final solution could produce a deep impact on their future alignment decisions. They were concerned that hostilities could spread into their own countries. The nations all regarded the United States largely responsible for the present Lao crises. Country leaders in Thailand and South Vietnam believed that had USG provided anti-communist elements bold and prompt support in the past, the crises would not have reached current proportions and been resolved long ago.

The blame game also extended to the French and British, who both Prime Minister Sarit and President Diem believed restrained U.S. action and made SEATO intervention impossible. Now, largely due to procrastination, the issue would become a symbolic test of intentions, wills, and strengths between the major powers of the West and communist Bloc.

In the mix of nations, the neutralist governments of Cambodia, Burma, and Malaya favored an international political settlement resulting in a neutralist, but not commie-dominated Lao government. In contrast, South Vietnam and Thailand, enjoying closer ties to the U.S., preferred a non-communist, Western-oriented establishment. Failing in these objectives, intelligence academics believed that the loss of Laos or a partition would slant the Thai government toward an accommodation with communist powers, and seriously jeopardize

U.S. influence in South Vietnam. ⁴⁷

ONWARD TO UDORN

Prior to the H-34 movement to Udorn, Clarke, Combs, and Smith were instructed to fly thirty miles south to a new base of operations located on the Royal Thai Airfield at Udorn. Beside the three from Vientiane, two other pilots had already arrived in Udorn before the major party. The five pilots obtained accommodations at a local hotel in town, the rustic Mahpakdi. Ron Clarke shared a room with Bob Campbell another former Navy pilot, who Ron considered a "real gentleman." Because of operational requirements, they were seldom at the hotel at the same time. Clarke recalled the wooden hotel accommodations as basic, but comfortable. The rooms were Spartan, with a transom and glass area above each door. It was not unusual to observe hand grenades perched behind the glass of crewmember rooms. In Thai fashion, interior walls were un-paneled, with two by four members exposed. Spaces between the studs made excellent storage places for canned goods obtained at the Vientiane Embassy commissary. Rations from the ersatz store were used as needed when flying. A "head" and "shower" at the end of the hall consisted of the same hole in the floor. There was a basin of water and a little bowl for dipping next to the hole. That was how one flushed the toilet or poured water over your body to shower. Ron concluded that it was a good thing they had sturdy legs so they were able to squat. ⁴⁸

Soon after arriving in Udorn, the three men boarded a cargo plane for Bangkok to participate in the H-34 movement. There were a number of HUS-1 aircraft parked just off the hardtop. Some cockpits contained hard hats placed on the cyclic and a pair of pilot flight gloves lay on the PIC seat. Already checked out in the H-34, the men each selected an aircraft to follow Abadie to Udorn. ⁴⁹

Preparing for the monumental task of moving so many helicopters north on the morning of 29 March, all mixed service crewmembers assembled on the tarmac parking area where Abadie

⁴⁷ Foreign Relations 196-63, Volume 1, Vietnam, National Intelligence Estimate #50-61, #364, Outlook in Mainland Southeast Asia, 03/28/61.

⁴⁸ Ron Clarke Email, 06/06/15. Clarke remained busy during his Air America tenure. He conducted very little socializing, but did journey to Bangkok for R&R a few times.

⁴⁹ Ron Clarke Emails, 05/22/15, 06/06/15.



John P. Combs, Bob Campbell, and CJ Abadie at the Don Muang Airport prior to the HUS movement north to Udorn.

Ron Clarke Collection.

again briefed all hands regarding the estimated four plus hour flight to Udorn. Affording a greater availability of forced landing areas and lacking maps, they would use the northern road as a fixed landmark as a navigation aid to fly through the hills to Korat. If necessary, they would refuel at the Royal Thai air base and then continue the journey.

As one ship remained grounded at Don Muang for mechanical problems, mechanics prepared thirteen helicopters for the flight.⁵⁰ Ab further advised all-hands that if anyone, with what he humorously described as a "two rag leaker," should fall by the wayside, designated aircraft would ensure that the crew would return to Bangkok or Korat.⁵¹

Admiral Felt, Dean Rusk, and other high-level officials had been in town to attend the seventh high-level SEATO council conference scheduled from 27 through 29 March, to garner multi-national troop support and *"to discuss the Lao situation with General Phoumi, and urge him to go on the offensive."*⁵² Just before the gaggle's departure for Udorn, in passing, some

⁵⁰ JCS, 83.

⁵¹ Abadie interviews.

⁵² Joint Chiefs of Staff, 82.
Arthur Schlesinger, 280.

dignitaries witnessed transfer of the HUS-1s to Air America but, without stopping or any passengers disembarking, the DC-6 merely taxied by the armada and departed. ⁵³

Because recruiters had advised Army personnel to leave their flight equipment in the States, except for the minimum equipment Marine crew chiefs and pilots brought from the carrier, only sufficient helmets were available to accommodate one pilot per ship. This equipment deficiency necessitated major cockpit shouting in double crewed cockpits. ⁵⁴

INITIAL PROBLEMS

Unlike the "pilots start your engines" command from pri-fly on U.S. carriers, some organized chaos ensued among dissimilar crews. Minor delays occurred during engine start. One Army pilot, unfamiliar with the Marine HUS-1 cockpit configuration or procedures, complained that he could not locate the starter mechanism. Consequently, a disgusted Marine HAC, responsible for his flight of four, departed his cockpit and showed the man the trigger device location beneath the collective. Additional cockpit differences led to other delays. While helicopter pilots "pulled pitch" and "hailed ass," Fred Sass and Charles Mateer struggled to discover how to disable the cyclic trim. Army

⁵³ CJ Abadie Interview, 08/21/02.

CJ Abadie Email, 02/08/99.

⁵⁴ Information sources supplementing this segment:

John Fonburg Phone Conversation, 06/1/91.

Jerry Buffington Email, 10/7/03.

Fred Sass Emails, 08/28/02, 10/09/02.

stateside H-34s provided an overhead toggle switch to accomplish this. Except for a stick trim release button on the upper left section of the cyclic head, the HUS-1 lacked the Army modification. Not wanting to miss the journey, the two pilots took off and flew ten minutes before discovering the correct circuit breaker to disconnect the trim. Thus, with a problematic start to the journey, began a short period in which a few interservice personnel evidenced arrogance or suspicions of the other service's abilities.

Abadie led the pack north. Despite some reservations about maintaining flight integrity, all thirteen helicopters eventually reached the Udorn airport in relatively good condition. Dribbling in throughout the afternoon, personnel parked the ships on a wide, dusty, and rutted laterite taxiway that terminated at a western chain-link fence. Oriented east-west, Japanese engineers had originally hacked the remote airstrip out of the jungle during the latter part of World War Two, and utilized it to counter joint Thai-OSS operations in the region.⁵⁵

At the time of their arrival, the Royal Thai Air Base consisted of a basic 5000-foot fifteen-inch-thick concrete northwest-southeast oriented runway, built by U.S. contractors within the prior three years for contingency use, and also as an alternate emergency landing field to accommodate U-2 spy or B-52 crews.

"Lee" Holt flew to Udorn as co-pilot with Hal Clark in Hotel-November. Except for a distinctive concrete airstrip, the area was devoid of most anything but a few wooden platforms situated to erect tents. Beating the crowd to town, Holt obtained a room at the concrete Prachapakdi, touted as the "best" hotel in town. He had a "three lizard room" and was not bothered by insects. During the few months he remained with the Company, he did not experience much excitement in Udorn. However, he considered the people pleasant. On his off days, a young Buddhist monk visited him to practice English, and they became good friends. Other times he enjoyed listening to the owner of a nearby blacksmith shop perform music with his friends after work. At night Abadie's outdoor movies, where pineapple on a stick replaced popcorn, were interesting. He recalled the first hamburger stand commencing business while he was there. One highlight was the samlor races from the base to town. Pushed to their limits, the drivers appeared merely bone, sinew, and muscle. Except for boredom, participants did not

⁵⁵ John Haseman, 144.

have an excuse for the races, but were careful to tip heavily.⁵⁶

Also wisely recognizing that housing for the large influx of men would command a premium price for everything in town, Fred Sass and Dominic Guccione hustled into Udon Town the first evening and discovered decent accommodations at the Khrong Tong Hotel. In the small community, soon overflowing with hormone intensive, curious, and adventurous young Westerners, they rented a cool, reasonably priced room with a fan and private toilet. Marine pilots including Don Babitz and Newell Sly, billeted at the more substantial and respectable Prachapakdi. Not as choosy, or unable to obtain accommodations there, others opted for the more rustic Mahpakdi Hotel. Lagging their peers in timeliness, some personnel temporarily slept in squad tents at the field until finding suitable town lodging.

Hoping to ease transition to the new environment, "old timer" Charlie Bade filtered through the various hotels welcoming squadron friends and spinning wild tales about his Lao experiences. He related a few tales calculated to be scary, others were more humorous, like the pilot fired on by a hostile native armed with a bow and arrow. Another sea story revolved around his aircraft taking ground fire. Charlie's exploits enthralled and interested the newcomers, who would shortly share the same experiences. He divulged one interesting fact: certain areas in Laos were more dangerous than others, and a nebulous plan was in place to earn combat pay.

During the movement to Udon, Sass discovered that one of the recently hired temporary Navy pilots was an old high school acquaintance he had not seen in seven years. When John Smoot's family moved to Miami from Texas, the Smoot brothers matriculated in Sass's school. John eventually switched to another facility, while his brother remained and played football with Sass. Following the reunion, Smoot and Sass looked forward to good times in Southeast Asia.

Over time, perceptive people generally characterized Smoot as a wild child, a free spirit, a drinker, a card player, and a flying cowboy whose activities occasionally bordered on dementia. However, his methods were not all fun and games, and on occasion he exhibited a more practical side. Except in higher-class Bangkok hotels, Westerners discovered few familiar toilets installed in the country. The standard commode consisted of a slightly

⁵⁶ Shirley Holt Email, 03/26/09.

elevated porcelain bowl with footpads on either side. For obvious reasons, foreigners called the highly efficient, but unfamiliar device a "one-hole squatter." Except for a raised flush type water closet as opposed to the more customary water jar and dipper, the Krung Tong exclusively sported squatters. To relieve aching leg muscles and assume a more familiar posture, Smoot designed, and then commissioned a local carpenter to manufacture, a wooden toilet seat. Much mirth and ridicule ensued when people observed him carrying his treasure to the hotel, but nothing seemed to worry or bother Smoot.

Sass later flew with Smoot on a short test hop. During the course of the flight, he turned to Sass and yelled, "You have it." Then he unstrapped, lifted his seat, and climbed below into the cabin area, causing Sass to ponder Smoot's motive. Most pilots found the single relief tube located on the right side of the cockpit difficult to manipulate, so he assumed that his "stick buddy" wanted to stand upright at the cabin door and leisurely relieve himself. However, within a few minutes he observed Smoot hanging outside the right cockpit window, waving and laughing. Incredulously, the crazy man had stepped out the cabin door, climbed the fuselage, and stood on the pilot steps. Sass had never witnessed anything so blatantly dangerous before, and yelled several expletives at him.

Abadie also lived at the Khrong Tong Hotel, and posted daily flight schedules in respective hotel lobbies. The schedule informed the men where to deploy. If not slated for Vientiane, they flew directly to the work site, where the Customer assigned missions and informed them of actual or potential hot spots. Occasionally, management placed a note on the bulletin board to inform all personnel concerning a recent trouble area. Toward evening crews congregated in or around the three main hotels to view the schedule. If their name appeared, they attempted to rise early and make their way to the base to eat a breakfast of powdered eggs and coffee at the MABS-16 mess tent. At first, the trip to the field presented a challenge, for Air America possessed few vehicles and these Jeeps or small trucks were usually restricted to the base or exclusively reserved for management types. Occasionally, Sass rode with Abadie or a contractor's wheeled transportation. Most of the time, however, he hired a samlor for a nominal sum, as the three-wheeled pedicab provided the only option for a lengthy ride to the unguarded base entrance. There he dismounted and walked a quarter mile along the access road to the MABS facility. In the evening, numerous samlor drivers

bunched outside the gate hoping to obtain an American fare to town. ⁵⁷

With limited information or time to purchase necessary items, temporary Air America crews arriving from the States traveled light, carrying scant wardrobes for the tropical environment. Since the Company specified no standard uniform at the time, they wore khakis, fatigues, jeans, or anything else they could scrounge. If available in the correct size, the crewmembers initially purchased clothing from sparse MABS stocks.

One day, while hauling pants and shirts designed for Lao troops, the opportunity arose to partially solve the lack of clothing problem: the Flight Mechanic purloined several uniforms, which he distributed among crews. When the liberated garments manufactured for diminutive troops were not wearable by American brutes without major alterations, this was no problem for those adept in creating "field expedients." Following a brief search, they discovered a competent Indian tailor in town who stitched a rear-end expansion joint into the pants. Afterward, the men roamed Udon with a large V shaped patch stitched on the back of their pants.

When novelty of the movement waned and the men felt more comfortable in their new environment, a few men began to grow beards and wear cut-off shorts. Since they were officially Air America civilians, outside former constraints of military etiquette, they soon resembled Wild West, scruffy individuals. ⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Segment Sources:

John Fonburg Phone Conversation, 06/01/91.

Fred Sass Emails, 08/27/02, 08/28/02, 09/12/02, 09/20/02, 10/03/02, 11/08/02, 01/03/03, 10/14/03, 03/22/04.

Jim Coble Email, 03/14/02, 05/14/02.

EW Knight Email, 05/15/02.

CJ Abadie Email, 06/13/02.

Samlor: The Thai word for this pedicab is translated as three wheeled.

⁵⁸ Don Babitz Emails, 7/19/04, 7/21/04, 7/24/04.

Don Babitz April Flight Records; Fred Sass Email.



A typical raised Thai house constructed of wood and a corrugated tin roof. This particular house, located across the street from the airbase, was later rented by CJ Abadie.

Clarke Collection.

At first, Company personnel used MABS-16 support unit tents located on the northern portion of the complex, not far from the intersection of the parking area and runway. While still officially the dry season, Okinawa Marines had pitched large general-purpose tents on suitable ground to attend basic human needs, including housing, administrative, maintenance, mail, medical, messing facilities, and Air America operations and maintenance offices.

Pilots initially checked into the operations tent for an assignment, the location of mission, who they would be working with, and how long they were scheduled to remain in the field. After inspecting an aircraft, if not going to Vientiane, the pilot and Flight Mechanic went to the supply of steel barreled 115/145 fuel and rolled the desired number to the helicopter. Then the pilot cranked up the ship, while the crewman rigged the drums for lifting. The pilot then operated the hoist and the barrels were pushed into the cargo compartment. All ships were equipped with fly-away kits that included hand activated wobble pumps and a chamois. ⁵⁹

MABS-16 PROGRESS

A small contingent of U.S. Army Signal Corps personnel was co-located in the same area as the Marines. The original Marine-Air America tent base remained in place for a few weeks until a Marine engineering platoon consisting of one officer, twenty-one enlisted men, and twenty-one additional carpenters from the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing commenced an eleven-week construction project to create a more permanent facility, located on an eight-acre tract southwest of, and close to, the runway. Anticipating the imminent rainy season that generally began during the May-June period and normally caused flooding, they began erecting five raised four-foot-high wooden platforms on top of which they built wooden frames to support tents. Each of the two largest platforms could support thirteen strong-backed general purpose tents. Tents were shielded and provided screening to prevent intrusion of bugs and indigenous rodents. Two shorter platforms accommodated laundry and wash tents. Another platform contained two corrugated-roofed buildings intended to accommodate the squadron command center. Three buildings already existed in the selected area. These were renovated and eventually designated the mess hall, office space housing sick bay, the post office, the post exchange, the squadron office, a communications switchboard, and the motor transport office.

⁵⁹ Ron Clarke Email, 05/22/15.

A third building was allocated for Air America offices.

Rough mahogany and other building materials were purchased locally from merchants at a cost of 22,000 dollars. Wooden walkways connected the entire complex. All hands initially described the field operation as very primitive, but a substantial improvement from the previous billet.

Water was never considered a problem. From the beginning of the deployment, a water point was developed at a large pond less than a mile southwest of the camp. The essential liquid was hauled to the mess hall by vehicle-towed 400-gallon water buffalo tankers. When completed, a field filtration unit was employed to process and provide potable water trucked in from town. After the permanent camp was built a ten-foot-tall water tower with plumbing was erected to take advantage of gravity flow to supply water to the numerous washing stations.

Medical concerns and good health were always addressed for Marines in the field. By the third day of deployment a full staff, including a U.S. Navy doctor, three corpsmen, and sufficient medical supplies, were in place to support the entire unit and Air America crewmen for thirty days. Movement to new permanent quarters in early May afforded a more sanitary, insect resistant medium for twice-a-day sick call and minor operations. Daily inspections were conducted in facilities like the mess hall to help maintain disease-free personnel in a land harboring many indigenous illnesses.

During the six-month deployment period there were few serious issues addressed. Most of these dealt with skin ailments, gastrointestinal tract, eye, ear, throat, and respiratory infections, or the inevitable venereal disease. Because of anti-malarial drugs, there were few cases recorded of the mosquito borne disease.⁶⁰

Temporary pilot Ron Clarke recalled that one day a military construction group materialized to begin erecting wooden structures, which included a group of "pathways" with wooden pads off the side. The pads had tents on them which housed the Marines, plus a mess hall which Air America people were allowed to frequent. One of the tents housed a medical facility, which they could also frequent. The permanent base facility was built so far off

⁶⁰ George Hofmann, Camp Construction, 14-19.



Small trucks were one early mode of crew transportation from town to the Air America facility and to the flight line. The Thai driver stands in front of the Air America administration/operations building, a former Thai barracks structure that was utilized in the fall.

Abadie Collection.

the ground that Air America people considered the workers crazy, but when the rainy season arrived, they were vindicated. The water was very deep, and one could walk on the pathways. At times water was nearly over the pathways. ⁶¹

EARLY OPERATIONS IN THAILAND AND LAOS

With flying assets largely in place and missions backed up, the operation immediately accelerated into high gear. On the 31st, Don Babitz flew Air America personnel in Hotel Kilo to Ban Thakli, a sensitive Royal Thai Air Base located in a remote area well north of Bangkok. ⁶²

In addition to USAF jets, the Takhli base north of Bangkok also accommodated Air America C-46 aircraft and crews that covertly shuttled the "bullets, beans, and bandages" into Laos to support government rightist forces. During highly clandestine and secret operations, black U-2 planes either staged or resided within inner perimeter hangars waiting to conduct intelligence missions over the territory of cold war adversaries. Babitz "observed" none of this.

On 2 April, following an assignment in Vientiane, he delivered critical personnel northwest to the Padong (VS-05) primary Meo training base via the river town of Paksane. Later in the day he flew further northwest for twenty minutes to an alternate training site at Ban Na (VS-15). During the week he returned twice to Padong and Ban Na. Missions included attending a wedding, paying the troops, briefings, and parlays concerning upcoming operations to the west. There were no RONS (remain overnight) until later, so retracing his original flight path, depending on the time of day and weather, he either landed at Vientiane or returned to Udorn.

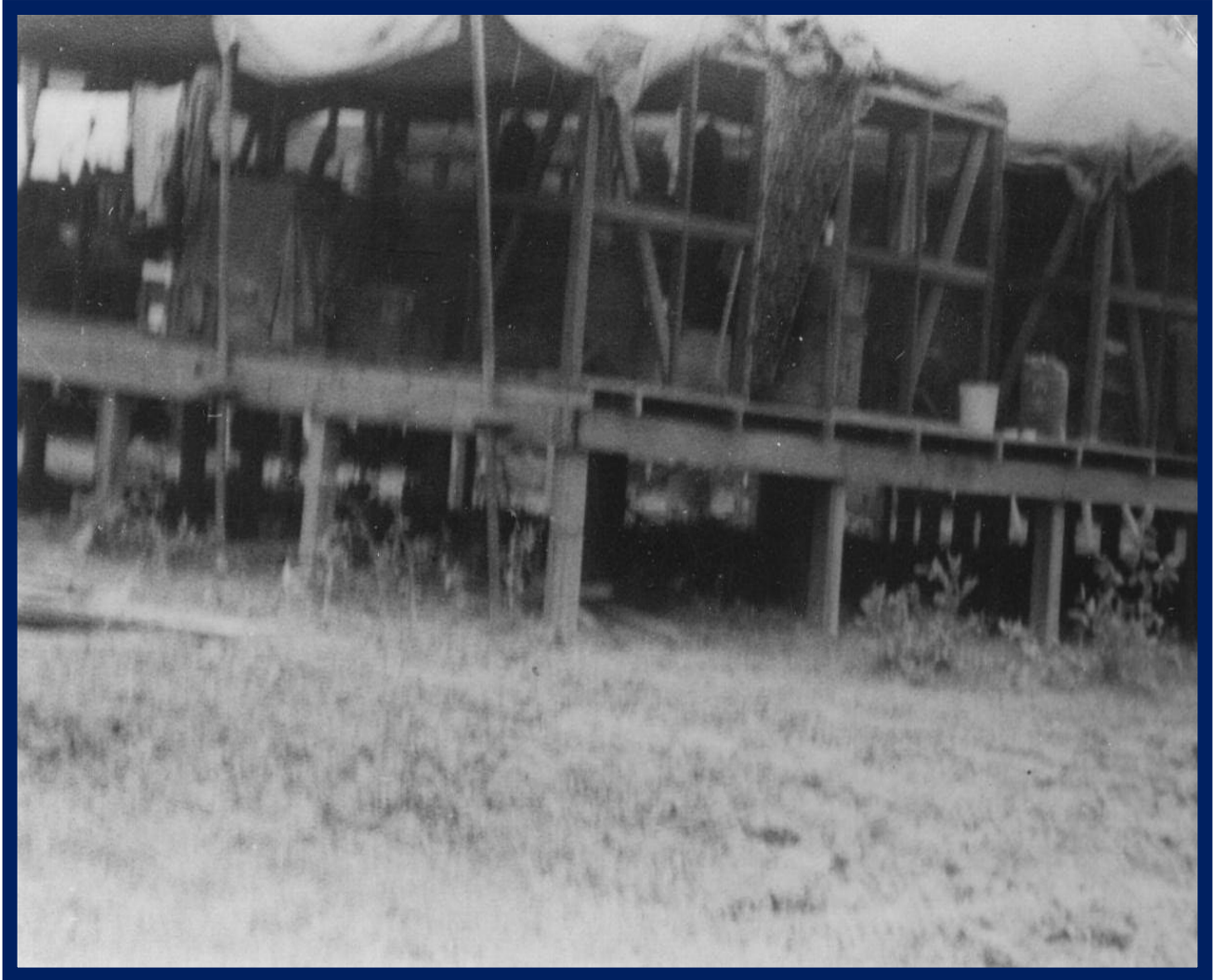
Early in the war, while Vang Pao was recruiting troops, not all Meo clans were inclined to provide young village men for battle. Despite possessing a leader or chief, most villages collectively voted on important issues. Therefore, depending on family and political ties, some fence sitters were opposed to Vang Pao and his harsh, aggressive recruiting methods. Therefore, when Vang Pao travelled, six guards always accompanied him. These people

⁶¹ Ron Clarke, Email, 05/22/15.

⁶² Don Babitz Email-Flight Time Records.

Elevated platforms in the process of being erected by U.S. Marines and Navy Seabees at RTAFB Udorn, Thailand to accommodate tents for MABS-16 housing and unit offices before onset of the rainy season.
Sass Collection.





Completed MABS-16 frames and tent living space for the Marine contingent erected on elevated platforms.
Sass Collection.



One of ten USMC 400-gallon water "Buffalo" tankers positioned close to MABS Marine quarters in 1961.
Sass Collection.



When the annual monsoon season arrived, the value of raised platforms and walkways was realized.
Clarke Collection.

were invariably loyal relatives who could be trusted to protect the leader with their lives.⁶³

"Plug," (we rarely knew either the surname or family name of those we worked with), another guard relation, was unique in that he had been mauled by a bear. Surviving the encounter, he incurred a deep wound on the right side of his nose. After the wound healed, a deep depression remained, which he plugged with wads of tobacco. Much later in the war, he was sent to the U.S. for reconstructive surgery that ultimately made an enormous difference in his appearance.

LOCAL MANAGEMENT

Busy times and great challenges proliferated daily. There were many items pending, and many people to consider. Until better organized, working long tedious days, Abadie struggled to perform all management tasks. Leaving his hotel at 0500 hours each morning, he arrived at the base, where he checked aircraft status and scheduled necessary changes. Additionally, he monitored flight line transportation, food availability, fuel, coordinated Vientiane and other site's mission requirements, answered Taipei correspondence, and digested the latest upcountry security messages. Following periodic maintenance inspections, he tested helicopters, flew with questionable new pilots, worked with Jack Forney pertaining to maintenance procedures and support upcountry, and kept the daily regimen alive when very little outside support materialized. The mixture of temporary "sheep dipped" pilots and mechanics during the first months created a zoo-like atmosphere. However, his responsibility with temporary pilots generally ended with flight assignments. MABS Commanding Officer, Lieutenant Colonel Johnson, wanted to be notified of Marine pilot problems, and tended to encompass all other officer matters. Abadie worked well with Colonel Johnson, who he noted had a difficult task with little support. He and the Base Manager generally had little daily working relations with the colonel. Abadie's day usually ended about 2200 hours, when he

⁶³ Some guards were young Meo boys like "Snoopy," who I watched grow and develop into a young adult at Long Tieng, where he became a competent loader and air operations officer. "Snoopy" survived the war. In 1974, after yet another land grabbing ceasefire and when USG policy dictated we abandon the Meo and long standing attempts to quell the spread of communism in Laos, I asked "Snoopy" his intentions. He characteristically answered that he would remain in Laos and start a lumber business, but he required a chain saw. Since our work was sporadic upcountry, I never saw "Snoopy" again and wondered if he survived and eventually left Laos after the communist takeover in 1975.



In addition to commanding respect as a military warlord, as part of his civic public relations duties, a youthful looking Vang Pao takes time out from the war to attend a Meo wedding, probably at Ban Na. One of his guards, normally a close relative, maintains a sharp eye on the crowd. Ladies finery was generally only worn at weddings and during the Meo New Year.

Babitz Collection.



On special occasions, such as a wedding or the Meo New Year, Meo ladies wore silver necklaces, a sign of family wealth. The artifacts were manufactured from French piasters or silver ingots.

Babitz Collection.



Dressed in traditional black garb, this Meo, a Vang Pao relative and loyal bodyguard, normally accompanied the leader during all trips away from the base. During the Author's tenure he derived the nickname "Plug," from an encounter with a bear during which he suffered a grievously deep wound alongside his nose, which he plugged with tobacco (not visible in this photo).

Babitz Collection.



Contrasting with "Plug," "Snoopy," another young Vang Pao relative, acted as a bodyguard. As his English improved, the intelligent lad became an efficient air operations assistant at Long Tieng. Unlike other young Meo soldiers, he slings a much lighter M-2 carbine rifle.

Babitz Collection.

occasionally showed a movie, compliments of either MABS or Gordon Murchie's local U.S. Information Service (USIS), on the hotel roof. Gathered on the street below, Thai youngsters eagerly anticipated these depictions of U.S. culture, although viewed in a reverse version through an opaque sheet screen.⁶⁴

MADISON

Abadie's immediate boss, Joe Madison, became the first Madriver Project Manager. An Assistant Vice President to Hugh Grundy in Taipei, Joe assumed an additional title of General Manager for Lao-Northern Thailand, and flew as a passenger to Udorn with Abadie on the 29th.

Madison's birth name was Joseph Orlowsky. Believing his last name to be too ethnic sounding, and a possible detriment to future career opportunities with the organization, some years before he had legally changed it. A peer described Madison as a "rotund, phlegmatic, somewhat toadyish appearing individual who supplied meticulous attention while counting nits and nats and guarding the Company till." Some suspected Madison of possessing close Agency affiliations, and that President Grundy tolerated him because he provided a valuable buffer with individuals with whom the President did not wish to deal.

Customarily wearing a black suit, white shirt, and tie, initially working and living in a tent and eating "C" rations, Madison did not merge well with the dust and rough civilization existing during the early days. However, he provided the group with a few creature comforts and readily agreed to expenditures for block ice used to cool soft drinks and occasional beer in buried klong jars.

Madison only remained in Udorn a few days until genial, pipe smoking, bespectacled "Doc" Lewis, Station Manager at Tachikawa, Japan, arrived to transition into the job and temporarily assume the role of Base Manager until Taipei headquarters recruited and assigned a permanent individual. Lewis found lodging in a very important person (VIP) room at the rear of the Prachapakdi Hotel, where he installed a beer and wine cooler, and frequently held off-duty court for management types.

Sometime later, Tom Tucker, who journeyed to Taipei in March on the same plane as J.J. McCauley, arrived as the Udorn program's permanent Base Manager. Described as a meek

⁶⁴ CJ Abadie Emails, 04/30/98, 01/21/99, 01/22/99, 02/08/99.
Fred Sass Email, 08/27/02.

individual who despised the work and the primitive backwoods atmosphere of Udorn, Tucker only remained a short time.

JACKSON FORNEY

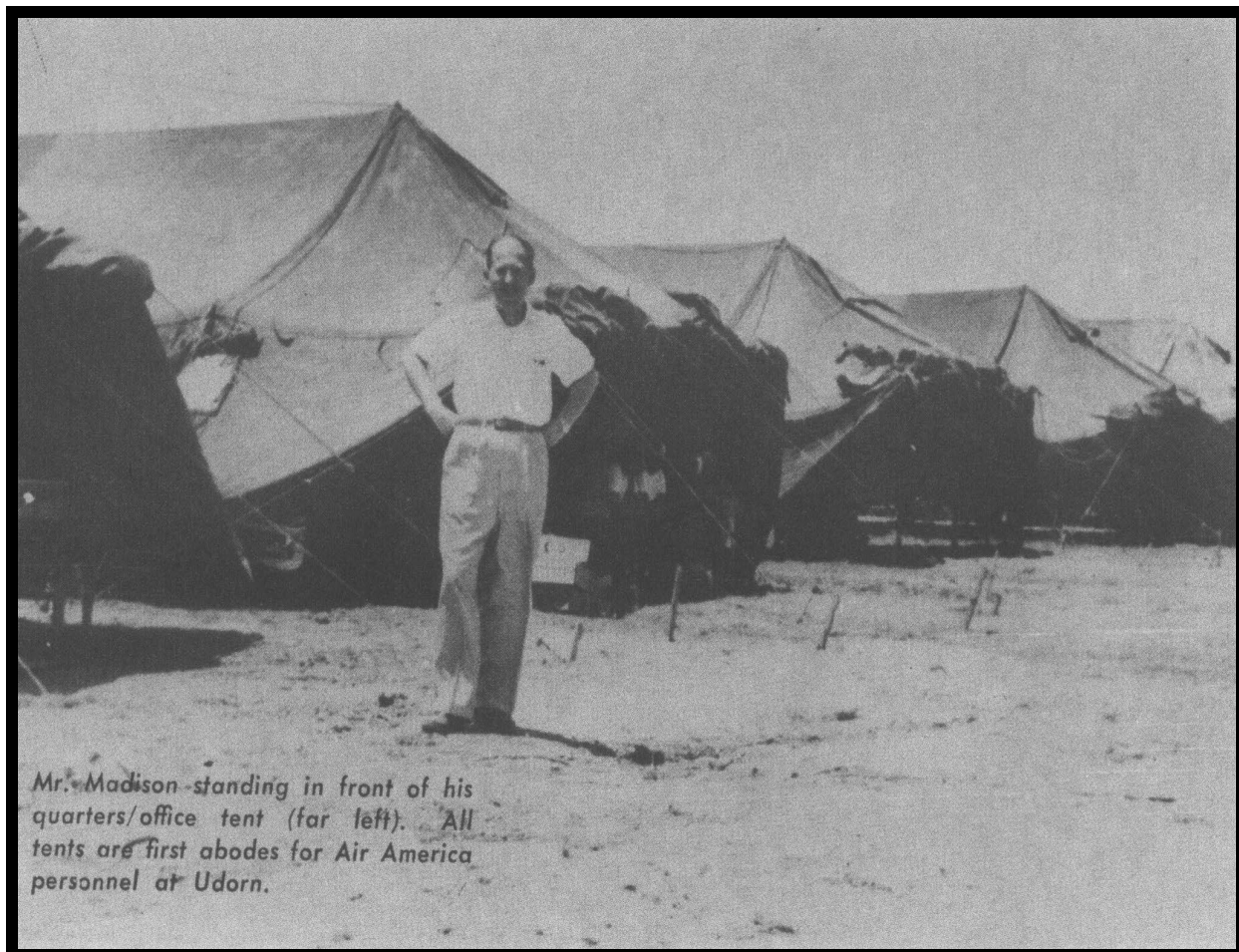
Jack Forney, another leading principal in local management during the early Air America helicopter operation, continued to exert his expertise and influence periodically over all maintenance phases for many years throughout the lengthy Udorn operation.⁶⁵

Following college, Forney went to work for CAT/AAM/Air Asia in early 1960 as Chief Mechanic Taipei--at that time the hub for the local and international airline and dark missions into China and Southeast Asia. After arriving in Udorn and renting a room at the Mahpakdi Hotel on the 28th, he generally remained in the area until establishing maintenance procedures and responsibilities between the Marine contingent and Air America. He also instituted a maintenance liaison between Udorn and Laos, and briefed new Flight Mechanics as to where they could obtain repairs in that country.

Following the catastrophic Bay of Pigs episode in April 1961, Taipei reassigned Forney to Bangkok to launch a comprehensive Southeast Asia Technical Service operation. Fixed wing-oriented at the time, Forney's responsibilities eventually included Bangkok, Vientiane, Saigon, and Phnom Penh.

Like most assigned to work in the Theater, Forney also considered Udorn a very primitive environment for Westerners, especially for those not accustomed to living on a local economy, or individuals who had never previously lived overseas. Even personnel who had formerly experienced life in major Southeast Asian cities were shocked by the nineteenth century setting. They found it extremely difficult to fit into the dull, drab lifestyle with few Western innovations or creature comforts in living accommodations, little or no air conditioning, very dusty dirt roads in the dry season that turned muddy in the wet season, a hot, spicy cuisine interspaced with purchased C-rations, and except for eight American

⁶⁵ Jack Forney Emails, 03/10/99, 03/18/99.
CJ Abadie Emails, 01/29/99 (2).
JJ McCauley Letter, 01/28/91.



Air America's bare bones operation was initially conducted from USMC general purpose tents in Udorn, Thailand late March 1961.

Air America Log, Volume 6, #5, 1972.



Photograph of visiting dignitaries from Taipei, Taiwan and Washington, DC offices in the Air America operations-map room at the raised Marine "Tent City" circa early fall 1961. Front row sitting right to left: Air America President Hugh Grundy, Commanding Officer MABS-16 detachment Lieutenant Colonel R. Johnson, Chairman of the Pacific Corporation retired Admiral Stump, UNK but likely a friend of Mister Stump. Standing left to right: Air America Station Manager Tachikawa, Japan "Doc" Lewis, Udorn Base Manager Tom Tucker, Air America Bangkok Regional Director Joe Madison, and Udorn base Helicopter Chief Pilot Captain Clarence Abadie.

Abadie Collection.

residents, a Thai population acquainted with only a few Caucasians.

Interfacing with the Marines as part of his job, Forney soon became acquainted with hardnosed Lieutenant Colonel Johnson. The first time he arrived late to his lunch table, the colonel publicly chewed him out. Work division between the two units generally specified that the military unit would maintain the facility, perform helicopter periodic inspections, heavy maintenance, supply special tooling, and limited spare parts. Air America pilots and Flight Mechanics would conduct daily preflight, post flight inspections, and light upcountry work. Within two weeks of MABS arrival in Udorn, Air America provided forty men to commence training with MABS aircraft and maintenance crews. Fifteen were assigned to rudimentary shops and hangar functions. However, with the intensity of upcountry operations, additional Flight Mechanics were required to help crew the HUS-1s. Therefore, training measurably diminished and Company employees' main effort was focused on the flight line and servicing aircraft. By August 27 experienced aircraft mechanics were added to the Air America roster. Following daily classroom training provided by a Sikorsky technical representative, the men were assigned to evening shifts on the flight line.

The Station Manager tentatively agreed to the Company assuming all aircraft maintenance responsibilities by late September.

Between civilians and military personnel there was bound to be an interpersonal clash of cultures. Marines accustomed to working with other Marines in the field, and in Udorn for only a limited period, indulged in a mainly short-term horizon philosophy and attitudes. For example, when relating to a particularly difficult problem, Marines offered, "*You shouldn't have any trouble doing this.*" In contrast to the Marine outlook, Air America personnel, taking a somewhat longer view, understood that they were involved for an indeterminate duration, and attempted to establish a new operation and become familiar with each other. As U.S. Marines and civilian Air America workers established particular methods of performing duties, arguments and rivalries inevitably arose. Their average age of twenty-five, a period in one's life when young men believe they know everything, contributed to problems. With leadership and operational experience in short supply, raw emotions tended to emerge in any discussion more technical than what to eat for lunch. However, despite endemic differences, the two highly diverse groups persevered to establish and sustain a viable maintenance operation. Additionally, the military equipment, tooling, camp support infrastructure, and H-34 experience MABS provided proved to be invaluable to the project during the early months.

With very few funds for improvements contained in the 1961 budget, base conditions continued to be marginal. In addition to inadequate manning, parts shortages, flying rates unheard of for fleet helicopter operations, heat, and omnipresent laterite dust, coupled with similar or worse conditions upcountry, many considered it a miracle that the operation survived a month. But it did, and in the Author's humble opinion, went on to become the most successful civilian, non-military operation in the history of the United States. ⁶⁶

Since the Lao war was proceeding poorly for the West, without appreciably altering the balance of power, the recently arrived helicopter crews immediately entered the fray. Abadie initially scheduled mostly former Marines as aircraft commanders, with Navy and Army pilots relegated to left seat duties. Whether Abadie based this method on previous service affiliation, knowing or previously having flown with several of the pilots, or a desire to hit the deck running utilizing a cadre of proven aviators in an entirely new program, is open to conjecture. ⁶⁷ Although all hands certainly desired to perform an outstanding job and not fail their particular branch of service, problems soon arose. Instead of dividing flying hours equally as is done in the Army, Marine PICs logged flight time separately as pilot or co-pilot.

After a while, underlings perceived management to be biased, and tired of what they called being "relegated to ballast." Overall, Army and Navy personnel cooperated well, but increasing friction continued with Marine pilots. Conflicts and sniping surfaced as to how various pilots flew, although this problem did not persist very long, as difficult flying conditions and knowledge that the enemy played a deadly serious game forced any animosity into perspective. Once inter-service rivalry assumed a back seat to reality, relations warmed, and pilots attempted to look out for each other.

Following an early breakfast, crews appearing on the daily flight schedule gathered in the operation tent for a last-minute briefing,

⁶⁶ Jack Forney Email, 3/18/99.

George Hofmann, 13, 27, 31.

During April aircraft availability averaged eighteen out of nineteen HUS-1s and 106.5 hours per ship; May statistics were slightly higher.

⁶⁷ Ron Clarke Email.



During the inception of the MABS-16-Air America operation, all maintenance was conducted in the open. Helicopters were parked off the main ramp to take advantage of shade while undergoing inspection, greasing, minor or even heavy maintenance. Bicycles were employed for personnel to move about the large area.

Source of photo unknown.



An Air America HUS-1 helicopter being towed by a weapons carrier along the laterite ramp to a parking spot in preparation for a test flight. Transmission deck platform is down for inspection. Dust from a taxiing aircraft is visible toward the end of the ramp.

Sass Collection.

and then proceeded to the flight line in one of the rare vehicles available. After pre-flight inspection, unless scheduled east, most crews headed for Wattay Airport for further assignments and loads. While Flight Mechanics supervised refueling and loading of fuel drums or other supplies, the pilots received briefings and daily work assignments from an air operation individual in a shack beside the runway.

Most considered Vientiane a considerably better environment than Udorn, and a preferred location for lunch. The American Embassy commissary-operated cafeteria provided decent food to those having late northerly departures. Unfortunately, crews perceived negative interpersonal relations with Foreign Service workers, who lived very well on government-provided overseas benefits. The remaining embassy staff, then much reduced because of the fluid nature of the war, did not exude cordiality. It appeared to many transiting helicopter crews that U.S. State Department individuals looked down upon them as a group of uncouth interlopers, who intruded on their perfect world.

At the airport, crews' double-checked loads and filed cursory flight plans before departing for a Special Forces camp upcountry. Upon arrival at a designated site, organized work commenced. Toward the end of a day, unless RONing for a few days (there were no RONs initially), helicopter crews returned to Wattay Airport with passengers, refueled, and, if time allowed, partook of food at the canteen. Then they returned to Udorn, where the process started over again the next day. ⁶⁸

The large influx of flight personnel, and the major expansion of

⁶⁸ John Fonburg Phone Conversation, 06/01/91.

Fred Sass Emails, 08/27/02, 10/03/02.

Jim Coble Email, 03/14/02.

helicopter operations, created increased responsibilities for local Air America management. Bob Rousselot, who had previously amassed a wealth of aviation experience while in the Marine Corps and on mainland China, looked toward the immediate future when additional flight personnel would arrive in Southeast Asia. Against this end he delineated some of Abadie's work descriptions in a 31 March memorandum:

*"You, as the Acting Manager, Helicopter Flight Operations [AMHFO], are responsible for the management and assignment of all Company helicopter pilots, including new hires. In this capacity, you will establish and maintain suitable crew scheduling and systems commensurate with our pilot availability and our flying requirements. I request you likewise establish and maintain suitable pilot training programs, flight check programs and other similar types of programs so related. In regard to the new hires, I recommend that you, as quickly as possible, select the ones whom you feel the most qualified and suited for the job and assign these pilots as pilots-in-command on those machines not already manned by our 'old timers.' You can then schedule the other pilots [temps] with these pilots-in-command until everyone has obtained a suitable area checkout. Thereafter, you can commence regular rotation programs in regards to scheduling the crews, as all crews should then be qualified to take their turns..."*⁶⁹

Despite obvious problems and duties any extensive operation begun from scratch might foster, superiors constantly presented Abadie with additional challenges. From his Bangkok office, AVP Madison, expressing preemptive vision, recommended that the AMHFO schedule courtesy calls at his earliest convenience with the Thai provincial governor, the town mayor, and the chief of police. He cautioned that

⁶⁹ Bob Rousselot Memorandum 03/31/61.

the sudden influx of a great many young Westerners into the community presented an explosive potential to foment serious disruptions and incidents in the sensitive Thai society. Moreover, should such problems arise, it would be wise to know local high officials.⁷⁰

In response to Abadie's concern about the urgent and immediate requirement for base ground transportation, Madison forwarded an additional memorandum. In this, he declared that the original contract, PEO-USOM-ICA, provided three Jeeps and two busses for the operation.

However, after corresponding with U.S. Operations Mission (USOM) officials in Bangkok, Madison discovered the original PEO authorization to be fallacious and unrealistic. No vehicles existed in the Lao motor pool to support the Udorn operation, and there were no contract provisions for reimbursing, renting, or leasing local vehicles. In order to discuss and implement ICA contract revisions with Air America officials to provide needed transportation, the contract officer planned to leave that night for Taipei. During the interim period, since ground transportation played such an integral role in the operation's success, Madison authorized minimum vehicle rental until contract revision. Adding a disclaimer stating that reimbursement might never materialize for any period before contract revision, he cautioned Abadie to rent only necessary vehicles.

J.J.

Jack McCauley's second trip into the Udorn base occurred during the early MABS-Air America transition period while he was returning to Wattay Airport after retrieving an additional helicopter, Hotel Foxtrot, from the Bangkok facility. As with the HUS-1 shipped to Thailand in February, this former HMR-162 squadron helicopter also arrived by air from Okinawa. The loss of yet another squadron helicopter sorely disturbed enlisted crew chiefs, for the sixty-five-dollar monthly flight pay they depended on for extracurricular activities, seemed to be in jeopardy. NCO Avery Norris accompanied the

⁷⁰ Joe Madison Memorandum, 04/01/61.

ship "down south." When Cobb returned, the men heard the word Laos mentioned for the first time. Without mentioning Air America, Norris confidentially told his close friend, Burt Palmer, "*There is a little fracas going on over there, which required aircraft.*" ⁷¹

When J.J. landed at the Udorn airfield, he observed MABS-16 in full operation, with refueling performed from a Marine tactical field fuel farm that employed two 10,000-gallon bladders (later augmented by two additional bladders filled with JP-4 jet fuel). These units were located close to the enlisted men's tents. After dusting off the area while taxiing, aircraft crews lined up nose to tail waiting for a drink. By chance, Gunnery Sergeant Dave Kendrick and Staff Sergeant Bill Waite met McCauley at the refueling point. All men had previously served together either in HMR-361 or HMR-362, with Kendrick as intelligence (S-2) NCO. Waite, an excellent softball ball pitcher, with J.J. his catcher, had become good friends while stationed on Bikini Atoll. Spotting his former catcher, Waite climbed up the side of the ship to greet his previous squadron mate. Following his April relocation to Udorn, J.J. enjoyed off hours with these friends from previous units.

As Marines do serving in any hardship area, while scratching the other's back they performed "cumshaw" favors for each other. ⁷² One benefit supplied J.J. with his favorite liquid--canned beer. He noted that Kendrick had assembled a distillation unit in his tent that produced quality beer. ^{73 74}

⁷¹ Burt Palmer Interview, 05/19/04.

⁷² Cumshaw: A Chinese term meaning grateful thanks. It was adopted by the military to reflect swapping scarce, or difficult-to-obtain, items.

^{73 74} JJ McCauley Letters, 1/28/91, 4/25/91.
McCauley, initially an enlisted "grunt" Marine Corps corporal, attended the MARCAD Naval training program at Pensacola, Florida.

Joint Chief of Staff Laos Situation Reports recounted the fall of Tha Thom, a major FAL base, following a Pathet Lao assault on 1 April. ¹ They further indicated that the enemy did not pursue his advantage, and allowed government troops to ultimately reassemble on Route-4 at Ban Nam Kap, more than twenty miles south of the long Tha Thom Valley. ²

Despite recent efforts of Meo irregulars from Padong to stem the flow of enemy movement south from the Xieng Khouang Valley along Route-4, the Pathet Lao build up continued unabated and Tha Thom appeared to be in imminent danger. For some time, government patrols had noted escalating Pathet Lao preparations to attack before the onset of the rainy season. Vientiane planners deemed the situation serious, for loss of the valley would present a clear path to Paksane and a potential to move either north or south along Route-13, to the loss of the entire Mekong River valley. The Vientiane staff had every reason to worry about their Paksane forces. Special Forces advisors and Air America crews attested to many examples of Royal Lao Army (RLA) bug-outs. Having previously been left on the battlefield to fend for themselves, the Americans had documented the general tendency of the poorly led Lao soldiers to consistently break formation and run in the face of even light or implied enemy pressure. Consequently, most Americans previously involved in such fiascos were highly cynical and eager to cover their critical "six-o'clock" position (CYA) at all times while working in the Tha Thom region. For these reasons, despite excellent defensive positions that supported good fields of fire, adequate weaponry, and sufficient ammunition, American Special Forces advisors who had fought the Pathet Lao from Xieng Khouang Ville to Tha Vieng over the course of three months, were reasonably certain the RLA would never stand and fight at Tha Thom.

RLA daily support for Tha Thom emanated from Paksane by road and helicopter. On 31 March, the Vientiane air coordinator dispatched Captain Tom Moher, temporary U.S. Navy pilot

¹ Tha Thom was located in a long, grassy valley on Route-4, thirty-two nautical miles north of the Mekong River town of Paksane.

² Historical Division Joint Secretariat Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2 August 1961 Chronological Summary of Significant Events Concerning the Laotian, Crisis, Third Installment: 1 Apr- 31 May 61, JCS Sitreps 87-61 to 90-61, 1-4 Apr. 1.

John Smoot, and Filipino Flight Mechanic Moon Centeno to work in the Paksane area. Briefed at the airfield and then loaded with supplies, they headed north. Before crossing the final ridge leading into the Tha Thom Valley, they heard the crackle of an urgent plea for help over the Special Forces Fox Mike (FM or frequency modulated) radio net. Despite intense static, the garbled report gave the impression that enemy forces had recently overrun a portion of the area. After jettisoning supplies, Tom informed the team radio operator that he would land in a rice paddy 150 yards east of the contested area and wait to evacuate the Americans. As he shut down, about eighty panicked Lao soldiers suddenly poured from the woods and converged on the helicopter. For "Old Timer Moher", such a drill had presented itself many times. Mobbing, particularly a lack of troop military discipline in tenuous battle situations, had frequently occurred since he began flying in Laos. During such periods, troops scrambling to survive trampled on wounded or equally fragile people. Over the months, Tom recalled several bad experiences. Therefore, he had little sympathy for, or qualms about leaving such individuals behind. When shot at by unhappy souls, he directed his Flight Mechanic to vigorously return fire.

However, what he later considered one of the more interesting incidents in which he participated, Tom prepared for what happened next. When queried, Centeno estimated that thirty troops were tightly packed in the cargo compartment. Tom was aghast, calculating that in no way could he possibly conduct a safe departure with such a heavy load. Moreover, how could he fulfill his mission to accommodate the expected Americans? Centeno's efforts to restore order and reduce the load to a reasonable amount failed, and the frantic hoard roughly yanked the slender man from the helicopter.

Smoot, described by those who knew him well as a wild and impetuous guy, was incensed over the nasty scene below, so he descended from the cockpit to assist with crowd control. Like a bull, he entered the cabin, and with great gusto commenced to indiscriminately eject passengers. Unknown to Smoot, one infuriated soldier took exception to the manhandling, and leveled a rifle menacingly in his direction. Centeno, observing imminent danger to the pilot, fired a diversionary round into the air. It produced the desired effect, sufficiently distracting the trooper, who spun and swung his gun barrel toward the report. Smoot, equally startled by the noise, instantly sized up the situation. He grabbed a carbine from a seated troop, and emptied a full magazine into the hapless adversary's chest. Use of deadly force snapped the Lao out of their panic mode. They hastily abandoned the helicopter, scurried off,

and huddled in an adjacent rice paddy. Then, for the longest ten minutes anyone ever recalled, the crew pointed weapons at the "friendlies."

Suddenly, tending to break the stalemate, two Special Forces team members crashed through the brush and approached the helicopter. After an explanation, and in view of the stalemate, but not sufficiently calloused to leave the soldiers with little means to fight, the Americans gathered all the Lao weapons and deposited them thirty yards from the hunkered group, although they realistically expected that the angry troops would probably fire at the departing helicopter.

While still stacking arms, they heard the staccato sound of automatic weapons. Then, pausing and firing to the rear, three more U.S. Army men arrived, breathlessly shouting that the enemy was hotly pursuing them. Before piling into the cabin, the tall, graying team leader hastily counted noses and declared that all his people were present. To supplement firepower, as an added precaution, they loaded two-armed Lao and removed side fuselage windows to provide additional firing ports. As expected, the overloaded ship bounced down dry rice paddies and over low trees while struggling to become airborne. As predicted, the disgruntled Lao left behind dashed for the pile of guns and commenced firing at the helicopter. Despite their exceptionally poor aim, the bird received numerous hits.

At a Paksane debriefing, where American principals enjoyed an endorphin-produced survival high, a first-hand account of the enemy attack unfolded depicting the unfortunate events. The Special Forces medic and radio operator had been hunkered in forward line trenches when the bad guys streamed across the river. While attempting to use hand held radios to direct friendly defensive fire, suddenly all unit contact ceased. Before long, the duo realized that most of the Lao troops had departed the field at the first scent of action. Essentially, they were on their own. Taking advantage of a lull in fighting, they scampered into the bushes at high port. From their concealed vantage point, they heard shouting and witnessed a few remaining Lao coldly shot down while attempting to surrender. Obviously, the enemies' orders of the day failed to include prisoners. Observing the appalling and wanton slaughter, the men withdrew further into the brush, hoping to avoid detection and a similar fate. The situation appeared hopeless. Abandoning all hopes of assistance, they departed the field for the prearranged rally point where, noting the team leader absent, they proceeded to the rice paddy and the safety of the helicopter.

More information surfaced. Monitoring heavy weapons behind the front, the team captain

possessed a Jeep containing classified material. Hearing the din of battle, and beginning to observe a number of Lao troops pouring down the road toward the rear, he correctly deduced a general evacuation to be in progress. He and two other team members sprinted for the Jeep, but before they could get underway, a Lao commanding officer arrived and forced them from the vehicle at gunpoint. He and his staff then packed the Jeep with Lao personnel and started down the road, leaving the Americans behind. Uttering an expletive, an American SSgt. peppered the Jeep, shooting out the rear tires. Then, before the men in the vehicle could react, the three stranded men took off for the rice paddy area where Moher's helicopter readied for takeoff.

After listening to the depressing tale, the Lao brass had no immediate comment, especially when the captain reemphasized the abundance of well-entrenched RLA defensive sites positioned with excellent inter-locking fields of fire. He bitterly added that friendly troops had barely fired a shot during what he considered only a minor skirmish in which even a token defense should have stopped the PL attack.

The after-action party hosted by the Special Forces team had just commenced when Colonel Little, Commanding Officer of in-country FTT units, arrived from Vientiane in an L-23 plane. Deluged with action-packed details regarding the rout, and the troops' reluctance to remain at Tha Thom, "The Shark" feared an enemy push toward the Mekong. He requested information concerning the latest situation. Since the current hostilities precluded accurate intelligence gathering, his request proved fruitless. As his nickname implied, Little, an officer well known for his tough personality, afforded slackers little patience. After incurring the colonel's wrath for not remaining at Tha Thom and rallying the troops, the team captain declared that, if provided with two additional Special Forces teams, he would immediately return and fight, but he refused to needlessly sacrifice his small group of men. He uttered the wrong words. In Little's mind, the man completely misunderstood the implications of the enemy victory. So, perceiving weakness and a lack of military judgment in his team leader, the colonel summarily relieved him of command.

Probably based on recent orders from the U.S. Embassy or Washington, Little resolved that Paksane would not fall during his watch. Therefore, he elevated a lieutenant to team leader status, with firm orders to stop, and reform the troops into defensive blocking positions along the road. The lieutenant, equally reluctant to rejoin the nightmare, had sufficient pragmatism to realize that someone must perform the job. Furthermore, he

recognized that refusal to comply with Little's order would also result in his receiving the ax. Slowing their immediate return to the battle area, the Lao commanding officer appeared even less eager to participate in the fray than his advisors, and it required over an hour of discussion to coax him into the helicopter.

Carrying a mixed load of Americans and Lao personnel, Captain Moher launched on a projected reconnaissance to determine the troops' exact position. After searching the road and valley without success, he turned to retrace the route south when heavy ground fire assailed the helicopter. Bingo, at that point they knew the location of the bad guys. Now they had to find the good guys. A few miles down the road, Moher landed to assess the suspected battle damage. While he and his Flight Mechanic inspected the ship and found only a few additional holes, stragglers appeared. Despite the senior Lao officer pleading for them to stand and fight, the demoralized troops pushed him aside and continued their trek south toward Paksane.

With nothing further to accomplish, Moher returned his frustrated charges to Paksane. After explaining the situation to ranking leaders, they organized a troop movement to shuttle two platoons north into Borikhane Town as a blocking force to guard the mountain pass. Gaining confidence from the additional support, troops eventually ceased retreating and began the long march back toward Tha Thom.

Upon entering the valley, they discovered no Pathet Lao forces in the immediate vicinity. Apparently, after seizing a horde of arms and ammunition, the enemy had withdrawn from the battlefield.³

This episode added additional information into the curious war, in which distinguishing enemy from friendly forces at times proved difficult.

During the conflict for Tha Thom, one helicopter incurred an engine failure and the pilot landed safely in the area. Anxious to recover the ship before losing it to unfriendly forces, Air America maintenance dispatched a C-7 Caribou crew to Paksane with several Filipino mechanics and an engine stand mounting an R-1820 Curtis Wright motor that weighed in excess of 2,200 pounds. Tom Moher delivered the armed and nervous quick engine change team,

³ Author Note: Instant resupply. Courtesy of the U.S. Government and at the expense of the Lao Army, such action constituted the successful tactics enemy units employed again and again over the years. Much to the disgust of flight personnel, Air America helicopters and planes were often shot at and hit by weapons and munitions of our own manufacture.



With the clam shell doors open, Marine Warrant Officer Bill Lane inspects the H-34 R-1820 engine, sometimes humorously called or described to ignorant locals as the "Great Buddha" that ran the helicopter.

Author Collection.

tools, and an "A" frame device into the still unsettled site. Then he returned to Paksane to attempt the challenging engine lift.

On the return trip, as he proceeded slowly at low altitude with minimum fuel state, while crossing a final ridgeline, intense ground fire from a supposedly friendly position greeted him. After releasing his load and landing, he hotly discussed the matter with the local commanding officer and Special Forces advisors. They admitted to observing the discharges, but professed equal confusion. They speculated that perhaps the position had recently changed hands. With the engine change complete and the ship ferried to safety, Moher returned to Wattay Airport.

During subsequent days, he learned from the Lao commander and Special Forces leader that on the day of the Pathet Lao attack, while ejecting troops from the cargo compartment, Smoot had thrown the commander of the ridgeline position off the helicopter. The act produced an angry and exceedingly vengeful lieutenant, for the man believed a ride to Paksane would eliminate him from participating in further front line duty. Therefore, in retaliation for the loss of his free ticket out of the combat situation, he offered 2000 kip to any man in his unit who shot down a green helicopter. American officers forwarded these findings in the form of an official complaint to local Lao leaders and Vientiane brass, but officials, not wanting to create waves, and desiring to place the operation back on track, let the offending lieutenant skate. He received neither a reprimand nor censure. The lack of punishment constituted an appalling precedent for helicopter crews then and in the future. It established carte blanche for anyone in the country, friend or foe, to indiscriminately fire any kind of weapon at H-34s. ⁴

The seriousness of the situation around both Paksane and Thakhet was evidenced by Phoumi's request, and CINCPAC's recommendation, to negotiate with the Thai government for installation of 105mm artillery units in those areas. The request also urged the implementation of T-26 bombing. Thakhet was considered the more serious of the two hot spots, for loss of the town would sever Laos at its narrowest point (approximately fifty miles) in addition to threatening the Thai border. ⁵

⁴ Tom Moher Tapes.

⁵ Joint Chiefs of Staff, 13, 34.

A PEO intelligence report submitted to CINCPAC in Hawaii, covering a three-week period from 13 March to 3 April indicated:

"At the end of the period, the enemy retained full control of the western approach to the Plain des Jarres and had, by the capture of Tha Thom effectively denied FAL forces access to the southern approach to the plain...

The enemy had continued to build up his logistical base in the Plaine des Jarres; both airlift and truck convoy had continued with only minor harassment by either the FAL or Meo guerrillas.

*The enemy numbered approximately 14,200 troops..."*⁶

⁶ Joint Chiefs of Staff, 14.

Plain des Jarres: French spelling; anglicized version-Plain of Jars, or abbreviated as PDJ.

New River-based HMR-162 squadron personnel had transferred to the First Marine Air Wing on Okinawa during April 1960. With the Futema airbase still under construction, squadron personnel billeted in dormitory style housing at Sukiran Army base, and commuted to and from work in "six by six" trucks. As soon as Navy Seabees completed a mess hall and one barracks at Futema, the squadron became the first unit to move to the muddy uncompleted facility. The mess hall doubled for recreational clubs, and a single hangar graced the runway. Sandwiched around squadron deployments, construction proceeded on a headquarters complex and additional hangars.

On 31 March *"The JCS reported to the Secretary of Defense that all but 17 of the [Marine] helicopter pilots and crew chiefs [redacted] had arrived in Bangkok. The remainder...were enroute and were expected in Bangkok by 3 April."*¹

Completing the complement of Marine crewmembers programmed by Washington for the hurried Air America operation, seven additional HMR-162 Marine pilots and ten crew chiefs were recruited and joined the Company. They joined the HMR-163 crewmembers in early April.

COBLE

Jim Coble, the only recent pilot to opt for permanent employee status with Air America, had previously acquired information regarding the Lao situation and the paramilitary job from Charlie Bade's vivid description while he visited former squadron mates on Okinawa. Impressed with Bade's accounts, and desiring a piece of the action, Coble wrote to Bob Rousselot offering his services contingent upon the vice president of operations (VPO) assisting in terminating his remaining service commitment. Soon afterward, he received a letter from the manager inviting him to visit Taipei. Following an interview, he received a three-page letter embossed with the Air Asia Company Limited letterhead, and dated 15 March 1961, that offered him employment as a Reserve Captain.²

¹ Joint Chiefs of Staff, 86.

² Jim Coble Emails, 01/27/02, 01/29/02.

Perhaps the following episode contributed to, or partially influenced, Coble's decision to leave the Marine Corps. During August 1960, HMR-162 deployed to the *USS Hornet*. In addition to other operations, during that fall, the squadron conducted Operation Blue Star off the coast of Korea in support of the Korean Marine Corps. The operation commenced during a period of marginal weather. The scheduling department selected Coble to fly in the lead aircraft with squadron Commanding Officer, Colonel Milton M. Cook,³ from the number one spot marked on the starboard side of the carrier bow. Following preflight, the two men boarded along with eight battalion landing team troopers and a crew chief.⁴ When the primary flight officer announced the familiar command, "*pilots start your engines*", Cook cranked up, and as standard procedure, both men performed the before takeoff check list. Receiving launch clearance--as customary during either day or night operations because of virtually no visual reference to a horizon--Cook initiated a standard instrument takeoff (ITO), while his copilot monitored cockpit gauges.

The departure appeared normal at first, except for no airspeed indicated on the gauge. Perhaps five seconds elapsed, when through peripheral vision, Coble detected a flashing light reflected through the right window. Curiously, the beam looked like the ship's red TACAN beacon located on top of the island. Then he raised his head, and noted the light tracking rear to front of the machine. Perceiving increased rearward movement, it became obvious to him that following liftoff, instead of transitioning to forward flight, Cook was gliding backward over the entire squadron and was now rapidly approaching a position astern the ship. From his takeoff spot on the deck, crew chief Burt Palmer observed the scene from his open H-34 cabin door. He watched in open-mouth fascination while the helicopter sailed five feet

³ Cook, an older individual, was reputed to have flown combat fighter plane missions with legendary Marine combat pilot, "Pappy" Boyington, during World War Two.

⁴ The military called the non-pilot crewmember a crew chief, Air America a Flight Mechanic.

overhead toward the fantail, with its main gear barely clearing squadron aircraft whirling rotor discs. After realizing the colonel's error, without further hesitation, Lieutenant Coble roughly snatched the controls from Cook, cleared the starboard side, rotated the aircraft nose down, and accelerated past the ship, while the remainder of the squadron departed into the inky void to form into division units.

Once Coble stabilized the aircraft and turned on course, the spastic and thin-skinned colonel reassumed control, and, as per the briefing, continued flight toward the coast. They flew for thirty minutes in marginal conditions, searching for the black box light beams delineating a landing zone that had allegedly been established earlier by a pathfinder team dropped ashore late that afternoon. However, delayed because of adverse weather and associated low clouds, and unknown to the squadron, the pathfinders had failed to set up a discernable landing zone. Finally, with no shore party contact established, and the majority of squadron helicopters spread all over the Korean Peninsula, with many pilots thoroughly disoriented, Cook prudently elected to abort the futile operation and return to the ship.

One division led by Captain Billy Bouldin actually accomplished the mission, but this feat occurred solely by employing good map reading.

Coble tuned radios and transmitted the recall message, while the remainder of the squadron responded by number and attempted to reform into tactical units. The head-down duties diverted Coble's attention from the instruments for several minutes. Suddenly the crew chief screamed over the intercom system, "*We are going in! We are going in!*" Coble instantly looked up and observed the ship descending in an unusual attitude--a graveyard spiral. At that time, the radar altimeter indicated sixty feet above sea level (ASL), and he realized that only a moment remained in which to correct the situation. For the second time since taking off, in a panic, he seized the controls from the senior man, leveled the rotor system, pulled pitch, and wrapped on all the power available. Then, very close to a watery grave, the machine responded and further descent ceased. With disaster averted, after regaining altitude, the commanding officer again claimed control and returned to the *Hornet*.

Following shutdown, Coble tottered on wobbly legs--a symptom of stress common to most aviators after exceptionally hairy incidents--toward the appropriate hatch in the bulkhead, where a ladder descended to the pilot ready room. Deep in thought about his incredible luck in surviving two close encounters, and the incomprehensible actions of his incompetent cockpit mate, he failed to notice several men approaching. After a few steps, joyful

battalion troops spontaneously mobbed him. Simultaneously, his crew chief grabbed, hugged, and kissed him several times, screaming in a booming voice, "Thank God, Lieutenant Coble, you saved our lives. That old son of a bitch almost killed us!" The men's cheerful display imparted a fitting testimony to Coble's quick action that night, but interestingly, Colonel Cook, who stood immediately behind the crew chief, never spoke directly to Coble again while they served together. ⁵

Eventually, all squadron chicks returned safely to the ship and secured. In the ensuing debriefing, which included Boulding's proclamation that the decision to launch was insane, there was a lot of finger pointing, some straight up. After the unnerving mission, the flight surgeon, observing the pilots' shaky condition forced handful of medicinal brandy miniatures on his charges. The alcohol's effects helped calm them, but, stoked by the lubrication, and still nervous over the unpleasant events, the men boldly discussed turning in their wings should their superiors attempt to schedule another launch that same night.

The squadron completed the mission the following day. ⁶

HIRING

During late March, men who could only be described as "spooks decked out in suits" arrived at the Marine Corps Air Facility at Futema, Okinawa, soliciting volunteer, unmarried HMR-162 pilots and crew chiefs to flesh out the prescribed Marine crew manning levels for the HUS-1 program in Udorn. The recruiters ultimately selected six squadron pilots: Richard B. Crafts, Malcolm T. Bird, Jay Erickson, Fritz Hocevar, Albert H. Barbes, and James R. Haver. Including James L. Coble, who had already been hired, the group satisfied the prescribed recruiting standards: bachelor, rated aircraft commander, and minimum total hours in aircraft type. A briefing included only bare facts concerning the work, the pay scale, and various options should the young men elect to participate. One option afforded them an opportunity to

⁵ Not all, but some former World War Two fixed wing pilots made very poor helicopter pilots. I witnessed the same lack of proficiency in my squadron.

⁶ Jim Coble Email, 03/16/02.
Burt Palmer Email, 03/15/04.
Malcomb Bird Emails, 10/24/04, 10/29/04, 10/31/04.

choose between a permanent or temporary Air America employee status. However, imminent deployment to the *USS Thetis Bay* created indecision as to the men's ultimate involvement with the Company. Consequently, like the *Bennington* selectees, none elected the former proposal. Recruiters presented to those indicating an inclination to join Air America reams of paperwork to read and sign. Then, as expected, after short notice, some members of the squadron boarded the "Teddy Bear" anchored off White Beach. Shortly after sailing, Bird and other pilots who had opted for Air America received notification that they would return to Okinawa. Following a little sleep in the pilots' ready room, and never having officially checked into assigned rooms, they transferred to Myako Jima, where a C-47 waited to spirit them to Okinawa. The remainder of HMR-162 merged with HMR-163 on the *Thetis Bay*, and the squadrons sailed for the Philippines under the command of the infamous Colonel Cook.⁷

At Okinawa, after linking up with Coble and enlisted volunteers, and a final interview, the pilots received passports, tickets, and a travel schedule from Okinawa, to Hong Kong, to Bangkok, and to Udorn. A photographer snapped Coble's passport photo of him in uniform. Crudely cropped to exclude distinctive military rank collar bars, the picture appeared as if he wore football shoulder pads.⁸

Preparing for the journey, Jim Haver hurriedly packed all his household goods except for a helmet, Mae West, flight jacket, sidearm, and two sets of civilian shirt-jean combinations. He directed the shipment to his mother, who, lacking any knowledge of her son's whereabouts, subsequently believed he had dropped off the face of the earth.⁹

Al Barbes's decision about joining the Company differed substantially from the other men. While deployed on the *USS Hornet*, and during subsequent visits to Cubi Point, the loner had met and fallen deeply in love with a Filipina lady. Conflicting with Marine Corps regulations strictly discouraging marriage to foreigners, and butting heads with Colonel Cook over this policy, Al requested an immediate discharge in the Philippines.

⁷ Jim Haver Emails.

⁸ Jim Coble Email.

⁹ Jim Haver Email.

Denied this option, he departed the squadron without consent, went AWOL for two days, and married the woman. Therefore, when Air America recruiters arrived in Okinawa, to avoid Colonel Cook's wrath and certain disciplinary action, the quiet individual assumed the "better part of valor."

Recruitment of HMR-162 enlisted crew chiefs followed a slightly different pattern from that employed in the United States. The men considered Okinawa duty generally good. For red-blooded single men, twenty-five cent Asahi beer and available Ryukan girls in the Ville provided all life's necessary pleasures. But, since nothing is forever, that routine evaporated when Burt Palmer's section leader ordered him to don starched utilities and report immediately to MAG-16 headquarters. Burt, anxiously reflecting on his jaded lifestyle, pondered what past action warranted an invitation to the head shed. He relaxed somewhat after noting other selected crew chiefs joining him at the facility. The men initially reported to the Sergeant Major, who escorted them to the Commanding Officer's office. Getting right to the point, the commanding officer inquired if they would consider volunteering for flight duty in a small country that required immediate assistance combating communism. Unable to decline such an offer by a senior officer, all hands volunteered. Those chosen included: Lee Booher, I.D. "Hooker" Maze, Jerry Mears, Don Forand, Ronald Kimbler, John Michael, Clarence N. "Nookie" Hagins, Marvin Treadway, and Ernest B. "Burt" Palmer.

Next, civilian types appeared. They cautioned the men never to divulge any facts of the recruitment process, immediately pack all their clothes, and return to a designated room at the Bachelor Officer's Quarters (BOQ) with their traveling gear as soon as possible. To sanitize volunteers, the "spooks" distributed money, instructed them to shed any clothing marked with military identification, and to purchase new civilian attire. After returning to the BOQ, individual briefings commenced over a two-day period during which each man received a passport and a thorough cover story including dates, names, and fabricated periods of former civilian employment. A dollar amount specified monthly wages. As advised, individuals allocated the major portion to a stateside bank and a small portion to cover living expenses in the field. Finally, to allay any curiosity, suspicion, or inquiries they might seek to dispel later while working in the region, the "spooks" indicated that other Americans seen in their area of responsibility had worked on agricultural projects.

Following the laborious recruiting and paperwork process, restricted to the BOQ for

security reasons, and initially isolated from the pilots, the men ate meals brought from the mess hall. Then, on the evening before departure, the officers joined the enlisted men and procured a couple bottles of whiskey to help pass the time. Limited speculation as to the future duty revolved around conversation like, "What do you think?" During briefings, handlers instructed the men to conduct conversation with each other on a first name basis, like stateside civilians, to cover their military status. At first, and for some time afterward, this informality proved difficult and uncomfortable for enlisted types who normally called all officers sir; they previously called a junior officer "lieutenant so and so." As they mixed and talked, Palmer discovered Lieutenant Malcolm Bird's first name--not the commonly used "Tweet", a name only assigned to him behind his back.

Late on the evening of 1 April, "civilians" ushered the volunteers into vehicles, which conveyed them to Kadena Air Force Base. There, on a remote, dark ramp well removed from prying eyes, they prepared to board an ancient C-46. No markings identified the silver plane. When the cargo door opened, a flight crew with Chinese features welcomed them. Soon after becoming airborne, they discovered Bangkok, Thailand, to be their ultimate destination. Refueling stints followed in Taipei, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, where a short shopping and sightseeing spree ensued.

To men accustomed to assigning a descriptive name to almost everything, after eventually discovering whom they were working for, coined the experience "The Air America Detail."

The group arrived in the Thai capital during early morning. As with *Bennington* volunteers, an Air America representative (called the contact man) met the new arrivals. Some members in the group took umbrage to their assigned billeting in a Thai style hotel on Suriwongse Road six blocks from the Civil Air Transport office. They referred to it as a sleazy "early hovel" or "The Cobra Hilton." A Sikh Indian security guard at the entrance sporting a beard and turban, and looking like someone out of a Gunga Din movie, further amused them. Before retiring for a few hours sleep, some crew chiefs talked seriously about posting a cobra watch. Venturing outside, they found the street awash in a sea of bicycle samlor drivers and Tuc-Tucks.¹⁰

¹⁰ Tuc Tuck: At the time, motorized three-wheeled Tuc Tuks were just being imported from Japan. Within a year, Tuc Tuks replaced the pedi-cab samlor in Bangkok. There was one estimate of fewer than 1000 cars in all of Bangkok.

Later that day, their handler conducted briefings, and produced additional temporary employment papers to sign. One paragraph in the agreement offered a means for later permanent employment. ¹¹

Next, Seventh Day Adventist Hospital staff conducted necessary vaccinations and a brief medical check. ¹²

While still in Bangkok, a few members of the HMR-162 pilot group elected to sample native dining. They ordered a Thai lunch in a hotel next to the Shell building. One delicious looking course arrived along with a small dish of yellowish clear liquid upon which floated two tiny peppers. Glancing around at other Thai diners, Bird observed them treating this seemingly innocuous sauce with respect. Meanwhile, Jim Haver placed a single drop on his fork tine. On the way to his mouth, the droplet fell on his lip, where a large, painful blister developed within moments. The incident provided an excellent object lesson. Thereafter, using more discretion, all determined to modify and refine any decision while continuing to eat like the locals. This was sound thinking, for those who opted to eat as Americans consumed a lot of "C" rations, tuna fish, and peanut butter, and missed the experience of sampling great native food. However, despite what they ate, most everyone rapidly lost weight. ¹³

¹¹ Reference in Jim Haver's permanent employment agreement PND-DP-61/1074, 17 May 61.

¹² Segment Sources:

Jim Coble Email, 01/23/02, 03/04/02, 04/14/02.

Burt Palmer, "The Air America Detail," *The Ugly Angel* 1 Jan. 2004 1-2.

Burt Palmer Interview, 05/19/04.

Burt Palmer Emails, 03/09/04, 03/10/04, 03/21 04, 03/31/04.

Jim Haver Email, 11/07/06.

¹³ Malcolm Bird Email, 06/22/02.



A three-wheeled Tuc-Tuk in 1961 Bangkok.
Clarke Collection.

UDORN

On the fourth, following a night in the dingy hotel, early reveille, and a time-consuming eighteen-mile trip to Don Muang Airport, the new arrivals boarded a silver C-46 for Udorn. Again, the crew appeared to be of Chinese origin. As they deplaned on the HUS-1 laterite taxiway, an individual emerged from the Operations Department tent, one of three squad sized tents located on the tower side and a hundred yards from the runway.

Tom Moher had recently arrived from Vientiane. Fatigued, disheveled, unshaven, and smelling like he had not bathed in two weeks, he introduced himself as the acting Chief Pilot and Operations Chief. (Abadie and McCauley were still absent.) Fatigued himself, Burt Palmer felt sorry for him and considered offering him some money for a bath. After greeting the new arrivals Moher announced, *"We have a large operation going on. Attend to the aircraft."* Then, for those crewmembers chosen to fly the mission, a briefing commenced in the operations tent.

Not long afterward, an early cloudburst forecasting the end of the dry season collapsed the makeshift office. Papers scattered everywhere and grape sized raindrops briefly pelted everyone. Following the early storm, a few men not involved in the projected mission hired pedicab drivers to take them into Udorn Town in order to seek accommodations at available hotels. Timing was important. Fortunate individuals found scarce rooms at the Prachapakdi. Others, too weary from the trip, amid the confusion and helicopter maintenance tasks, spent the first night in a squad tent. The following morning, with organizational activity back on track, the men sought the only remaining lodging in the dingy third rate Mahpakdi Hotel. Besides offering cheap rates, most crewmembers regarded the establishment as little more than a low-class whorehouse. Additionally, the first floor eventually accommodated a restaurant-nightclub combination, with the added ambience approaching that of an open sewer.

Malcolm Bird, who also billeted in the hotel, considered his stay at the Mahpakdi a study in a close and open living arrangement. The wide, dark hallway between rooms terminated with bathing and toilet facilities at the end. This resulted in no unauthorized person escaping either the occupants' or house mother's notice for very long.

There were relaxed rules regarding how many of what gender occupied a room, and there were no apparent solicitations. Moreover, no women occupied a room, although some in the group had a casual friend visit now and then. When the nightclub opened, girls of the night

were present, and were seen with residents from time to time on the living floor. ¹⁴

Marking the first time in their short military careers, except for some supervision while working at the airfield, the young enlisted men discovered a new-found freedom while in Udorn Town. The majority of men from the 162-squadron roomed on the second floor close to the front of the hotel. An open porch overlooked the normally busy main street, providing a handy place for the crew chiefs to sit, drink, people watch, observe the unfolding scene, and discuss their current situation. A designated houseboy acted as Gunga Din, bringing Singa (pronounced Sing) beer up from the restaurant, while locals gathered outside to stare and wave at the new arrivals.

Marine Warrant Officer Bill "Gunner" Lane, considered a nervous sort, also billeted in the hotel, probably to monitor his charges. An elderly Marine from Hawaii, only recently attached to the MABS-16 unit, and now in charge of the Temporary enlisted Marines, Lane made the journey from Bangkok with the group. ¹⁵ The boisterous men soon discovered that Lane was a teetotaler, and from the elevated veranda, spied him across the street emerging from a coffee shop. In time, the men respected Lane, whose sphere of influence normally centered on activities around the line shack and hangar. They considered him a good guy, with one exception: Already charged with multiple tasks to perform during the day, they never fully understood his obsession with amassing fifty-five-gallon POL drums. Aircraft continuously returned from the field carrying empty oil and fuel containers. Personnel then stacked these at the end of the runway for later transfer to a Bangkok location for steam cleaning, refilling, and return. When a C-46 arrived from upcountry, Lane always captured all available hands to form a drum working party.

By the second day, the Americans concluded that restaurant beer was far too expensive for their slim wallets. Consequently, they began the quest for the "Big Bucket." They subsequently attempted to convey to the "houseboy", ¹⁶ and anyone else who listened, that they

¹⁴ Jim Coble Emails, 01/23/02, 03/07/04, 04/02/04.
Malcolm Bird Emails, 06/22/02, 05/15/14.
Burt Palmer *Air America Detail*, Email 03/16/04, 03/31/04.
Burt Palmer Interview, 05/19/04.
Jim Haver Email, 02/07/03.

¹⁵ Bill Lane, a former Marine China hand, held the rate of PFC in 1939.

¹⁶ Houseboy: A generic term used for the obviously older man. According to Ron Clarke, he was very helpful running errands for ice, bananas, and rice pudding. The "pudding" was wrapped and then steamed in banana leaves.



An early main street scene in the central business district of Udon, Thailand. Before cars were introduced to the northeast, the local mode of transportation was limited to smoky, diesel burning busses, bicycles, samlores, motor scooters, motorbikes, or the old-fashioned art of walking.

Knight Collection.



The "houseboy," actually an adult with a family, standing on the second floor porch of the Mahpakdi Hotel. An ersatz fired clay beer cooler sits to his left.

Clarke Collection.

wanted to purchase a large container or two to hold ice and quart bottles of Singha beer, an item that could be purchased cheaper at the local market. However, an absence of available English speakers proved an obstacle to competent understanding, and rudimentary sign language did not materially help their cause. Finally, shadowed by curious local onlookers, two men launched in a samlor to seek a suitable vendor who sold the required items. Not far down the street, a corner shop appeared to contain many different kinds of vases and urns. They negotiated a price for a couple of "Big Buckets," but wondered why people trailing them appeared greatly animated. Continuing on, they discovered an icehouse and substantially cheaper beer. The ensuing party lasted well into the night with people below the balcony gazing at them in awe, amazement, and excitement. Later, a Thai friend revealed to them the same night that they had purchased burial urns for deceased's ashes, items culturally inappropriate to utilize for beer containers. Could anyone doubt the derivation of the derogatory term, "Ugly Americans?"

With the advent of long, sweltering, and arduous workdays, for a while the men remained close to the hotel until they became better acclimated to the environment. Too fatigued and dehydrated from their tasks to wander about town, they quaffed a few cool beers and then hit the sack early to be somewhat refreshed for the predawn transportation scramble. The ever-present gathering of samlor drivers and their pedicabs fulfilled this requirement. When in town, Air America supervisor Jack Forney rated a rare Jeep, but the men required at the base at all hours and with few vehicles available, normally gravitated to using the cheaper local mode of travel.

P.J. Carl, a former HMR-163 crew chief, also billeted at the Mahpakdi. Peers described Carl as a little mentally "left of center," but a good guy and excellent mechanic. Selecting a samlor driver with the largest calf and thigh muscles, he quickly hired the Thai man full time for the enormous sum of a hundred baht per week (five dollars being the U.S. equivalent for the large red certificate). The driver also doubled as a bodyguard, clutching a long knife and sleeping in front of Carl's bedroom door. After returning from his first week upcountry, Carl discovered the man patiently waiting for him outside the hotel. Later, when Carl rented a house in town, the driver accompanied him.

After settling in, the men discovered that Molly, the hotel owner's daughter, spoke excellent English. While constantly fending off attempted advances from over-sexed Marines, she provided valuable interpreter services and helped to ease the Americans' transition into



Early morning street scene near the Prapachdi Hotel, with Buddhist monks conducting the traditional daily begging process from the religious populace. Only eating once a day prior to twelve noon, this constituted the monks' only meal.

Clarke Collection.



Photo taken from the Mahpakdi Hotel's second-story balcony of a truck full of mid-April annual water festival revelers. Although the Samlor driver appears unscathed, if one wanted to remain dry it did not pay to cross the group's path.

Clarke Collection.

the local community. In time, she assisted those disposed to rent local houses. Despite the cultural differences, of course, the Marines' arrival in the backwater community severely shocked and disrupted a local economy based on supply and demand. Consequently, the influx motivated a substantial increase in commodity prices. Overlooking this unkind cut, the Americans found the Thai people generally kind and friendly.

The matter of money was conducted on an individual basis. Mister Chelerm, a town banker, spoke passable English and willingly cashed the men's monthly paychecks. However, most Flight Mechanics deposited the majority of their wages in a Washington, D.C. bank. The remaining "walking around" money arrived promptly by courier. The men noted that each check was drawn from different banks, and never from the same state, which caused the men to speculate as to the number of bank accounts Air America employed. ¹⁷

¹⁷ Burt Palmer Interview, 05/19/04.
Burt Palmer Emails, 03/12/04, 03/16/04, 03/21/04, 03/24/04.

Since being defeated at the Sala Phou Khoun crossroads in early March, FAL activity remained generally static in the north and south along Route-13. Hoping to seize and hold ground before a possible ceasefire agreement, stimulate troop movement, and counter enemy consolidation around Moung Kassy, Vientiane Programs Evaluation Office (PEO) planners were prodded by Washington to retake the Phou Khoun Road junction and eventually move on the enemy controlled Plain of Jars. Therefore, they conceived an ambitious tactical operation employing Air America fixed wing transport planes, and the first sizable helicopter vertical envelopment ever attempted in the Kingdom.

INITIAL BRIEFING

At this time, Abadie was engaged at management meetings in Bangkok. He designated J.J. McCauley as flight leader of the Udorn contingent, and while he was absent from Udorn, requested that McCauley attend a mission briefing of principals in Vientiane on 3 April. Arriving at the meeting, McCauley discovered field grade Marines Major Reed and Lieutenant Colonel Johnson representing the Air America helicopter arm present. Fixed wing pilot Captain Johnny Lee, flight leader of a two plane C-47 force tasked to drop pathfinder teams, also attended. The meeting was conducted by PEO representative, USAF Colonel Harry S. Coleman, assigned from the Pacific Air Forces (PAF) staff, and working under USOM cover since January to establish a tactical operations center, and to coordinate a possible Task Force 116 incursion.

Cobbled together by the Vientiane General Staff and their American advisors, the basic air operation appeared relatively simple and uncomplicated. During phase one, two loads of 200 paratroopers, a handful of Special Forces advisors, and a Thai PARU team would jump, secure, and mark an unimproved landing zone located in a rough area just northeast of Moung Kassy. After attaining this initial objective, phase two entailed ten helicopter crews landing a battle-tested battalion of 200 men from the Luang Prabang royal capital. Following a join-up with pathfinders, the force would then move onto and seize a portion of Route-13 between Moung Kassy and the strategic road junction at Sala Phou Khoun. After accomplishing

this objective, Luang Prabang road-bound army elements would march south from Kiou Cacham (Site-04) and others, move north from Vang Vieng (Site-16). They would dislodge any enemy, clear the road of obstacles, and ultimately join forces with the paratroopers.

Sometime before the meeting, from 2,000 feet above ground level (AGL), Air America crews had reconned and photographed the area selected for landing. After conducting map, visual reconnaissance, and photo analysis, staff planners selected a landing zone suitable for the mission. Colonel Coleman had almost completed his briefing of the projected enemy situation when, unexpectedly, from his commanding position at the end of the table, and with palms flat on the table, he stared directly into Captain McCauley's eyes and spat invective at him, *"And you sons of bitches **will** go in and land."*

The colonel's unexpected outburst shocked everyone, virtually ending all decorum in the room. Thoroughly confused, intimidated, and more than a little annoyed at the abuse directed at him, McCauley gathered his writing materials and angrily replied:

"Captain Abadie asked me to stand in for him today. I do not have to listen to that kind of bullshit from anyone! I am leaving. You can reschedule another meeting when he returns from Bangkok."

As he stood up to leave, Major Reed tugged on his arm, urging him to remain and indicating that he and Johnson would calm the seemingly irrational man. The rattled McCauley sat down, but remained in a severe state of shock. Until completion of the meeting, he continued to be very puzzled at the Air Force pogue's verbal abuse. He had never previously met Coleman, and was completely unaware of the man's rabid animosity and bias toward Air America helicopter pilots. ¹

Unknown to McCauley, Coleman still seethed over perceived shabby treatment, which motley helicopter crews, wearing tattered, filthy cut-offs and unkempt beards, had afforded him at Thakhet. Cognizant that the men were U.S. military officers, the colonel assumed they were aware of his elevated rank. Disgusted with their non-military demeanor and sloppiness, he believed it was necessary to square them away. Therefore, delivering a terse message to Colonel Johnson, he requested that the MABS commanding officer severely discipline the

¹ JJ McCauley Letters, 1/15/91, 1/25/94.
JJ McCauley Phone Conversation, 11/20/93.

offenders. However, following due deliberation concerning his limited options, the MABS honcho indicated that such a task proved almost impossible, as the men, being officially quasi-civilian Air America employees, were technically no longer subjected to military regulations. Still, he conceded that he would appeal to their sense of decency to clean up their appearances.

Apprised of the incident, Abadie believed that Johnson could have made an issue of the pilot sloppiness, but believed the program would have suffered a major morale problem. Furthermore, events were escalating rapidly, and good organization was not well established in Laos. Consequently, emphasis centered on completing the Customer's job with the least amount of interference and in-country incidents.²

SECOND BRIEFING

On the third, the flight schedule displayed crewmember assignments for the following day. Late the next morning, crews repositioned all available helicopters to Vientiane for fuel and a meal. Toward afternoon, with few navigational maps available, the large force formed a loose daisy chain and followed the Mekong River to the royal capital at Luang Prabang to be in place for the following morning's insertion. The river trip took over two hours.

Later that evening, to accommodate the sizeable group for the mission briefing, pilots assembled in a large clubroom, where amenities included beer. First Customers, then J.J. McCauley, conducted briefings. The mission specified one battalion lift following the paratrooper drop and, unless preassigned area work, a return to Luang Prabang. Briefers stressed the operational importance of the mission, indicating the obvious. It represented the largest helicopter troop movement ever attempted in the country. To the majority of crewmembers' present, the plan appeared simple, straightforward, and was well designed with few problems envisioned to mar success. However, as an exact enemy location was unknown, some stirring occurred within the group when the pilots learned that they might possibly encounter a hot landing zone. Except for the experienced old timers, visions of battle and potential

² Bill Leary 1961 Notes.
CJ Abadie Interview, 08/21/02.

combat, gleaned from "Sea Stories" and vivid scenes from war movies, only increased individual anxieties. Adding to the men's doubts and nervousness, they keyed on the fact that the mission marked the disparate group's first large operation together--largely without benefit of preparation or practice. In addition, unless paired in the cockpit with men from their original units, they barely knew the names of the other crewmembers. Yet untested, one question troubling most pilots centered on the unknown quantity of how well the multi-service participants would fare the following morning. However, while maintaining a semblance of bravado, perhaps bolstered by beer, ego, or a combination of the two, and despite personal mental demons, everyone overtly professed that the operation looked like a "piece of cake."

Flying Hotel Romeo as co-pilot with John Fonburg, Shirley Holt was one participant in the operation. After arriving at Luang Prabang, at the Customer's request, they conducted a round trip mission of one hour and thirty-five minutes. ³

After arriving in Udorn, since 1 April some crewmembers had participated in day missions or orientations, but for most individuals, the field maneuver marked their initial overnight stay in Laos. Scarce lodging in the remote royal capital, and safety concerns regarding the new and mysterious environment, led to uneasiness within the group. Consequently, most crewmembers elected to eat "C" rations and sleep in the Sikorsky Hotels parked at the airfield, where guards patrolled and security appeared satisfactory. Uncertainty about the following morning's events, coupled with uncomfortable bucket seats never designed as human beds, combined to provide a restless night for more than one young crewman.

Teamed together in Hotel Sierra, Ron Clarke and Walt Wizbowski arrived at Luang Prabang in the afternoon in order to participate in the vertical envelopment. Like other crews, they elected to sleep in their HUS. With only one blanket available to them, they found the experience rather unsatisfactory, as the canvas troop seats offered tight, uncomfortable quarters.

Crews arose early the following morning, and assault troops arrived soon afterward to

³ Fred Sass Emails, 08/27/02, 08/28/02, 09/03/02, 10/08/03, 10/10/03, 04/25/04.
Shirley Holt Email 04/07/09.



While nine to ten Lao troops stand-by to board the Marine Corps bailed HUS-1 Hotel Sierra at Luang Prabang, crew members conduct last minute preparations for the vertical envelopment in "Elephant Valley."

Ron Clarke Collection.

board the helicopters. ⁴

THE JUMP

"A combined assault wave of FAL paratroops and infantry forces in C-47s and helicopters was airdropped and air landed north of Moung Kassy, as the FAL launched its offensive to retake that town." ⁵

Historically, previous attempts to clear Route-13 had always proved difficult for overly cautious, and poorly led Lao Army units. Therefore, snake bitten from the inception, the current operation provided little exception from the norm.

RLAF T-6 pilots prepped the proposed landing zone. Once over the drop zone, from his cramped cockpit, Captain Johnny Lee activated a switch to illuminate the green jump light. Despite receiving the go signal, after observing a solid canopy of green covering the hostile ground below, in a "hell no, we will not go" fashion, the supposedly well trained and elite paratroopers refused to depart the lead C-47. Following much cajoling and delay, Special Forces advisors Captain Billy Chance, Private Turpin, and Thai PARU team members eventually persuaded the men to jump. What occurred during the initial leap provided a bit of black humor to the already tenuous situation. In order to sustain themselves in the field until supplied, Lao troops carried live chickens in small woven bamboo baskets. When the jumpmaster cracked the door open, streams of air currents and considerable noise flooded the cabin. Frightened almost to the point of death, the birds squawked and hopped around until their feathers flew off, resembling a blinding snowstorm. Upon reaching the ground, it was judged the stark-naked chickens required no additional plucking for the pot. ⁶

Problems continued to escalate beyond control when disgruntled troops in the second C-47 also refused to jump. The PIC, with no other option but to comply with the heavily armed men's wishes, returned to base. Unless encountering excessive enemy contact in the landing zone, the plan envisioned H-34 crews landing maximum loads of little guys directly following the pathfinders' ground contact. However, after the mission delay, and with fewer friendly assets available in the zone, the original plans and coordination rapidly deteriorated.

While Special Forces honchos in the field frantically adjusted to the changing

⁴ Ron Clarke Email, 05/31/15.

⁵ Joint Chiefs of Staff, Laos Sitrep 91-61, 5-6 April 1961, 9.

⁶ Roy Mathews, 22-24.

situation, HUS-1 pilots orbited in a loose daisy chain that encompassed several miles of air space. It occurred to many involved in the operation that the influx of so many helicopters and men to spy-ridden Luang Prabang the previous evening, and now lengthy exposure to any hostiles on the ground, eliminated all elements of surprise and secrecy. Nevertheless, that day, the gods of war peered down kindly on the evolving scene, for once on the ground, paratroopers encountered only light enemy resistance. Consequently, the mission proceeded with some degree of confidence, and radio operator Turpin called flight leader McCauley with landing instructions.

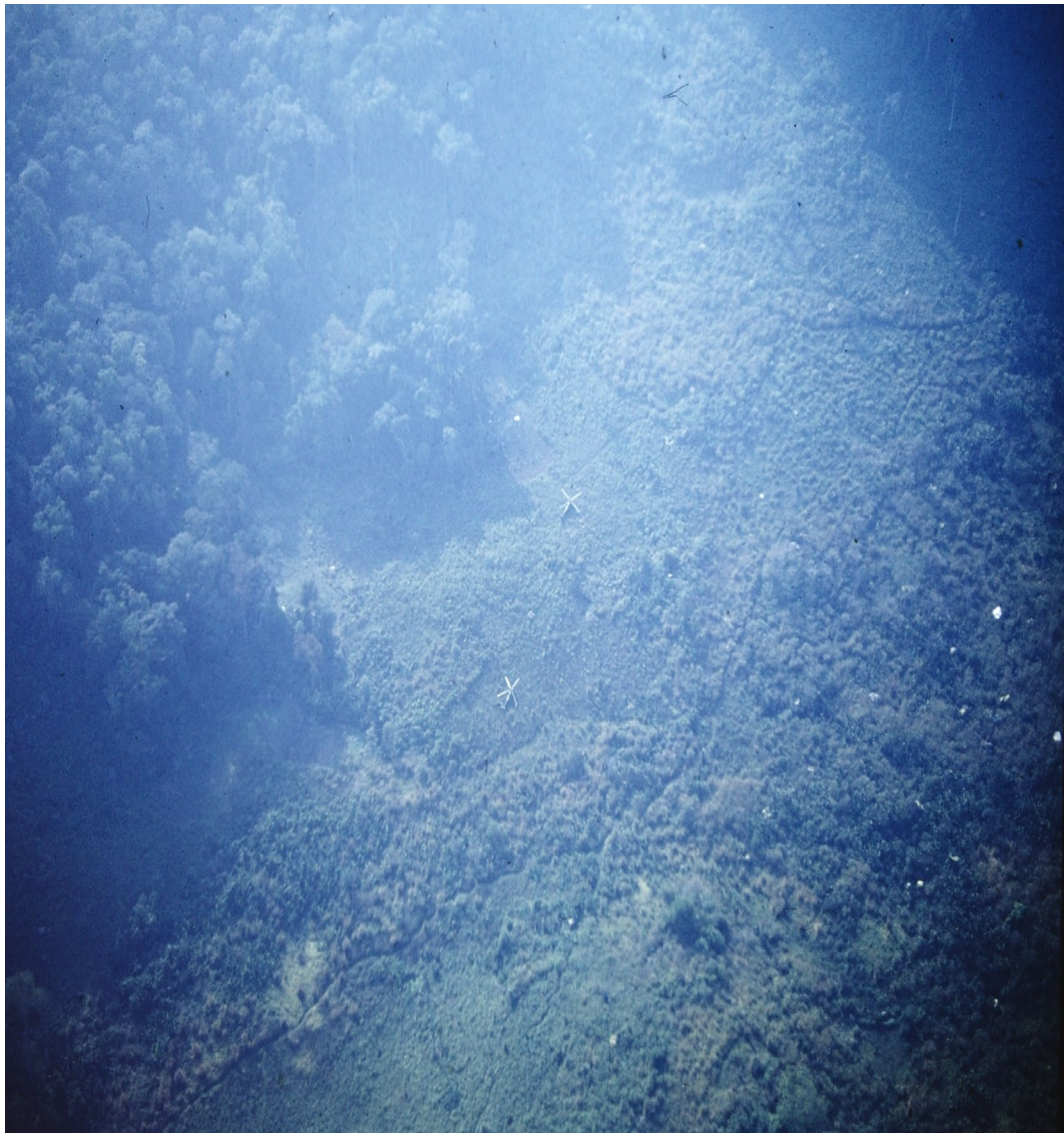
Forming the armada into two columns in trail formation, McCauley commenced a left base leg turn toward final approach. During numerous orbits, he had observed a narrow green valley generally oriented in a north-south direction. To some in the gaggle, the harsh terrain resembled a steep limestone quarry, with needlepoint like karsts etched by acid, interspaced between the sides. On short final, closer examination of the estimated thirty-acre area revealed reasonably level terrain blanketed with a few small trees, high saw grass, sugar cane, brush, and brambles. Hovering cautiously to a landing revealed other hidden hazards. As rotor downwash blew twelve-foot-high elephant grass nearly flat, huge spiked boulders were uncovered. Despite the abundance of nasty obstacles, most H-34 pilots, maneuvering cautiously, landed safely, and used hand signals to disgorge the troops.⁷

Not all pilots were so fortunate while landing in the unprepared area. The following incident commenced a series of crippling H-34 accidents that over the next few months portended an incredibly steep pilot learning curve, while working in the low intensity combat environment.

ERRANT PARACHUTES

One participant, Fred Sass, flew in the capacity of co-pilot near the middle of the

⁷ John Fonburg Letter, 06/02/91.
John Fonburg Phone Conversation, 06/01/91.
Fred Sass Emails, 08/27/02, 09/03/02.
Jerry Buffington Email, 10/07/03.



Aerial view of the "Elephant Valley" vertical envelopment showing two helicopters on the ground. Discarded parachutes are visible to the right scattered throughout the jungle terrain.
Clarke Collection.

right column with PIC Paul Walton in Hotel Quebec (Bureau Number 145732). Walton took proper interval on the aircraft in front. Unaware of what to expect in the tight landing zone, the "pucker string tightened" on final approach. From the crew's airborne vantage point, the men were initially unable to observe either the presence of paratroopers, or barely discernable scattered parachutes lying in and around the high grass and on tree tops. Lao troops, pre-briefed to secure their camouflaged parachutes, after landing failed to heed this simple precaution, probably because of the mission delay, the unknown, and nervousness at the thought of combat.

As Hotel Quebec closed on the landing spot, Sass, finally aware of the potential danger, cautioned Walton to remain alert for loose chutes. The words barely escaped his mouth when a large, white sheet blossomed overhead, entwining straps and yards of nylon around Quebec's whirling rotor system. Within seconds, the envelopment resulted in a joyride never experienced in any amusement park. The aircraft bounced and buffeted violently to the extent that overhead items in the cockpit sheared and dropped to the deck. Severe vibrations and twisting moments reminded the occupants of a ground resonance situation. Fortunately, Walton possessed enough presence of mind to immediately apply the rotor brake. This terminated all aircraft gyrations and probably contributed to maintaining the ship in an upright position.

The incident was observed by other crews. As Ron Clarke and Walt Wizbowski commenced an approach, from their vantage point they observed Hotel Quebec's pilot flare in a standard landing configuration. Then a parachute suddenly blossomed and encircled the main rotor head, and shroud lines wrapped around the tail rotor system. The airframe twisted intensely and the blades ceased to turn as the aircraft touched down.⁸

Including elapsed time from Luang Prabang, initial loiter to the incident consumed only forty minutes.

During the excitement, other helicopter pilots continued to land relatively close to each other and dispatched their troops. Glancing to his left, Sass observed one crew chief peer directly at him while his pilot lifted to depart. He wondered angrily why no one made an immediate effort to help them. After the "stick buddies" secured the engine and climbed to the ground, they found themselves alone. Their load of panicked infantry troops had immediately vacated the area, moving west at high port toward their assembly point.

⁸ Ron Clarke Email, 05/31/15.

A hasty examination of the ship revealed major overt damage. Besides obvious blade damage, during entanglement, the parachute had also tightly wound around the rotor head, certainly crushing essential moving parts like pitch change rods. Inspecting the starboard side, the fuselage and tail cone revealed wrinkled and torn skin. Inside the cabin, twisted stringers hung in clusters. A cursory assessment indicated that, if repairable, at a minimum Hotel Quebec required major component changes and probably hours of difficult field repair. At the very least, the incident now relegated the helicopter crew to footsloggers.

Departure of the Lao troops presented the anxious crewmembers with a new dilemma. Specifically, now alone deep within a denied area,⁹ they found themselves without protection, or security, devoid of any means to protect themselves in what certainly was an adverse situation. The lack of ground fire provided little consolation to the anxious crew, which found themselves in a survival mode. Like fish out of water, they were entirely out of their element. With no H-34s visible in the high grass near their disabled aircraft, moving smartly away from the large tempting target, the three men "beat feet" to the north.

Unknown to them, another helicopter crew had noticed their plight and radioed the parachute mating incident to McCauley, who in turn designated the nearest ship to aid them. Within a reasonable period, while they stomped noisily through the brush, a U.S. Navy pilot carrying his weapon at the ready position, and looking much like an apparition, suddenly emerged from the grass, nearly terrifying them out of their wits. After leading the joyous trio to his ship, they proceeded to Luang Prabang where Walton, upon instructions from Abadie, returned to Udorn for a preliminary debriefing as to the status of Hotel Quebec.

Sass remained overnight at the royal capital.¹⁰

When McCauley learned of Hotel Quebec's accident and observed the developing confusion on the ground, after two trips, the disgusted flight leader advised pilots in the remaining ships to recover pathfinder casualties and return to Luang Prabang for additional

⁹ Denied Area: A military term used to delineate territory not controlled by friendly forces.

¹⁰ Fred Sass Emails 08/26/02, 08/27/02, 10/07/03.
Moher Tape.

assignments. ¹¹

Following the mission, Don Babitz, PIC of Hotel Mike, flew north to Kiou Cacham (west of Sala Phu Khoun) on the Route-13 Road leading to Luang Prabang. There he completed several local assignments supporting the operation before returning to Luang Prabang and then Wattay Airport. He recovered at Udom at twilight. ¹²

ADDITIONAL DAMAGE

Unknown to McCauley, other damage of a lesser magnitude occurred to helicopters involved during the landing process. Assuming the position of "Tail End Charlie" in one formation column, Jerry Buffington flew behind Ed Meixner's aircraft. As Meixner touched down, rotor wash sucked a parachute into the air, enveloping and damaging his rotor blade tips. Shocked and distracted at the bizarre sight, Buffington, "running out of power and ideas ten feet too early," executed a hard landing. Unsure of the damage to his machine's rotor system, Meixner transmitted his intention to abandon the ship. Therefore, Buffington remained in the landing zone nervously awaiting the crew's arrival. Believing his was the only operational aircraft remaining in the weeds, the ensuing time interval seemed an eternity before Meixner and his crew fought through the high grass to his H-34.

After takeoff, Buff flew southwest to Vang Vieng, but, while maneuvering to park in the fueling area, contacted a sizeable tree with his rotor blades. Following shutdown, inspection revealed four dinged rotor caps. Shortly afterward, the crew noticed a punctured and substantially crushed belly beneath the forward fuel tank. Fulfilling the time-honored rule that accidents happen in threes, apparently while landing in the landing zone, he had settled on a large rock. Unable to participate in further operations, the mechanic removed all rotor caps and Buff ferried the whistling aircraft home without passengers. Prior to the 5 April operation, Buff had considered himself a hot pilot. However, the two incidents

¹¹ JJ McCauley Letter.

¹² Don Babitz April 1961 Flight Records.



Walt Wizbowski about to photograph the small rock embedded in the aft tail cone of Hotel Sierra during the vertical envelopment operation east of Luang Prabang.

Clarke Collection.

humbled him considerably that day. Lingered in the hangar for six weeks, his ship required extensive H&MS sheet metal repair. ¹³

Aircraft damage continued. As Wizbowski was terminating his approach and conducting a deceleration, Clarke spotted a huge rock hidden in the tall grass. He yelled to Walt, "Pull back!" Wiz took the advice. The H-34 settled to the ground just missing the boulder, which would have likely damaged the clam shell doors and also the engine. After returning to Luang Prabang, they discovered that during the landing process another rock had lodged in the fuselage just forward of the tail wheel assembly. ¹⁴

Without additional requirements for the majority of H-34s during the ongoing operation, most aircraft and crews were directed to return to Udorn by late afternoon. Those men remaining at Luang Prabang for duty the next day passed the night drinking, joking, and speculating about how long it would take the troops they inserted to walk or run back to Luang Prabang. ¹⁵

ASSESSMENT FOR A POTENTIAL RECOVERY

Plans immediately went forward to further assess Hotel Quebec's status and possibly retrieve one or both ships left in the weeds. On the sixth, Sass, along with mechanic "Preacher" Bryson and another mechanic, deadheaded to the site. ¹⁶

13 Jerry Buffington Email.

¹⁴ Ron Clarke, Email, 05/31/15.

¹⁵ Fred Sass Email, 10/22/03.

¹⁶ Preacher: Marine crew chiefs attributed nicknames to everything and everyone. They called Bryson Preacher because he was so sinful. Burt Palmer Interview, 05/19/04.

Despite some nervousness, a brief inspection of the first area appeared to be serene, and devoid of any human activity compared to the previous day's excitement. Determining that the machine required at least one main rotor blade, and was probably beyond the normal scope of recovery, the mechanics opted to salvage a few radios, minor cockpit instruments, and the logbook. Then the recovery pilot dropped them off a short distance from Hotel Quebec at the second H-34. The view from an elevated terrain encompassed much of the area on that lovely spring day. The mechanics carefully removed the parachute and discovered that the most serious blade damage centered on tip caps, which they easily removed while standing on the tail cone. Then, reasonably certain that the machine could make the thirty-minute journey to Luang Prabang, they said, "Let's go." Sass had never previously flown an H-34 with tip caps removed. Thinking that the mechanics might be reluctant to fly with an Army guy, he inquired if the Marines felt comfortable flying the helicopter in that condition. He received an affirmative reply. Therefore, he cranked up the engine, engaged the rotors, and hover checked the machine. Other than a noticeable loud whistling sound that increased with application of RPM, he felt no adverse vibrations and considered the aircraft airworthy. After recovering at Luang Prabang, he hitched a fixed wing ride to Vientiane, and then caught a helicopter to Udon. No one quizzed Sass about the mishap and he assumed Walton had provided management with all the necessary information.¹⁷

Armed with Walton's abbreviated details, Gunner Lane, coordinating maintenance efforts with Jack Forney, speculated that a good maintenance team might recover Hotel Quebec. Therefore, without benefit of any situation briefing on the area in question, he selected recently arrived mechanics I.D. Maze, John Michael, Jerry Mears, Lee Booher, P.J. Carl, and Burt Palmer to journey into the field, further assess damage, effect necessary repairs, and, if possible, place the helicopter in a ferry condition. To execute this mission, Captain J.J. McCauley and his First Officer Pat Sullivan, who now wore a red beret obtained from an officer in the field, flew the crew, their toolboxes, and one blade to Luang Prabang, where they spent the night.

The following morning, McCauley flew the maintenance team forty miles north to what

¹⁷ Fred Sass Emails, 10/07/03, 10/08/03, 10/10/03, 10/26/03, 03/22/04, 04/03/04.

the men now called Elephant Valley. Following a brief aerial recon, McCauley identified Hotel Quebec, and then landed in what he considered a suitable location several hundred yards from the aircraft. Because of ten-foot-tall grass between the two ships, the men could not see Quebec, but using an estimated a compass heading, pointed north.

While beating a path slowly through the grass, carrying the heavy blade and toolboxes, the team, including Sullivan, who had opted to accompany them, suddenly encountered a uniformed patrol. Hearts momentarily ceased beating. Then, after recognizing friendly Lao soldiers, the Americans smiled, waved, and continued their movement, while fully expecting an ambush at any moment. Without prominent landmarks to guide them, to verify that they still followed the correct track to the aircraft, Maze scaled a small tree, sighted Hotel Quebec, and relayed corrections.

Arriving at the downed site, in addition to observing the parachute wrapped around the rotor head, the men soon discovered a cracked fuselage behind the turtleback, and a twisted, but still attached, tail cone. With such extensive damage, they judged that no amount of maintenance could be accomplished in the field to restore the machine to airworthiness in order to fly it to safety. Therefore, reverting to plan B, they concentrated on salvaging loose items from the cabin section, and serviceable parts like radios and cockpit instruments.

About an hour into this task, a sarong-clad woman slipped out of the grass and began rapidly jabbering at them in her native language. Unable to converse with anyone in the group, the woman gave up and faded into the jungle. Soon afterward, without observing an exact source, the Flight Mechanics heard engine noises from a western ridgeline, probably in the direction of Route-13. The characteristic pounding noise from a heavy fifty-caliber or 12.7mm machine gun followed. Lee Booher, standing on the horizontal stabilizer while stripping tail rotor parts, observed several rounds tickle the grass tops below. With little hesitation, he dove headfirst into the sharp Habu grass,¹⁸ severely slicing his nose and face. Work immediately ceased. Leaving the rotor blade, toolboxes, and parts, the frightened men began rapid movement toward the recovery H-34. Before long the firing stopped. Maze, realizing that he had left a prized baseball cap at the ship, foolishly returned to retrieve

¹⁸ Depending on the country, Marines referred to tall tropical grass by many names: Habu, Kuni, Elephant, saw tooth.

it. It proved a bad move, for he was observed and firing soon resumed.

With an ever-greater incentive to depart Elephant Valley, retracing their steps on the beaten path, the men now raced toward McCauley's ship. Just short of the helicopter, Sullivan, winded and too exhausted to continue, collapsed. Then, in typical John Wayne fashion, he gasped, "Men, go on without me." But he did not understand that Marines never leave a man behind. Some of the Flight Mechanics grabbed the limp individual, dragged him to the ship, and deposited him in the passenger compartment.

Described by Burt Palmer as one of the most rapid H-34 departures he ever experienced, McCauley activated the starter button and engaged the rotors. As he lifted off the ground, Sullivan miraculously recovered from his fatigued state and snatched a Thompson sub-machine gun. Out of control, he strode to the cabin door, where, snarling loudly like a beast, he brandished the weapon and fired toward the jungle. The men collectively shook their heads in disbelief, and began to wonder about the pilot's mental and physical condition, for only minutes before he had protested that he could not walk. ¹⁹

Located deep in denied territory, the aborted mission marked the final recovery attempt to salvage or extract Hotel Quebec. Abandoned, moldering, savaged by nature's elements and Pathet Lao bands, the ship constituted the first recent, but the second Air America H-34 strike in 1961.

AFTERMATH

Like all other RIA Route-13 clearing operations attempted thus far, this one also failed miserably. The inserted battalion, supported by airdrops and helicopters, while continuously drawing ground fire, did achieve part of the objective elements, and moved onto and blocked a portion of the road. Further exacerbating the situation, despite Special Forces team prodding, four days into the operation neither north nor south reinforcing columns had moved toward the paratroopers. Therefore, within a week the isolated troops abandoned their tenuous position and moved several miles northwest. Afterward, they were either airlifted from the valley or exfiltrated through hostile territory toward Luang Prabang.

¹⁹ Burt Palmer Emails, 03/10/04, 03/11/04, 03/24/04, 03/26/04, 03/31/04 (2), 04/11/04.
Burt Palmer Interview 05/19/04.

Joint Chiefs of Staff SITREPs (situation reports) covering 5 to 6 April initially painted a generally optimistic or "whitewashed" picture of the operation:

"All phases of the operation reportedly worked 'very efficiently' with skilled American technicians located at key positions during the execution. One paratroop and one infantry battalion successfully assembled in the drop area, a roadblock of Route-13 was quickly established, and patrols were probing southward. However, the GM 12 offensive north toward Moung Kassy, to join with the airlifted force, made no progress." ²⁰

By 13 April, issuing a face-saving understatement, FAL leaders acknowledging that the Moung Kassy operation was "only partially successful, ordered the withdrawal of the airdropped troops to Luang Prabang." ²¹

On the same day, Pentagon planners and the Secretary of Defense noted from previously gathered information:

"...that the military situation in Laos was continuing to deteriorate, that the communist bloc was delivering supplies and equipment in increasing amounts to the Plaine des Jars area, and that communist-bloc technicians were continuing to operate with the Pathet Lao/Kong Le forces. Immediate action was required..."

A recommendation was proposed to employ weapon-equipped B-26 planes staged in Thailand to hit enemy targets. ²²

With demoralization rife over the unsuccessful operation, no crewmembers celebrated in Udorn. During post-operation discussions, appalled helicopter pilots bitterly complained about the loss of one helicopter and damage to others; and also, about the expense of so much time, money, energy, and risk resulting in so little gain. They believed the helicopter program could ill afford another such "piece of cake" operation.

Pointing fingers, old timers disparaged as pure fantasy the PEO advisors' unrealistic assessments during the crumbling situation, and their dubious assertions that only the introduction of close air and armored support could possibly salvage the operation. In

²⁰ Joint Chiefs of Staff, Laos Sitreps (situation report) 92-61 to 92-61, 9.

²¹ JCS, Laos Sitrep 99-61, 25.

²² JCS, 24.

hindsight, it smacked of a do-something-even-if-it-is wrong scenario, and appeared another last-ditch maneuver to save face. The proposed stopgap measures proved far too little, too late--and largely unavailable. Citing flawed photo lab analysis of the landing zone, the pilots judged U.S. advisors to be ultra-rank amateurs for even authorizing the poorly planned and executed operation. With maximum disdain, they declared American staff members in Vientiane to be mere blackboard analysts, concerned mostly with moving colored pins around a large chart. Furthermore, other than textbook situations, they believed that the advisors displayed little practical knowledge or experience pertaining to Marine Corps vertical envelopment concepts, or viable operational planning.²³

Consequently, no additional large-scale helicopter operations occurred for several years.²⁴

UPCOUNTRY²⁵

Satisfying initial two pilot cockpit requirements during the area familiarization period, some of the newly arrived Okinawa contingent immediately went to work flying Hotel India on maintenance or milk run flights from Udorn to Vientiane with Dominic Gucchione, who himself had only been in Udorn a few days.

Within eighteen days, Jim Coble began single pilot flights.

On 6 April, Abadie hurled the new arrivals into the breach. Without benefit of a coherent briefing or maps, several pilots participated in the continuing Route-13 operation. To familiarize each other, squadron mates Jim Coble and Dick Crafts teamed up in Hotel Mike and supported the ongoing fight to seize and hold road positions

²³ Tom Moher Tapes.

²⁴ This was the case until May 1966 when another ill-conceived and poorly conducted large-scale mission contributed to the death of helicopter Captain Bill Wilmot.

²⁵ Upcountry: Instead of indicating a specific location, upcountry became a generic cover term used by pilots when talking about going to work.

north of Moung Kassy. Operating from Vang Vieng with several other crews (including Don Babitz, flying Hotel Uniform), soldiers loaded the aircraft and directed the crew to a northern landing zone. Nearing the area, they discovered troops in contact (TIC). The rough terrain and high grass added an additional tough dimension to critical decision-making. With a pitched eyeball-to-eyeball battle in progress, unable to land safely, they hovered briefly while the Flight Mechanic quickly discharged a portion of the cargo. Then Coble flew about a mile away to escape ground fire, while the Flight Mechanic stacked another load in the cabin entrance. In this manner, they conducted three hairy trips into the landing zone. Shot at each time within the contested area, miraculously, the crew and ship escaped battle damage and returned to join their peers at Vang Vieng to conduct less challenging assignments. Their initial taste of combat constituted an on-the-job training exercise performed at its best. ²⁶

Unlike his mates, Jim Haver received the benefit of U.S. Army Captain Ed Shore's vast one-day experience in working in Laos. While flying local shuttles in Hotel Kilo around Vang Vieng, the two men evacuated civilians from a ridgeline village. Later in the day, Lao army troops sought passage out of the area, but the pilots declined the request and left them, presumably to fight. Within a few weeks, Shore experienced the supreme event of his lifetime while piloting Hotel Kilo.

Despite lingering jet lag, the former Marine pilots deemed anything connected with helicopters to be just fine, for the bright-eyed and bushy-tailed youngsters were very anxious to fly. "And they flew, and flew, and flew." ²⁷ Scheduled every day, they soon found the

²⁶ Jim Coble Emails, 01/27/02, 01/29/02, 01/30/02/ 03/15/02.
Jim Coble April 1961 Flight Records.
Don Babitz Email, 7/21/04.

²⁷ Jim Haver April Flight Time Records.
Jim Haver Email 06/08/02.

flying to be rigorous, fraught with bad weather, with precious little rest, and, further complicating the difficult job, with few radio navigation aids.

Located in proximity to the Udorn airstrip, a low wattage non-directional radio beacon (NDB) operating on a frequency of 236 megacycles (Morse code call letters Uniform Delta: ..-, -..) provided the sole viable navigation aid. Touted as providing coverage over an effective range of forty miles, much of the time the NDB only produced five miles coverage for the low-flying helicopters. After completing work at a river town, one normally established a heading inbound to the Udorn base and prayed that the Automatic Direction Finding (ADF) needle would swing toward the beacon and lock before exhausting all fuel. Then it was only a matter of turning the aircraft to align with the Radio Magnetic Indicator (RMI) compass needle, and track inbound to the station. ²⁸

In time, the MAG-16 detachment operated a makeshift control tower, and during high peak periods--generally when expecting military aircraft--monitored traffic flow on UHF frequency 236.6. However, because of early departures, unannounced late arrivals, generator failures, and electronic problems attributed to the tropical climate, Air America pilots failed to enjoy much of the "control" aspect. The tower also provided direction-finding steers close to the field on request, but with the short range available, pilots seldom used this assistance. Furthermore, what self-respecting pilot would ever admit to a lack of orientation? Within two months, a radar unit provided some assistance during prescribed hours.

A tedious learning experience unfolded for many new Air America aviators. After a single trip upcountry, pilots realized that they were not "God's gift to aviation" as they had previously considered themselves. ²⁹

²⁸ This process was called "homing" in the trade.

²⁹ Jerry Buffington Email, 10/30/03.

During twenty days on the schedule in April, Malcolm Bird flew 108.6 hours, the most he had ever flown a HUS-1 in a month. At the time, and that rate of usage, he wondered how long the machines would last.

While working, Bird noted that the transition to upcountry flying was proving difficult for some Marines. Used to two pilots in the cockpit, the men had previously experienced little supervisory control or had been subject to individual planning in the Corps. They considered on-the-job-training (OJT) demanding, a bare bones experience, when they started flying solo pilot in May. Beside conducting difficult mountain flying and navigation, often in unbelievable weather, they soon discovered that learning to clear obstacles required an entirely new array of skills, while attempting to master additional flying situations than they had ever previously encountered. Over time, the men realized that the training command, and the U.S. Marine Corps, had merely taught them rudiments of H-34 flying. The Air America experience permitted them not only to apply basics, but also to develop positive techniques, and become the master of their H-34. ³⁰

INITIAL PROBLEMS

Difficulty and bias concerning a perceived inter-service gap in maintenance proficiency initially colored total unit cooperation. For a time, Marine pilots requested to only fly with fellow Marine Flight Mechanics, who possessed the ability to more than just fuel or oil an aircraft. Although Marines considered a few Army pilots good stick men, they judged others not holding instrument ratings to be deficient in instrument meteorological conditions (IMC), short on experience with maximum gross takeoff, rough area landings, and mountain flying skills. ³¹

Used to prior cuddling in their respective cadres, during the first few weeks of

³⁰ Malcolm Bird Emails, 06/24/02, 05/13/14.

³¹ Flying under instrument flight rules in America is called IFR. International terminology is IMC-international meteorological conditions.

operations, some pilots voiced a concern over what they considered questionable maintenance that appeared to be worsening daily. One pilot recalls some annoying items at first, but nothing regarding flight safety; mostly gripes like inoperative stick trim, one per revolution vibrations, and annoying radio problems. Pointing fingers in various directions, some Marines perceived that repair problems emanated from the Army and unskilled Navy personnel's lack of H-34 maintenance experience. In contrast to the Marine Corps, Army aviation companies never required their crew chiefs to execute maintenance beyond preflight, refueling, draining the fuel sumps, and cleaning the windscreen. Now, constantly working at outstations and in the field for the first time, they discovered themselves ill prepared to perform basic maintenance tasks, particularly after a machine came out of major inspections. Generally useless during a maintenance malfunction in the field, they had little knowledge of helicopter systems and almost no ability to troubleshoot a problem. There were at least two exceptions in the Army group, but they had previously worked in a maintenance squadron.

Many Navy volunteers in particular consisted of youngsters with little hands-on maintenance experience. Most soon rose to the challenge and quickly learned how to perform the job, or left Udorn.

In the main, younger U.S. Marine Flight Mechanics were not measurably more improved in performing field maintenance than the Army and Navy types, but many did evidence more experience, initiative, and were even considered self-starters.

The two deficient groups were not entirely inept, but just enough to cause a problem. Once all hands clearly understood that experienced pilots never sanctioned less efficient maintenance than provided in the U.S. Marine Corps, everyone pitched in to correct deficiencies, and problems measurably declined. Within base confines, after organizing and understanding an essential need to fully cooperate, the MABS detachment, supplemented by the shop talent of H&MS personnel who continually arrived from Okinawa, teamed with Air America crews to eventually produce acceptable H-34 maintenance.

Before this occurred, the helicopter fleet continued to deteriorate, especially in the category of vibration levels that included one per, two per, and high-speed vibrations. Moreover, some of the inspection flights after maintenance were bizarre.

During the period, Malcolm Bird and CJ Abadie discussed the maintenance complaints. Bird, and experienced former squadron test pilot Jay Erickson, subsequently helped resolve local maintenance problems, mostly annoying squawks, but not always affecting flight safety.

These included such pilot logbook entries as stick trim inoperative, one per vibrations, radio gripes, and other items. However, it constituted time-consuming work.

Bird spent almost two weeks on the flight line analyzing and correcting safety of flight gripes. Over time, he discovered that to keep up with daily flight operations demands, maintenance would repair a battle-damaged rotor blade by changing the blade (s) and then enter in the logbook that the damage was duly repaired and did not require a track. Almost all of these aircraft exhibited low frequency one per vibrations and, depending on how many blades were changed, might exhibit two pers. ³²

Bird's most memorable experience occurred early during this voluntary work. He was assigned to track an aircraft, but after engaging the rotor system, one blade dipped so alarming low that he was concerned that it might impact the tail cone. He immediately disengaged the rotor system and applied the rotor brake. Subsequent adjustment of the pitch change link of the black rotor blade by six inches better aligned the wayward blade with the other three blades. (Prior to tracking, blade tip caps were marked with different colored grease pencil marks for identification on the tracking flag.) The fix allowed reengagement of the rotors and a short taxi to the run-up area to complete the tracking process.

In some instances, an entire day tracking the rotor systems of several aircraft was required. The effort showed definite improvement in the operation, and Bird recalled few maintenance problems pending by the start of the monsoon season. ³³

LIFE INTOWN

During dull evenings at the Mahpakdi Hotel, good friends and fellow Marines Jim Haver, Dick Crafts, and Jay Erickson engaged in bridge games while observing young ladies escorting customers upstairs to enjoy a little "Thai Dessert." Within a short time, Abadie recognized the trio as good reliable pilots who indicated that they wished to fly all the time and, if possible, work together. He favored their work ethic and depended on them to perform required

³² Because of disparate blade weights and degree of leading-edge deterioration from sand and dirt blasting, a blade change always required tracking. A two per vibration in a two blades system related to an abnormal vibration for every rotation of the main rotor blades. A one per vibration was inherent in the system.

³³ Malcolm Bird Emails, 06/24/02, 07/06/02, 09/27/04; 05/13/14, 05/15/14.

tasks, albeit in their own way. He initially considered Jim Haver a fearless hot shot pilot, and encouraged him to opt for permanent Air America status, which Haver did the following month after signing an employment agreement sent to him by Assistant Director of Personnel, David Traylor. Thus, Haver became the sole pilot from the military group hired in March to transition to a permanent status while in the field. ³⁴

Pat Sullivan also resided at the Mahpakdi Hotel after moving down from Vientiane. He participated in café bull sessions. One evening, he suddenly and inexplicably began sobbing uncontrollably, which triggered the men's' concern about his mental state. Over time, Bert Palmer attempted conversations with Sullivan, but eventually recognized him as a "true flake," and avoided him thereafter. On another occasion in the restaurant, Ron Kimbler, following an intense argument with Sullivan, became highly incensed. As a result, the drunken Marine bounded onto his motorcycle and roared off into the night. Within an hour, two samlors arrived in front of the hotel, one containing Kimbler, the other parts of his wrecked machine. Through interpreters, his anxious comrades learned from eyewitness accounts that Kimbler had passed out and had run into the wall of the Coca Cola building. Furthermore, eyewitnesses had observed the man's feet, clad in shower shoes, dragging behind the bike fifty feet before the crash. That explained his skinned toes. Carrying him upstairs, the caring men dumped the still inebriated Kimbler in his room. The next morning, he groaned all the way to the airfield. He did not fly for a while afterward, and the men, parodying Marlon Brando, named Kimbler "Marlon Brandflakes, the wild one." ³⁵

³⁴ Jim Haver Emails, 07/05/02, 11/07/06, Air Asia Company Limited PDN-DP-61/1074. CJ Abadie Email, 02/05/99.

³⁵ Burt Palmer Emails 03/11/04, 03/13/04, 05/15/04.

Kiou Cacham was located twenty nautical miles south of Luang Prabang on Route-13, where the road doglegged to the east. Like the government base at Vang Vieng, it served as the most forward government site. The two sites, collocated as an integral part of Route-13 defense for both Luang Prabang and Vientiane, received supplies mainly by road during the dry season.

Soon after attempts failed to stimulate movement of the northern FAL units toward Moung Kassy to support the Moung Kassy operation, on 5 April a decision was made to form additional hundred-man auto defense groups from area tribes as an alternative to the RLA's poor performance in the field. These villagers, in addition to Meo already trained, could serve as proof to international inspectors that the RLG actually occupied and controlled areas claimed by the Pathet Lao. Consequently, an exasperated PEO staff tasked Team Ipsen's Special Forces Mobile Training Team (MTT) unit to recruit, train, and employ aggressive, local Meo tribesmen to fulfill political aims and aid in the escalating Lao war. ¹

THE CLERGY

By historic timetables, Christian doctrine and ethics arrived late to Laos. Early missionary attempts to proselytize both the lowland and high-country natives generally met with failure in the primarily Buddhist and tribal-aminist country. However, thoroughly consistent with French colonial ambitions in the late 1800s, evangelization commenced in most low-level areas, with the exception of the rugged, largely inaccessible northern regions. For years, French Catholic religious orders had declined government solicitation to service this wild and dangerous mountainous area until 1935, when the congregation of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate (Oblates or OMI) finally accepted a northern mission, and three priests entered Laos, with two remaining in Vientiane and one at Paksane. Within a relatively short period, posts opened at Luang Prabang and Xieng Khouang Provinces.

The onset of World War Two and Japanese occupation largely curtailed missionary work. When the French moved back to reassert their colonial ambitions in Southeast Asia and Laos,

¹ Joint Chiefs of Staff, 28.

the number of priests expanded in the country. Younger, more venturesome priests journeyed into the interior north of Paksane, and as far as Nong Het in Xieng Khouang Province, located close to the Lao-Vietnamese border. In 1950, the order established a mission post at the Meo village of Kiou Cacham, south of Luang Prabang on Route-13.

During the late fall of 1956, Massachusetts resident Father Lucien Bouchard was ordained and sent to Laos along with Father Matt Menger. Helping to augment their assignment, both men were fluent in the French language. After arrival in Laos, Father Bouchard was sent to Paksane for a year to learn the Lao language and to assist others as a part time teacher.

His association with Meo clans began early. His next assignment, in December 1957, was in the Luang Prabang area, assisting Father Rene Charrier to evangelize area Meo clans. His specific responsibility was at Long Vai Gneu (Phou Pha Theung), located on a high twenty-mile mountain range east of the Nam Khan (river), between Luang Prabang and Xieng Nguen, a small town located on Route-13. To implement this assignment, he had to begin learning the Meo language. During his year at Long Vai Gneu, Father B, as he came to be known to us, occasionally journeyed to a Meo village at Kiou Cacham on Route-13 to preach and conduct communion.

There were many villages located on the extended massif. Not all were considered friendly to the Lao government. Toward the end of 1958 Pathet Lao had stepped up their intimidation and mandatory communist propaganda sessions in nearby villages, making it untenable for Father B to remain. As a precaution, at the end of 1958 he was reassigned to the government-controlled Sam Neua Town in upper Military Region Two, where he joined two other priests who preached to sixteen Meo villages within four hours' walking distance. ²

After the Kong Le coup in August 1960, followed by the ejection of FAL troops from Sam Neua by Pathet Lao forces in late September, he was again forced to leave his post. Most, but not all of the priests, left on foot to the south for Ban Ban. It took the four priests six days of hard slogging to complete the journey. Two fathers remained in town under loose house arrest, while two others were captured while returning from Moung Soi where they had been stationed.

² Former International Voluntary Service (IVS) and USAID refugee worker Fred Benson interview with OMI Missionary Father Lucian Bouchard, 12/11/13, Courtesy of Email from Mac Thompson, 06/14/14.

Within a week or two of arriving in the Ban Ban Valley, Father B and his associates were able to cage a plane ride south to Ban Lat Houang, a road junction town on the eastern Plain of Jars. From there a kind Lao general allowed them to ride a C-47 to Vientiane. When FAL forces reclaimed Vientiane in December, he was advised to take a vacation, home leave, and a religious refresher course in Rome.

Brouchard did not return to Laos until February 1962. Working out of the refugee center at Sam Tong, he became known as the admired "Walking Priest of Laos." He would remain in the Theater until 1975, when the communists took full control of Laos.

By 1957, additional Italian Oblate priests entered Laos. One father working in the Kiou Cacham area disappeared in 1960, marking a second priest murdered by the Pathet Lao. Following Kong Le's August coup and resulting civil war, times proved increasingly difficult for the clergy. As the communist movement progressed south from Sam Neua into Xieng Khouang Province, Pathet Lao arrested or murdered other dedicated priests who failed to heed evacuation advice. The war was not kind to the men of God. The period between April and May 1961 was a particularly devastating time for the order, with three Fathers being assassinated.³

SPECIAL FORCES

Before evacuating Kiou Cacham, a resident priest, long under a Pathet Lao death threat, introduced the new American Special Forces team to a Meo clan chief. Thereafter, marking a tentative beginning in area Meo recruitment, medic training commenced with nine local young men. At a mountainous site, a day and a half walk south of Kiou Cacham, Special Forces personnel instituted weapons training employing the M-1 rifle and M-3 grease guns. Later, as manning levels approached ninety souls, an Air America plane airdropped a compact hundred-man weapon pack. The bundle contained rifles--a 57mm recoilless rifle (RR), a 60mm mortar, and a Browning Automatic Rifle (BAR)--and basic ammunition loads. During the course of the first training phase, one unfortunate man lost his life. Utilizing a 57mm recoilless

³ A total of seventeen OMI priests and lay persons lost their lives in Laos. Father Pierre Chevroulet, *Oblates Witness to the Faith in Laos: OMI Documentation* (Rome General Administration Missionary Oblates 1999).

rifle box as a makeshift coffin, it required the team a day and a half to dig a grave in the rocky, impermeable soil. Only later did the Americans learn that because of the area's stony earth, Meo burials normally consisted of piling rocks over their deceased.

During the course of training, the team discovered other difficulties. Because no streams flowed above the 4,000-foot elevation, except for seasonal rains, an adequate water supply always constituted a problem. Obtaining sufficient water to cook air dropped rice for one hundred men and for rudimentary bathing required employment of tiny mountain ponies to haul the precious liquid from water points at the base of the mountain. Beasts capable of carrying only eight gallons (forty pounds) per trip added to the time-consuming and arduous task. Readily available and abundant meat was purchased from surrounding Meo villages. The Americans considered the area's landscape spectacular: On clear mornings, while gazing over the vast 360-degree panorama, one harbored the illusion that he could easily step from one hill onto the next.

Eventually the team divided ninety trained individuals into thirty-man groups and assigned one unit to each of three selected areas. They located one site at Ban Phia Luong, seven miles northeast of Kiou Cacham. Deep in harsh mountainous terrain a few miles north of Route-7, Americans christened the locale Ipsenville, named after the Special Forces team leader. The Meo site contained a small forge from which the blacksmith cleverly produced weapons. At one forward site, two Meo and one American set in motion the first reconnaissance missions to gather and forward intelligence reports concerning enemy truck traffic along Route-7, although skeptical superiors in Vientiane challenged the large number of vehicles reported by the recon teams. ⁴

Three days after the Moung Kassy insertion, Jim Coble and Dom Guccione began working out of Luang Prabang to support ongoing operations. This assignment necessitated spending the first overnights in the field. For Coble, it began several months of work and residence at the outstation. During this period, Kiou Cacham became one of his favored work places. The site always seemed to be on his route to many areas. Therefore, after forming a rapport with Special Forces team members, scheduled or not, he landed there several times a week to

⁴ Roy Mathews, 16-17, 19-21.
Burt Palmer Email, 03/17/04.

retrieve outgoing mail or obtain a grocery order.

AN INADVERTANT BOMBING RUN

Weather, maintenance problems, and hostile fire provided some, but not all, of the adverse conditions Air America helicopter pilots and their equipment faced. On the 14th, Coble and Al Barbes flew Hotel Bravo on missions southeast of Luang Prabang. During the course of the day, they landed at the north-south oriented Helio Courier dirt strip at Kiou Cacham. Bulldozed out of a mountain, the short runway lay in slight defilade from the north beside Route-13. The southwestern side of the strip plunged more than 2,000 feet down slope toward the valley floor. An embankment and hill protected the landing strip from direct enemy fire and observation from a Pathet Lao hilltop outpost located across a narrow valley, 2000 meters to the northeast. Factions proudly displayed their respective flags. Hoping to keep opposing hostiles honest, and aware of their presence, both sides occasionally fired a round or two in the other's direction. However, as practicing Buddhists, the adversaries generally aimed their rarely launched shells high enough to inflict minimum damage and not injure or unduly upset anyone. To commit bodily harm would violate religious beliefs, and certainly elicit retaliation (the Asian version of "what comes around goes around"). Company Helio Courier and helicopter crews regularly flew in and out of the site trouble free. Over time, while failing to sketch maps defining minefields, Meo and FAR personnel liberally sowed and spread numerous antipersonnel devices throughout the area. Because of the presence of scattered, undocumented mines, the American team in charge of the area cautioned flight crews that if ever locally forced down, to remain with the ship; that they should never attempt to leave the aircraft for the strip, as they certainly would never be able to pick their way through, and survive, the lethal objects. If humanly possible, team members would attempt to venture down and retrieve them, but if this proved impossible, they must fend for themselves.

While Barbes remained at the controls of the idling helicopter, Coble strode toward the team leader's living quarters at the south end of the strip to discuss further mission requirements. At this precise moment, an Air America C-46 cargo plane flown by John G. Anastakes, also a C-119 driver, who had flown four "Squaw" supply missions over Dien Bien Phu during the First Indochina War, commenced a low pass in preparation for a drop on the narrow drop zone (DZ). Coble, sensing potential danger to the helicopter, wheeled around and hastily headed back toward Hotel Bravo. When he observed "Stack the Greek" Anastakes initiate a



Kiou Cacham (LS-04) viewed from a flat approach angle. Masking from enemy observation for as long as possible was a preferred technique employed by helicopter pilots in order to avoid being fired on.
Clarke Collection.

second pass and palletized 105mm ammunition exiting the door, he broke into a trot. Barbes, also spotting the danger, immediately closed the throttle to activate the clutch, disengage the rotor system, and secure the engine. As Coble scrambled into the cockpit, Barbes applied the rotor brake. Together they managed to slow the rotor system, but an errant parachute from the ammunition drops entangled a moving blade, causing substantial damage to both blades and the rotor head. Unaware of the turmoil occurring on the ground, the "Mad Bomber" merrily continued his runs as Coble's dander rose to a red alert level. To vent his frustration, and fully intending to impact the C-46, he fired three flares at the plane. As gravity took precedence, the rounds arced, fell short, and only burst close to his adversary.

When word of the rare incident reached Udorn, Gunner Lane immediately rounded up a team of individuals he considered his finest mechanics to further assess Hotel Bravo's damage and conduct field repairs as necessary to recover the aircraft. Flight Mechanics Burt Palmer, Ron Kimbler, and I.D. Maze, plus another Marine, soon arrived at Kiou Cacham and blade removal proceeded without difficulty.

Over the next couple of days, while the team RON at the Luang Prabang hotel, helicopter crews delivered blades and a rotor head to the site. However, the absence of adequate equipment, mainly a lifting device capable of removing the heavy rotor head to install the new component, stymied further work and constituted a major annoyance. While maintenance personnel pondered the slim options available to them, a Lao Army unit returning from a road clearing patrol along Route-13 between Luang Prabang and Kiou Cacham, entered the camp. The group of vehicles included a small tank, something that looked like it might have been manufactured in a German Volkswagen factory. A six-foot long cannon protruded from the round turret. As an alternative to a necessary, but nonexistent, "A" frame, Palmer and Kimbler proposed employing the tank as a "field expedient." Specifically, if they moved the H-34 adjacent to the highest point on the bank overlooking the strip, then positioned the tank abeam the helicopter, with an extension device secured to the gun barrel, combined with a jury-rigged hoist, they might accomplish the job. Contributing to the feasibility of this theory, long ago, while working on the Luang Prabang highway, bulldozers had carved a short strip from the hillside. Providing necessary dirt to build the road, the excavation also formed a sheer ten-foot wall on the strip's northeastern edge. To test their untried concept, Palmer and Kimbler measured both gun barrel length and muzzle diameter. Next, they searched the reverse slope and felled a suitable tree. After trimming branches and hauling the pole to



Hotel Bravo rotor head repair utilizing initiative—a U.S. Marine Corps field expediency—a Lao tank and a stout pole.

Fred Sass Collection.

the site, they placed it into the cannon barrel. Then, with an all-hands effort, they dragged Bravo fifty yards north and adjacent to the high point. A Lao driver repositioned the tank close to the embankment's edge where he traversed and depressed the muzzle toward the helicopter. To prevent the lengthy pole from bending excessively or snapping under the heavy load, the mechanics crafted a wooden "X" shaped cradle with a third pole for support, and jockeyed Hotel Bravo close to the bank directly under the shaft. After rigging a chain fall, one man shinnied along the pole to effect final adjustments. Then, utilizing the proper height and mechanical advantage of the clever device, the men hooked straps to the rotor head and the exchange proceeded.

While utilizing this ingenious solution in the absence of proper equipment, the unexpected happened. When Pathet Lao forward observers spotted the tank arriving at the top of the hill, equipped with what looked like a "special weapon," they panicked and assumed the worst. Consequently, to discourage use of the weapon and preserve their longevity on earth, they preemptively opened fire with artillery, mortars, and all other available weapons. Work on the helicopter ceased immediately, as the repair crew scrambled down the reverse slope to avoid the mayhem and assess the situation. When no counter fire commenced from the "monster gun," Pathet Lao shelling ceased. After the dust settled, excitement waned, and work to restore the H-34 to a flyable condition resumed. Fortunately, enemy aim or incentive continued to be ineffective, and Hotel Bravo incurred no battle damage.

Over the following two days, the mechanics successfully installed the rotor head and mounted replacement blades. During the process, a young pilot designated to ferry Hotel Bravo south to Udorn, anxious to depart, suggested flying the helicopter with only two opposing blades. Not sure if the man was joking, the alarmed crew talked him out of the crazy scheme. To help pass the time while awaiting parts, Palmer carried a quart of whiskey from which he quaffed an occasional belt. On one parts trip, Jim Haver spotted the bottle and, disapproving of drinking on the job, poured it on the ground. Maze observed the extreme sacrilege and

informed Palmer, who, highly incensed, considered clobbering Haver. ⁵

HOTEL INDIA

Operational damage and destruction of Air America aircraft continued at a brisk pace in April, with the helicopter program incurring further losses. On 19 April, arriving at Vang Vieng after lunch, Jim Haver and blond, balding Navy copilot, Eric H. "Hal" Norfleet, and Flight Mechanic R. Eakin supported Meo and Special Forces operations at northern sites. Later that afternoon, while ferrying seven Special Forces personnel to Ipsenville, one of the Meo-controlled mountain positions in the Kiou Cacham local, Hotel India (Bureau Number 1243978) crashed. It marked the third H-34 loss in 1961.

Norfleet, one of several Navy pilots with little or no mountain experience, flew the leg from the left seat. Clear weather prevailed in the region, but no sign of smoke, blowing grass, or other clue provided a wind direction. Therefore, assuming an identical wind to that observed at Udorn, he continued a downwind approach to the confined helipad located on the hill's reverse slope. His action constituted an invitation for disaster. Finally recognizing an excessive ground speed and high rate of closure too late, on a short final approach the inexperienced Norfleet, panicked and attempted an abrupt deceleration, followed by a corresponding power application to counter the descent. The corrections were too late, for the aircraft entered a non-recoverable power settling condition, smacked the ground hard, and bounced on the sloped incline below the pad. A comedy of errors followed in rapid succession. As Hotel India slid rearward toward certain destruction, PIC Haver abruptly seized the controls, jerked the ship into the air, and simultaneously wheeled 180 degrees to the south. His action merely exacerbated an already untenable situation, and compounded emergencies. Excessive torque imposed on the large airframe from the wrenching turn caused the tail-pylon section to shear from the tail cone. Loss of pylon and tail rotor control resulted in an accelerating double spin to the right. After Haver dropped the collective lever to reduce the

⁵ Segment Sources:

Jim Coble Emails, 03/13/02, 03/14/02, 10/17/02, 11/18/02, 03/07/04.

EW Knight Emails, 05/04/02, 05/05/02.

Burt Palmer *Air America Detail*.

Burt Palmer Interview, 05/19/04.

Burt Palmer Emails, 03/09/04, 03/10/04, 03/20/04, 04/10/04 (2).

Jim Haver Email, 08/02/02.

torque moment, the wounded machine once again slammed into the hillside, losing the tail cone, shedding blades, and skidding 200-feet to the base of the hill.

Reflecting later on the incident, Jim Haver did not recall noise during the plunge, but at one point the cockpit unexpectedly filled with dust, which then abruptly dissipated. After the aircraft ceased movement and collapsed on its left side, an extremely anxious Norfleet attempted to exit the cockpit. However, the ground blocked the window on his side and part of the left main landing gear lay in his lap. Despite an absence of fire, the possibility of explosion still constituted a distinct threat, so Haver secured the engine and both men evacuated hastily through the right cockpit window. The pilots noted that the auxiliary power unit, now hanging from the exhaust pipe, was inexplicably still running.

Miraculously, except for extreme mental anguish, none of the crew or passengers suffered appreciable injuries during the gyrations, although one Special Forces man complained of minor back pain. Attesting to extreme stresses imposed during the accident, Haver, who had been strapped tightly into his seat during the crash, displayed a perfect imprint of the lap belt embossed on his stomach. He also exhibited an unexplained scratch on his back. After looking at the tangled mess of metal, they could not believe that they had survived the impact of such a severe wreck. Realizing that the consequences of the accident could have turned out much worse, they gave thanks to divine providence.

A handful of black-clad Meo soldiers, while chopping out a landing pad on top of the hill, viewed the accident with abject humor. Lodged in their parochial minds, the ignorant tribals assumed that every helicopter landed in a similar manner. Special Forces personnel cited a previous example. They reported that when Meo, naïve as to Western technology, encountered their first H-34, the exhaust flame particularly awed them. Observing them edging dangerously close to the stack to gape and wonder at the mysterious spirit producing the fire, the Americans restrained them.

Arriving at the village, the excited Flight Mechanic related an eyewitness version of crash events from his perspective in the cabin section. During the final approach, several passengers stood near the cabin door looking toward the landing zone. The initial ground contact afforded them little opportunity to return to their bucket seats and strap in. During the second impact, they ended up pressed together in a human ball that, in retrospect, humorously rolled back and forth from front to rear in the bouncing cabin section.

Impending nightfall, and lack of any radio communications, necessitated remaining overnight in the Meo village. Unconcerned, the Americans assumed individuals at Vang Vieng and Udorn would eventually declare them missing and conduct a search the following day. Displaying customary mountain tribe hospitality, the village chief invited the visitors to spend the night in his twenty by twenty-foot thatch house. The interior appeared dark and smoky. Without alternate sleeping accommodations, the men were obligated to recline on the dirt floor. Despite the Meo habit of completely bathing their bodies only once a year at the New Year, the surroundings were not particularly odiferous. Captain Ipsen, exhibiting a typical military mentality, while seeking to prevent gastrointestinal (GI) or other health problems, cautioned the group not to eat, drink, or smoke anything proffered by the locals. ⁶

The following day Paul Walton and Fred Sass retrieved the crew and passengers. After depositing the survivors at Vang Vieng, the Hotel Hotel crewmembers returned to the crash site with Flight Mechanic Bert Palmer, Filipino lead ground mechanic Bague, and other workers to initiate salvage of recoverable objects. After assessing the damage, the team stripped radios, magnetos, carburetor, pumps, and other items not considered strike items. They also removed parts regarded as possessing overhaul potential, like servos and dampeners, left the remainder to the natives and jungle. ⁷

After the Hotel India crash, the ship became a permanent fixture embedded in the landscape, and for a time served as a focal point for tribal social gathering, viewing, and touching.

Before departing the site for a second trip to Vang Vieng, following a hover power check, Paul Walton informed his Flight Mechanic that the ship seemed too heavy and ordered him to remove something. The Flight Mechanic ejected a small radio appearing to weigh less than twenty-five pounds. The PIC, then pronouncing the gross weight acceptable, lifted off. Incredulous, Sass protested that the radio's modest weight appeared negligible, and he

⁶ Jim Haver Emails, 06/08/02, 06/27/02, 02/01/03, 02/02/03.
Haver April 1961 Flight Time Record.

⁷ Burt Palmer Email, 03/20/04.



The severely damaged Hotel India. While curious Meo observe, Air America mechanics inspect the ship for salvageable parts.

Sass Collection.



Meo soldiers dressed in standard black tribal attire guard Hotel India, while Air America mechanics continue examining the engine for usable parts.

Sass Collection.



Photo believed taken at Vientiane, Laos. Right to left: Hal Norfleet standing on the right helicopter wheel wearing a pork-pie hat, Flight Mechanic Dale Klock leaning on the cabin door step, Carl Lawrence at the left door entrance; other two men remain unidentified.

Sass Collection.

believed it highly unwise to expose themselves to the dangers involved in another trip to retrieve it. Walton won the argument, and conducted an additional round robin solely for the radio. Over the course of several flights together, Sass recalled PIC Walton as a quiet person, one not easy to converse with or to understand. Although no problems arose in the cockpit, he preferred flying with other pilots, those who did not always relegate him to a non-flying status.

Later over a beer, Norfleet and Sass enjoyed a hearty laugh about the accident. During their conversation, Norfleet confessed an intense dislike and fear of mountain flying. This attitude, reinforced after the recent crash, prompted him to state that perhaps he should pursue a healthier line of work--maybe attend law or medical school. ⁸

Hal discussed his flying aversion with Captain Abadie, who eventually granted him a ground job coordinating H-34 helicopter operations from Wattay Airport in Vientiane. Abadie considered the posting essential to the program, and not just a make-work position, as management at the fixed wing base thus far had provided his unit subpar support. It sorely needed a boost from a knowledgeable person who understood helicopter problems. ⁹

⁸ Fred Sass Emails, 08/28/02, 09/26/02, 11/08/02.
Fred Sass April 1961 Flight Time Record. There was no follow up regarding Norfleet's future education, but Jim Haver eventually attained a dental degree and practiced until retiring.

⁹ John Fonburg Letter, 11/16/91.
CJ Abadie Email, 1/20/99.
The lack of willing support, especially obtaining parking and cargo assistance from Vientiane management counterparts, generally continued to be problematic throughout the program. From the beginning, it appeared as if the fixed wing culture, believing itself mutually exclusive from all others, cared little for, and divorced itself from, the helicopter program--one often considered a stepchild of a greater parent organization.

Management expressed considerable concern regarding the mounting helicopter losses and, at the same time, unease concerning new employees, changing conditions in Lao, weather, and other pertinent operational factors. Additionally, overriding emphasis focused on satisfying Customer program requirements and contract retention. CIA commitment, and aspiration to outperform in the Theater, far exceeded that of other USG agencies. Hence, the Udorn unit strived to accomplish the extra mile and achieve its part. In addition, one could logically argue that CJ Abadie, recalling his hairy crash at Khang Kho, developed a philosophical mindset that operational accidents constituted an unpleasant aspect of the helicopter operation. Moreover, at the program's inception, he fully understood that few pilots initially possessed the unique proficiency required for mountain flying. On-the-job-training (OJT) was essential, and became the watchword of upcountry success. Abadie noted that if one survived normal operational flights, he eventually became a good mountain pilot, but if one experienced a narrow escape or an actual accident and survived, and truly learned from his mistakes, he developed into an excellent mountain pilot. Of course, others who totally failed to hack the program went home.¹⁰

As the designated plane commander of Hotel India, Jim Haver recalled no repercussion, investigation, required written report, or negative management opinion connected with his part in the accident. To unwind, regain his composure, and mentally recuperate from the hairy encounter with death, Abadie permitted Haver a few days rest and relaxation in Bangkok. More than ready for a break from the lackluster and dusty confines of Udorn town, he swaggered into a fancy hotel lobby wearing jeans, a cowboy hat, and a leather shoulder holster stuffed with a single action Colt revolver. Stunned American and other foreign tourists stared and wondered at the brash youngster's ostentatious appearance. Following a room assignment, he luxuriated under a hot shower for a half hour while the room boy brought him double scotches on the rocks. Later, he journeyed to a well-touted restaurant, washed down a steak with a few martinis, and subsequently passed out face down on his plate. Taking no offense at the display, and hoping to avoid adverse publicity, the proprietor wisely deposited him in a taxi and directed the driver to his hotel. After several days of similar imbibing and unwinding, Jim Haver returned to Udorn and work. Unfortunately, constant worry, fatigue, and drinking to

¹⁰ CJ Abadie Interview, 08/21/02.

escape reality continued unabated and severely hampered him throughout his Air America tour.¹¹

Other exciting incidents occurred within the Kiou Cacham area. One afternoon, Coble landed while a joint Lao-American patrol approached the site boundary. Suddenly, under attack by an annoyed enemy, the unit panicked and foolishly dashed into the perimeter minefield. During the ensuing chaos, one Lao lost a leg. A few more men close to the fringe of the explosion escaped unharmed. The rest, realizing the danger of further movement, hunkered down and successfully resisted the attack. Haver hoisted out the remaining men, accomplishing this from a high hover, and careful not to touch the tail wheel on the ground. ¹²

¹¹ Jim Haver Email, 06/15/02.

¹² Jim Coble Email, 03/13/02.

Despite Soviet leaders' willingness to unite with Geneva Accord Cochairman Britain in a mid-April appeal for a Lao ceasefire, the month proved crucial to the survival of a free Laos. Much depended on communist objectives that appeared to include obtaining as much land as possible before the scheduled international conference.

Supported by Air America helicopter crews, Special Forces teams continued to assist the RLA in defending against enemy buildups and potential attempts to sever the country at two narrow points: first in the Tha Thom-Paksane corridor along Route-4, and then in Military Region Three at Route-8, near Nhommarath, north of the Mekong River town of Thakhet. In Military Region One, concerns also remained over the threat to Luang Prabang from continuing problems at Mounq Kassy.

By the third week in April, following the government loss of Nhommarath in Military Region Three on 15 April, communist forces approached Thakhet, where uncontrollable FAL troops were not considered mentally fit to withstand an enemy attack on the Mekong River town.

Thai Prime Minister Sarit, with early family roots in northeast Thailand and concern about the current potential threat to his country, at an earlier behest of the Chief Joint U.S. Military Group Thailand, had introduced a Thai 105mm artillery battalion to bolster RLA defenses. Also, troubled that ongoing international negotiations, in tandem with the Lao ceasefire, had failed to yield tangible results, the Thai Prime Minister feared communist efforts would eventually usurp any successful attempt to form a coalition government in Vientiane. The following week, with enemy forces approaching within ten miles of the Mekong town, and enemy gunners shooting at inbound helicopters, Sarit declared to the world that unilaterally, and without SEATO assistance, he was prepared to order his troops into action.¹

HAYER'S TRIP TO THAKHET

During the critical period between 15 to 17 April, Captains Jim Haver and Jerry

¹ Joint Chiefs of Staff, 13, 29, 31, 32.



Under threatening skies, at the end of the day an Air America Flight Mechanic performs daily maintenance on an assigned HUS-1 at Thakhet. Unlike other Mekong River towns, the Thakhet airstrip was not paved, merely a scraped and rolled laterite surface that became unusable by larger planes in wet weather.

Clarke Collection.



Because of the muddy runway conditions during the monsoon season, military supplies had to be air dropped along the Thakhet airstrip. First bundles were dropped by Air America kickers to ascertain wind drift. Air drops were conducted almost exclusively at mountainous Lao sites where landings were not feasible.

Clarke Collection.



Blossoming parachutes deploying over the Thakhet drop zone to cushion supply landings. Rotor blade of Ron Clarke's HUS-1 seen in the lower left corner of the photo.

Clarke Collection.



The first supplies nearing the drop zone (DZ) at Thakhet. Although not a full-fledged "streamer" the red parachute appears not to have fully deployed. Depending on the load, this could result in damaged goods.

Clarke Collection.



Air dropped supplies reaching the ground at Thakhet.
Clarke Collection.



Following a cargo drop, supplies had to be recovered. Here government troops are examining and culling items contained in jute burlap bags. The black beret soldier to the right is probably a Thai PARU embedded with the Lao. Personnel tents can be seen in the upper left near the treeline.

Clarke Collection.



Air drops could be dangerous at times. The left elevator of Curtiss C-46F B-138 seen here was damaged during a cargo drop. The crew managed to return the ship to Wattay Airport for repairs.
Clarke Collection.

Buffington teamed together in Hotel Juliet to work and RON at Thakhet. Despite the larger and more versatile H-34 crew's occasional work in Military Region Three since January, the men soon discovered that local Lao troops and Special Forces personnel possessed little knowledge of H-34 operational capabilities or limitations in the field. Haver, when asked about a cleared area required to deliver 105mm ammunition to a projected landing zone, without seriously considering implications of the query or his answer, indicated that the helicopter's length was fifty-six feet. Later, while he obtained a briefing about the new location, loaders crammed the cargo compartment, front to rear and deck to the ceiling--in helicopter parlance "cubed out"--with artillery shells. Observing the vastly overloaded section, and realizing that the ignorant loaders had no concept of maximum gross weight or center of gravity, he instructed them to remove shells until only a pitifully small mound remained. Although he considered the remaining 1,000 pounds embarrassing compared to the original load, he preferred to live a little longer.

More surprises awaited the crew. Arriving at the artillery position, they discovered a fifty-six-foot hole deep within a fifty-foot-high circle of trees. With no safe approach path available into the landing zone, Haver returned the load to Thakhet. Lack of viable communications, foresight, and particularly common sense, unquestionably contributed to both parties' problems, but these learning factors continued to hinder helicopter operations over the years. Therefore, as new Customers and unschooled troops entered the field, and new sites developed, out of necessity, crewmembers relied on their teaching skills to perform their work. ²

The men also performed shuttles to Dong Hene, site of a Lao officer school and undersized stone citadel located on Route-9. Another mission took them further east to Tchepone, a militarily strategic hub on Route-9, located in the Bang Hieng Valley, almost in the geographic center of Indochina. The town had been defended by the 12th Infantry Battalion until January, when the unit withdrew to Thakhet and was replaced by newly assembled Volunteer Battalion-33.

Situated in a low savanna-like area sheltering a 4,000 by sixty-five-foot strip,

² Jim Haver Email, 06/08/02.
Jim Haver April 1961 Flight Time Record.

little did the pilots or anyone in the Western camp imagine that the area would later become the headquarters of the Ho Chi Minh logistical trail operation and choice drop zone to funnel men and materiel into South Vietnam. The district, extending to the border, included 200 villages and 45,000 indigenous Kha people, who later served as porters to move enemy supplies into South Vietnam. ³ It was a dangerous area. At the time, most of the eastern two-thirds of Route-9 was controlled by communists, with 1,500 troops on or adjacent to the road, and an estimated 4,000 enemy troops south of the road.

While the pilots departed the valley, several enemy artillery rounds splashed in close proximity to the helicopter. They never returned. ⁴

Tchepone and Moung Phine were attacked on 29 April, and with BV-33 withdrawing east toward Ban Houei Sane, the sites soon fell to the communists.

Enemy units continued to dislodge RLA outposts along major backcountry arteries well removed from Mekong River towns. As usual during enemy attacks, friendly forces in their haste to escape scattered weapons, shoes, and other military gear behind in their panicked rush to safety. Taking the initiative, the field training team (FTT) team leader assigned to the unit utilized a Thai-provided 105mm-howitzer battery to slow the enemy advance, but he expressed a strong desire for effective airpower. Hearing his comment, and caught up in the heat of the moment, Haver, eager to curry favor and display a young Marine's invincibility, offered Hotel Juliet and his services to execute any feasible plan. Taking advantage of the youth's Gung Ho enthusiasm and proposal, the Army men proposed dropping a few drums of doctored aviation gasoline--called hot soup--along the road on suspected enemy positions. Team members removed the cabin door and placed the containers containing the volatile liquid close to the opening. Then they taped 60mm mortar rounds to barrel tops. The devices

³ Kha: A generic term used for ethnic clans located in remote lowland areas of Laos.

⁴ Their effort quite possibly marked the last time an Air America or any western helicopter crew landed in the Tchepone Valley until the disastrous 1971 Lam Son 719 operation.

Jerry Buffington Emails, 10/21/03, 11/05/03.

Arthur Dommen, *Conflict In Laos*, 347, 356.

John Prados, *The Blood Road*.

CIA Special National Intelligence Estimate, SNIE 58-2-61, Probably Reactions to Certain Courses of Action Concerning Laos, 07/05/61.

Ken Conboy and Morrison, *Early Covert Action on the Ho Chi Minh Trail*, Internet.

stimulated Haver's curiosity as he wondered how they would ignite the gas. He soon found out. As he approached the intended target area, above the din of engine and transmission noise, he heard a loud banging from the cargo compartment. Looking between his legs, he observed a sergeant hammering vigorously on the live ordinance.

Terrified that the shock would ignite the shell and blow the aircraft to pieces, he shouted, *"What the hell are you doing?"*

"I'm just trying to arm the shell, son."

Considering striking a mortar round in such a manner to be extremely dangerous and utterly stupid, he ordered, *"Well, knock it off,"* and promptly aborted the mission. He learned a lot from the experience, and it was the last time he ever volunteered his services to "bomb" the enemy. ⁵

⁵ Jim Haver Email, 06/02/02.

During a period of heightened enemy activity, while superpower talks leading to a projected ceasefire slowly progressed, U.S. military options in Laos significantly diminished mainly because of the Agency's disastrous Bahia de Cochinos (Bay of Pigs) Cuba adventure on 17 April. ¹ Following this egregious loss of face, President Kennedy assumed a more cautious stance when heeding intelligence reports, source information, and ambitious plans by prime advisors. Consequently, he increasingly turned inward for opinions from a trusted handpicked staff who, while not entirely ruling out military action, stressed a more palatable diplomatic solution in Laos. Many believed the failed Cuban action and ensuing Congressional pressure probably spared intervention in Laos by the men and machines of Task Force-116.

TAKHLI B-26s

Despite continuing entreaties from field personnel to employ bombs during T-6 strike missions, but with authorization to only use guns and rockets, Washington planners recognized that significant offensive capabilities were hampered by the small number of RLAFF T-6 planes available, and sporadic achievements from the pilot complement. They also understood the pressing requirements for reconnaissance intelligence missions in critical areas, and overall control of Lao airspace. Since T-6 pilots were failing to perform the job, it was painfully evident that the Lao Government sorely required additional air power to stave off communist gains in Laos and recapture strategic areas. Early in the year the Department of Defense, et. al. conceived a "black" B-26 bombing campaign code named Millpond. ² Along with increased helicopter support, program planners envisioned this measure as a key adjunct to FAL movement in order to retake the Plain of Jars. This would be accomplished by attacking enemy convoys and supply dumps, and interdicting long supply lines clandestinely from Thai soil. ³ Indeed,

¹ Hannah, 12-13.

² Along with the introduction of HUS-1 helicopters, Millpond was part of a comprehensive program to stem the communist tide and return territory to the Lao government.

³ Joint Chiefs of Staff, 55.

during a projected attack on Plain of Jars targets, the Joint Chiefs of Staff desired a massive first strike with up to sixteen planes "to gain surprise and obtain the fullest shock effect." ⁴ However, despite substantial planning and expense incurred in positioning crews and machines, the armada was never used for its original purpose, and became one offensive element the Kennedy administration scrubbed following the failed Cuban invasion.

USG's covertly owned Air Asia Company possessed a sizable Far Eastern maintenance facility at Tainan, Taiwan. It was largely sustained by performing government contract work on various types of U.S. military aircraft. Like the early American gunboat principal in China and other areas, the overt-covert strategy of constant readiness to act at a moment's notice to implement American foreign policy had long been established at U.S. overseas bases. Against this end, several flat black B-26 light bombers displaying no exterior identification were maintained and staged early at the Tainan airfield. Their recent use as an asset of foreign policy had occurred in 1958, when they were flown by deniable American civilians in Indonesia to support USG-sponsored rebels attempting to overthrow the Sukarno government. In recent years, a few Air America pilots with World War Two bomber experience were encouraged to volunteer for B-26 transition, and to make themselves available to fly them anywhere, at any time, on an as needed basis. ⁵

By 15 March, after the Thai government approved the measure to clandestinely stage foreign war planes on its soil, the Joint Chiefs of Staff reported the Air America contingent of B-26B's and crews ready to relocate to the remote airbase at Thakli, Thailand. ⁶ Pursuant

⁴ Joint Chiefs of Staff, 28, 41.

⁵ Jay Erickson, 7.

⁶ JCS, 51.



Air America Captain Maury Kentster flying a B-26 at the Tainan, Taiwan, facility circa February 1964.
Joe Hazen Collection.

to early 1961 recruitment, training, and planning, on 21 March, ⁷ a handful of experienced Air America pilots--Thomas Jenny, William Beal, Truman Barnes, and Ronald Sutphin--ferried four heavily armed B-26s from Tainan, Taiwan, to Thailand, where they assumed the role of mission flight division leaders. ⁸

Sixteen to eighteen volunteer USAF pilots were selected for clandestine B-26 operations. ⁹ By the end of the month, eight B-26s, after being hauled out of storage at Davis-Monthan AFB, refurbished, removed from USAF inventory, and sanitized, were flown by the military crews, from the U.S. for Kadena, Okinawa. After a brief retraining period, the "sheep-dipped" USAF crews ferried the planes to Thailand. ¹⁰ Contained in April message traffic, the Joint Chiefs of Staff indicated that *"15 B-26s were in Thailand; one was still under repair in Okinawa. Two RB-26Cs were configured with electronic equipment to conduct photo reconnaissance missions."* ¹¹

In time, the mixed crews received briefings from Base Commander Major Harry C "Heine" Aderholt and Colonel Al Blizzard concerning a projected 17 April bombing mission. (Both men were seconded to the CIA from the U.S. military for the project.) Then Captain Aderholt, commanding the USAF Detachment Two unit for unconventional warfare (1045th Operational Evaluation & Training Group) arrived at the base on 2 January 1960, and remained there until 1962.

⁷ Joint Chiefs of Staff, 57.

⁸ Air America Captain Tom Jenny's Recollections. About the same time, the Department of Defense (DOD) sought additional helicopter crews to man the H-34s.

⁹ JCS, 62.

¹⁰ JCS, 84.

¹¹ JCS, 39, 40.

Joe Leeker, *In Combat*, 2.

THE VERSATILE HELIO COURIER

Previous to the B-26 assignment, Heine Aderholt had been a member of the USAF Aerial Resupply unit at Kadena Air Force Base, Okinawa, planning Agency-sponsored clandestine and paramilitary operations over China and Asia. Following a stint at Eglin Air Force Base with the Air Commandos, Aderholt returned to Okinawa to work as a liaison between the U.S. military and the Air America-CIA effort in Laos. While there, he recommended that the Agency purchase a Helio Courier STOL (short takeoff and landing) aircraft, and to loan one to Air America for evaluation and demonstration to the Customer.

According to W. MacCormick, a former Air America Station Manager in Vientiane, the Helio Courier was designed by two individuals, one a Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) professor. The plane was originally designed for missionary work in remote areas. Bob Bryan, Pastor of the old North Church in Boston, and a Hebron Academy graduate, were test pilots. Unique qualities of the STOL machine soon caught the attention of CIA personnel, who requested the USAF evaluate it at Eglin Air Force Base in Florida. An Air Commando unit, having replaced the Aerial Resupply Squadrons (ARS) in October 1956, was assigned to the project. Heine Aderholt, Lee Mullins, Frank Farthing, and others performed the evaluation.¹² The USAF purchased a few planes and designated them U-10s. All had been manufactured with a fixed tail wheel assembly, and one modification was equipped with floats.

The demonstration Helio Courier, 555, "loaned" to Air America in January 1960 by the USAF, was called "Triple Nickel."¹³ Accompanied by Heine Aderholt to assist in initial training, the machine had a tail wheel that would not rotate. Therefore, each landing on the unimproved mountain strips upcountry was exciting, and resulted in a minor crash. Fortunately, Fred Walker and Ron Sutphin learned to fly the machine relatively well, and convinced the Customer that it was safe for operations. Following acceptance, several models were ordered with unlockable tail wheel assemblies, which helped prevent stress on that component. An extra doubler was installed mid-fuselage to provide additional strength. A vapor lock problem when starting was solved by locating the component aft of the fire wall.

¹² Lee Mullins later joined the fixed wing program and flew many years for the Company.

¹³ A C-123 plane was later assigned the same numbers and moniker.



The versatile Helio Courier parked on one of the better-maintained upcountry air strips in Laos.

Mike LaDue Collection.

The tail rudder was modified so that it would not jam.

When pilots continued to damage the delicate machines with regularity, a long list of required parts was forwarded to the manufacturer. The reply stated that the request for so many parts indicated a need to purchase a new Helio. From that time, manufacturing data plates were retrieved from totaled planes and secured at Tainan. As new Helios were illegally reconstructed by Air Asia's talented work force, old data plates were affixed to the resurrected machine. Such was the nature of the clandestine aviation services at the time.

Despite the machine's limited capacity to carry large loads to high elevations, and its proclivity to damage on landing, the amazing Helio Courier was the workhorse in backcountry Laos for many years until a stronger, more powerful Platius Porter aircraft was purchased in 1964. ¹⁴

STAND DOWN

While impatiently marking time for the word from Washington for the B-26 launch to destroy enemy supply dumps on the center of the Plain of Jars near Xieng Khouang, "Sheep Dipped" USAF, Air National Guard reserve types, by then assigned Royal Lao Air Force commissions, and Air America pilots, stood by in a comfortable two-story barracks building. Courtesy of Seabee magic, the amenities provided far more creature comforts than the sterile atmosphere confronting Heine Aderholt's arrival the previous year.

From the beginning of the project, Air America pilots worried about a successful outcome of any joint mission, as the mixed group never had an opportunity to fly together, or to practice tactical maneuvers. Furthermore, it appeared to the Air America contingent that the relatively inexperienced military group only wanted "to drink and bitch." ¹⁵

The night before the planned mission, crews received a final briefing. Armed with bombs and rockets, but not controversial napalm, the planes would simultaneously strike enemy positions. Four divisions, consisting of four planes in each unit and led by an Air America Captain, would be used. Commencing at dawn, eight B-26 crews would crater the PSP runway at

¹⁴ Joe Leeker, Military Aid, 6-8.
Tom Penniman Emails, 04/29/00, 04/30/00.
W. MacCormick Email to Tom Penniman, 04/28/00.
Retired General Heine Aderholt Letter to Author 12/24/92.

¹⁵ Bill Leary Notes.
Captain Tom Jenny's Recollections.

Xieng Khouang in the center of the Plain of Jars and destroy any Soviet planes sighted on the ground. The remaining two divisions would then attack enemy concentrations in the Ban Ban valley and southern Plain of Jars.

Early on the morning of the 17th, Aderholt informed the pilots that Washington had ordered a stand-down. Most certainly, the failed Bay of Pigs operation had caused the cancellation. By 20 April, because of adverse world opinion, Washington officials placed the bombing mission permanently on hold, with the B-26s and crews on a standby status. ¹⁶

By late July, with a tenuous ceasefire already in place, and talks in Geneva proceeding on the Lao question, Washington planners determined "*that the requirement for the employment of B-26 aircraft as a part of an over-all effort in Laos no longer exists.*" ¹⁷ Consequently, in August, crews were redeployed, and all but two aircraft were sent to airfields at Tainan, Taiwan, Clark AFB, Philippine Islands, or Kadena, Okinawa.

Lao planners required reliable photo and reconnaissance intelligence that divulged "*enemy troop dispositions and movements.*" This was particularly important in areas like the Plain of Jars, which were either denied to government forces, or were restricted from normal ground reconnaissance because of impassible roads and unreliable agent reports. Requested by the RLG, and authorized since December 1960, a U.S. attaché C-47 based in Saigon, but temporarily assigned to Vientiane during January 1961, conducted thirty-eight air reconnaissance sorties over Laos. Until shot down on 23 March, SC-47 crews provided valuable evidence of Soviet planes, truck movements into Laos from North Vietnam, locations of supply points, troops concentrations, and several other pertinent items generally unconfirmed or previously unknown. ¹⁸

¹⁶ Joe Leeker, In Combat, 2.
JCS 37.

¹⁷ Joint Chiefs of Staff, 89

¹⁸ JCS, 65, 72.

With Vang Vieng abandoned on 23 April, and a requirement for intelligence concerning further enemy movement south, requests went forward, and were granted, to utilize RB-26Cs (and RT-33 aircraft) for medium level photo reconnaissance until the Royal Lao government accepted an anticipated ceasefire and it had been effectively established. During one such reconnaissance mission, an aircraft flown by Captain Ed Eckholdt and Al White on 2 November was hit by heavy anti-aircraft fire west of Mugia Pass. They recovered safely at Udorn, and were observed refueling by Jim Coble.^{19 20}

DON COURTNEY

During the fall of 1957, Don Courtney and the Author attended the 20th Officer Candidate Course (OCC) for a grueling ten-week conditioning and indoctrination course at the Mainside Training and Test Regiment (T&T) at the Quantico, Virginia, Marine Corps base on the banks of the Potomac River.

Following second lieutenant commissioning, we survived another eight months in the same platoon, first at Camp Upshur, an old Quonset hut facility, and then at a newly-completed U.S. Marine Officer Basic School in the vast expanses of the Quantico area boondocks. After completing his obligated service as an engineering officer, Courtney, having previous Agency-preferred "smoke jumper" experience in the forests of Montana, joined the CIA and was assigned his first four-month contract at Takhli, Thailand. While based there, he helped rig and airdrop C-46 loads to remote Lao guerrilla training sites. Enjoying high

¹⁹ Joe Leeker, In Combat, 3.

²⁰ Jim Coble Email.

In addition to daily C-46 resupply flights from Thakli to Vang Pao's Meo forces, "Romeo" (also called "The Ranch" by flight crews) provided a secure base for highly classified U-2 intelligence flights over Cold War adversaries' countries, and had served as a waypoint for Tibetan operations.

adventure and good money, he returned to resume more of this activity in September, and remained until January 1962.

He recalled the Millpond B-26 crews at the base, but not their mission. During time off, he flew to Udorn in a Helio Courier several times, and observed parked green Marine helicopters. On one trip north, flying with a pilot from the B-26 group, the PIC asked if he wanted to fly. Courtney answered in the affirmative. The man, assuming that he was pilot qualified, asked questions about flying the C-46. After admitting that he merely dropped cargo, the pilot-in-command abruptly grabbed the yoke and reassumed aircraft control. Courtney, more than a little miffed, got minor satisfaction after the stiff wing driver landed at the Udorn strip and ground looped the plane directly in front of a host of Marines.

In a paraphrased version of his draft copy of, *A Ration of Luck*, Courtney wrote:

In the spring of 1961, after being hired for a short-term contract with the CIA, half a dozen former U.S. Forest Service smokejumpers lived at the hot and humid base at Takhli, Thailand. Theoretically, they were not aware of the identity of their employer or any mission details because the risk of capture. The less they knew the better. Covert CIA operators preferred to utilize this type because of their expertise with parachutes, familiarity with air operations, physical fitness, and ability to function with little supervision or paperwork. ²¹

Furthermore, since they were bona fide civilians [he had fulfilled his military service obligation as an engineering officer], any direct USG connection was deniable should they be captured. Duties included rigging, loading and airdropping arms, ammo, and food to the growing Lao tribal irregular army. Continuing non-stop, initially alternating in two large cargo carrying C-46s, the 'kickers'--as they were later called--beginning at dawn rigged and loaded planes one day while flying and dropping the next. Returning generally by noon, the plane was loaded again for a final trip that did not return to the base until well after dark. Drop days were preferred to ground work since it was cooler at 12,000 feet and one could nap enroute to sites. Compensation included extra pay for hours flown north of the Mekong River. A different Air America C-46 crew rotated into Takhli about every 10 days.

²¹ Except for indigenous Lao or Thai kickers, this category of Americans was utilized throughout the war. A few of the more capable types like Courtney later moved into the ranks of Agency Case Officers.

Pilots included Art Wilson, Tony Durizzi, Al White, Fred Reilly, Woody Forte, and Randell Richardson.

In later years, when he was firmly immersed in the role of an Agency Case Officer, Don Courtney and the Author would once again cross paths.

MAAG

Taking measures to counter April communist gains north of Vang Vieng, Paksane, and Thakhet, and to provide the least provocative move to show the American flag in Laos, Washington sanctioned what already constituted a relatively open secret: to disclose American military presence in Laos by authorizing PEO and MTT advisors to change from civilian clothes into military uniforms. Although difficult to substantiate to the world, North Vietnamese Army advisors had provided in-country training and leadership to the Pathet Lao for years. Now it was the West's chance to shine. Under the new arrangement:

"All former PEO and Lao Training Advisory Group personnel would be armed while in the field. Their primary function would be to serve as tactical advisors though they would not be restricted from participation in combat when necessary, and after the establishment of the Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG Laos) there would be no further distinction between PEO and LTAG."

Simultaneously, the Marine Corps nucleus of Joint Task Force 116 at Camp Courtney, Okinawa, prepared for action. ²²

Following approval, an announcement to the media by the State Department declared in part:

"...that the Government of Laos had requested the establishment of a MAAG to assist in organizing the defense of Laos more effectively. That the additional assistance to be

²² Joint Chiefs of Staff, 27.
Hugh Toye 169.
Robert Futrell, 64.

*supplied through the MAAG should help to redress the military imbalance in the country which has resulted from the continuing flow of materiel and personnel to the rebel forces over an extended period.”*²³

Directly violating the ineffective Geneva Accords, Programs Evaluation Office personnel in Vientiane and Special Forces soldiers in the field donned U.S. military uniforms and insignia on 20 April. Previously sheltered under the cover of USOM, the PEO under the command of General Boyle assumed an independent MAAG Lao status containing all the structure and functions of a normal Military Army Advisory Group. From that time forward, Department of Defense designated Special Forces Field Training Teams as White Star Mobile Training Teams. Other personnel referred to their frequently changed code name of White Star.²⁴

From the initial introduction of Special Forces into Laos, team members trained Lao soldiers in weapons usage, unit training, artillery, communications, and logistics. With PARU assistance at mountain bases, these tasks expanded to include training tribal forces in unconventional warfare. In a country where transportation was extremely difficult, planes and crews of Air America were deemed mission essential, and were liberally used to move White Star, CIA, PARU, and supplies to work areas. Helio Couriers, H-19s, and then UH-34D helicopters, performed this undertaking in remote areas. To maintain a semblance of secrecy, aircraft flew under contracts signed by the ostensibly USG civilian entity, USOM-Laos.

When the PEO emerged from the closet to become an official MAAG, the USOM facade was no longer necessary to maintain. Therefore, on 19 May, Brigadier General Andrew J. Boyle, MAAG Laos Chief, requested the Air Material Force Pacific Area (AMFPA), USAF Far East procurement agency, Tachikawa, Japan, to conduct clandestine contract negotiations with Air America representatives. Without mincing words, he had long made it understood that he wanted authority to utilize planes and helicopters to fly where and whenever he wanted, to unequivocally support the RLG. Department of the Air Force agreed, indicating that a new contract was essential for air services:

“...in the interest of National Defense, which because of military considerations,

²³ Joint Chiefs of Staff, 36.

²⁴ White Star Laos 1959-1962 (Special Operations. Com) 2.
At inception, the Special Forces unit was originally designated Operation Ambidextrous, then Operation Hot Foot, and lastly White Star.

*should not be publicly disclosed and for which Air America Inc., is the only known source."*²⁵

Normally contracts were straight forward. As elucidated in a 1962 memorandum:

*"The Company contracts its services in an overt manner [but not at all times] and at competitive prices to the U.S Army, Navy, and Air Force and to USAID for a **variety** of flying and maintenance engineering activities throughout the Far East...The USAF has stated on a number of occasions that it regards the Companies' engineering shops, skilled personnel and fleet of aircraft to be an important emergency resource positioned in the Far East..."*²⁶

MADRIVER

Overseeing the Madriver Project, a term originally used as a generic code word in communication messaging and reference to the Udon helicopter operation, representatives of Air America and the U.S Air Force signed a one-year contract (AF62 (531)-1674). This semi-overt document encompassed the fiscal year 1 July 61 to 30 June 62, and provided two and a half million dollars for operating costs. It was later extended through 30 June 1963, when the total amount of funding almost tripled.²⁷

As signed on 1 July 1961, portions of the comprehensive Madriver contract, couched in much confusing legalese, stipulated that the Contractor (Air America):

"...shall provide, establish, manage, operate, and maintain a complete flying and maintenance service, inclusive of all facilities, supplies, materials, equipment, and support services not furnished by the United States Government, including required maintenance and referred to as the contract services, to permit utilization by the United States Government

²⁵ Joe Leeker, Military Aid, 16-17.

Bill Leary 1961 Notes, UTD.

²⁶ Agency Memorandum, 11/07/62.

Author Note: These poignant words positively confirm Air America's clandestine paramilitary role in Laos. By inference, if not a concealed military arm loosely linked to top leaders in Washington, then the Air America operation was very close to this in implementing USG Lao policy.

²⁷ Joint Chiefs of Staff.

[USG] of a quantity of six to twenty helicopter aircraft; dependent on the Contractor's capability to perform as such may be effected by the result of hostile acts or other unforeseen circumstances beyond the control of the Contractor during performance hereunder. The aircraft are to be operated in the Work Zone..and at points in the Work Zone designated by the Chief MAAG. The contract services shall be rendered at airports or other locations in a specified area made effectively available by the United States Government and designated in writing to the Contractor by the Chief, MAAG..."

The contract additionally ensured that Air America provide flight and non-flight personnel, flying services, parts, and critical materials. It also specified provisions for medical services, equipment, and materials for Contractor personnel. Allowing Chief MAAG to designate work areas and to service USG agencies, the contract not only allowed the U.S. military access to the helicopters for war-connected work, but also CIA and USAID to accomplish their diverse functions. ²⁸

In effect, the all-encompassing contract was cleverly crafted, worded, and expertly masterminded for the Air America Company to perform **any** job deemed necessary by the Customer. This was later reflected in Air America's motto: **ANYTHING, ANYWHERE, ANYTIME**. Of course, a majority of contracts with any substance normally required periodic tweaking and fine tuning to reflect changing and current conditions. Therefore, contract numbers were altered during fiscal year contract negotiations, and, from time to time, when considered necessary and realistic to reflect changing situations, specific contract items were added or deleted, but overall contract basics remained largely unchanged over the years. ²⁹

DOWN THE TUBES

"The setting for Vang Vieng must have been selected by a master artist. It is spectacular. The village rests at the foot of stupendous walls of rock, rising two and three

²⁸ Joe Leeker, Military Aid, 17.

²⁹ Author Note: The Catch-22 provision in the contracts served our masters well when a military search and rescue requirement developed in 1964 to retrieve downed U.S. aircraft military crews from enemy locations in Laos that we would normally circumnavigate and avoid.

thousand feet vertically into the sky. These mountains have no foothills. There's no gradual rise of slope. Just an absolutely flat plain; then suddenly, abruptly, a staggering wall of rock." ³⁰

Since April termination of the failed FAL attempt to sever and control the Vientiane to Luang Prabang road above Moung Kassy, communist forces, supported by Soviet Ilyshin airdrops, had prepared for a coordinated strike on Vang Vieng. First indication of imminent attack on the base occurred during the early morning hours of 22 April at a forward RLA position twelve miles north at Ban Pha Hom. Savagely impacted by precision artillery barrages, superior Pathet Lao forces flanked, then breached, the FAL battalion perimeter defense, and subsequently overran the entire position.

Team Moon's four-man forward detachment advised the FAR battalion that night. Marking the first time since introduction of American Mobile Training teams in 1959, Special Forces teams suffered serious combat casualties. Enemy troops captured team leader Captain Walter Moon. Sergeant Orville Ballinger escaped, then evaded for a week until also being captured. Two additional members of the team, SFC medic John Bischoff, and radio operator Sergeant Gerald Biber disappeared, and were presumed killed while attempting a dash southward in an armored vehicle. ³¹

Within a day, surrounded by enemy-controlled mountain positions, and lacking sufficient troops or necessary intestinal fortitude to defend the narrow, exposed valley, Vang Vieng fell. RLA units, adept at years of advancing in the wrong direction, quickly withdrew south toward the tiny hamlet of Ban Hine Heup on the Nam Lik's south bank. There, in relative safety, they established a watery demarcation line to prevent further enemy advances toward Vientiane.

The loss of Vang Vieng emphasized the added importance of government Mekong River towns, Luang Prabang, Thakhet, Paksane, and Vientiane threatened by Pathet Lao forces.

³⁰ Thomas Anthony Dooley, *The Edge of Tomorrow* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1958) 26.

³¹ Captain Walter Moon Memorandum.



Dwarfed by towering hills, a HUS-1 crew approaches Vang Vieng against the backdrop of haze and clouds.
Clarke Collection.



Many Air America crews worked at Vang Vieng before it fell to communist forces. Captain Ron Clarke standing in front of HUS-1 Hotel Sierra during the noon hour.

Clarke Collection.

Fearing that Laos teetered on the ropes, the newly-designated MAAG chief in Laos lobbied Hawaii-based CINCPAC in Phoumi's behalf to use T-6s to bomb enemy forces at Vang Vieng and along the road--previous strikes had been limited to using only guns and rockets. In case the enemy moved past the Nam Lik toward the larger Mekong River towns, with little means to stop the advance, military leaders requested authority to employ B-26s and possibly U.S. or SEATO troops. Ambassador Brown also wanted to use bombers against enemy positions on the Plain of Jars. ³²

After minor deliberation, President Kennedy denied the request to use B-26s, but, noting the serious nature of the situation, decided on ordering Naval fleet movement toward the area to possibly implement Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) Plan 5. ³³

Air America helicopter pilots were extremely shocked when the end came at Vang Vieng. Crews favored working in the area, particularly since the work entailed low-level missions consisting of only a few mountain landings. They also had enjoyed assignments supporting the affable Moon and his team. They participated in missions along Route-13 and the Vang Vieng Valley, which housed a decent RLA-Special Forces compound and the reassuring presence of tanks and other rolling stock. While operating from Vang Vieng, crewmembers listened to unsubstantiated stories of Moon's prowess and his nickname as "The Phantom of Laos." Reputedly roaming the jungles at night snooping and pooping, armed with a twelve-gage shotgun and shoulder bag of ammunition, the aggressive captain often returned to base with trophies of enemy ears. ³⁴

"Lee" Holt flew to Vang Vieng on 13 April with Walter Wizbowski in Hotel Sierra. The crew spent minimum time working there and recovered very early at Wattay Airport to await maintenance repairs on their machine. The delay required a RON in the administrative capital.

³² Joint Chiefs of Staff, 43, 48.

³³ JCS.

³⁴ Burt Palmer *Air America Detail*.
Burt Palmer Email, 03/09/04.



A column of government troops on the move at Vang Vieng.
Clarke Collection.



Troops crossing fallow rice paddies and full and empty drums of aviation gasoline to board a waiting helicopter.

Clarke Collections.

While Holt was waiting, Art "Shower Shoes" Wilson asked if he wanted to accompany him as copilot on a C-46 new engine break in, referred to in the trade as slow time flight. They bored holes in the sky around Udorn and Vientiane for a couple of hours, and then Wilson asked if Holt had ever seen Dien Bien Phu. Holt answered no, but indicated that he would like to, Wilson established a northern course without benefit of navigation aids. They flew for some time in that direction, while clouds slowly closed in beneath the aircraft. Then, with the undercast solid as far as one could see, Wilson reversed course for Wattay Airport. They never saw the projected destination, and Holt was not even sure that Wilson even knew his location. After landing, Wilson remarked that it was beneficial to have completed more than half the required ten hours slow time.

The following two nights were spent at Vang Vieng. Nothing exciting occurred in the area other than some interesting meals at a thatched roof, open air eatery named Charlie's. There was no electricity for Charlie's refrigerator, and the number of flies inside the box equaled those on the outside.

One day, with time to kill, Holt and his cockpit mate took a ten-mile Jeep ride north on Route-13 to an open field where a 105mm howitzer crew entertained them. On the way to the position, a damaged U.S. military truck that had rolled over a land mine was pointed out to them. A passenger was spared shrapnel wounds only because he had placed a packed duffle bag on the floor. Vang Vieng was notable among the crews because of communal bathing in the river late each afternoon. Holt was so funky from the excessive heat and humidity that it only took a few seconds to overcome any aversion to bathing naked with the locals.

During the return trip to Udorn, Don Babitz, flying Hotel Uniform, challenged Wizbowski's crew to a race. They both logged one-hour en route, therefore, the ultimate winner is lost to the ravages of time.³⁵

Despite the semi-clandestine nature of the Air America operation, it was possible for a crewmember to inadvertently obtain notoriety without trying. One morning, after the action had measurably heated, Ron Clarke ferried wounded Lao soldiers to Wattay Airport from Vang Vieng. As the men were offloaded, one person did not appear to be breathing, so Clarke hurriedly climbed down from the cockpit and began to administer artificial respiration. Eager

³⁵ Shirley Holt Emails, 04/06/09; 04/28/09 (2); 05/29/09.



Victim of a grenade wounding, a Lao soldier being removed from Clark's helicopter by a Special Forces sergeant and a local.

Clarke Collection.

for news of any kind relating to the war, reporter Grant Wolfkill was there along with a news team filming Clarke's humanitarian effort. Clarke had flown Wolfkill twice before, and was somewhat familiar with the man. As luck would have it, he later discovered that the news clip aired on a television network in the U.S. and the Clarke family saw it. They remarked to each other, *"Now we know where Ronnie is."* (Just before departing Washington, for Southeast Asia Ron had called his parents saying he would be away awhile, but was unable to inform them where he was going.) ³⁶

LAST MINUTE MAINTENANCE

Shortly before Vang Vieng's loss, a transmission caution light illuminated on an H-34 instrument console. Inspection revealed excess metal on the chip detector plug sufficient to warrant a component change. Once again, Udorn maintenance facility supervisors challenged Bert Palmer to work his magic. By then Bert Palmer was a highly esteemed mechanic with a growing record of accomplishments, in supervising and performing difficult jobs. Don Forand, Jerry Mears, and McKenzie followed Palmer into the field for what became another challenging three-day repair chore. Because component shortages and a lack of skilled mechanics hampered maintenance as to what could be provided quickly to the field, Don Babitz delivered a sling load containing not only a stand-mounted transmission, but also an attached rotor head complete with hydraulic plumbing to Palmer, who helped steady the swaying unit during touchdown. To Palmer it looked as if Udorn mechanics had recently stripped the transmission-rotorhead assembly from a line H-34; perhaps one currently in the hangar for repair or heavy maintenance.

With no "A" frame tall enough to facilitate a transmission change, drawing on recent field experience with Hotel Bravo, Palmer scoured the area for a similar alternative to the tank and pole method used at Kiou Cacham. Off the side of the runway at the jungle's edge, he discovered a giant tree with a stout limb. After some cajoling, soldiers helped the men push the component stand and H-34 under the tree. Then, after tossing a rope over the branch, they hauled Jerry Mears aloft, where he attached and remained to manipulate the chain fall apparatus.

³⁶ Ron Clarke Email, 07/16/15.



Supply sheds staged along the runway at Vang Vieng. Goods delivered by fixed wing aircraft were then distributed to outlying sites either by trucks or Air America helicopter crews.

Sass Collection.



While a Flight Mechanic checks the engine oil level, a Lao military truck driver positions his vehicle to load supplies.

Sass Collection.

Work proceeded until the lunch hour arrived. With limited meal options, the men elected to eat at Chinese Charlie's open-air noodle joint on the edge of the small ville. When Mears yelled for them to toss him a rope, joking and laughing they responded, "No way, Jerry. Stay there because, you look and act like an ape." After lunch, they returned with a bunch of bananas, and tossed them one at a time to the starving man.

Following the transmission swap, at the end of the day Mears' buddies graciously allowed him to join them on the ground. Troops again helped push the machine to the airfield, where the men reattached the rotor blades. Lacking proper equipment, blade tracking became another Marine field expedient. The "tracking flag" consisted of a military 782-gear web belt nailed to a short reverse "C" wooden frame. Then Palmer stood on two fifty-five-gallon drums close to the whirling rotor blades, as two men, positioned on two additional drums, held his waist to keep him steady. The work completed, a pilot flew the bird to Udorn, while Don Blankenship followed, slinging the damaged transmission unit.

Before Palmer departed the site, he observed an armed Lao AT-6 parked on the strip. The Lao pilot arrived, climbed nimbly into the cockpit, cranked the engine, departed, and headed north while admiring locals watched. He returned within thirty minutes and, much to the delight of the onlookers, performed two low passes, and then landed. Bounding from the cockpit, he strutted around bragging about the number of Pathet Lao he had just killed. He then boarded the next helicopter headed south.³⁷

With the balloon poised to go up, in order to remove local inhabitants and refugees from harm's way, numerous Air America helicopter crews, hauling enormous loads, shuttled people from the area. Jerry Buffington's Flight Mechanic recalled rolling off the strip with thirty souls, more than twice a normal load.³⁸ As the final H-34 crew to leave Vang Vieng, Don Blankenship and Dave Smith supported the evacuation the evening it fell. Several rounds dropped around them as they dashed to their ship. While hurriedly cranking the engine, Special Forces and Lao personnel piled on top of each other into the cabin section in their

³⁷ Burt Palmer *Air America Detail*.
Burt Palmer Emails, 03/14/04, 03/15/04, 04/10/04 (2), 05/03/04, 05/09/04.

³⁸ The H-34 provided seats for thirteen individuals.



The PIC of Hotel Uniform parked his ship without properly locking the tail wheel at Wattay Airport, Vientiane, Laos. This aircraft was destroyed at Nong Khai, Thailand during late October 1961. A Quonset type hangar is seen in the background surrounded by Air America cargo aircraft.

E.W. Knight Collection.



An H-34 crew delivering a quick change rotorhead and transmission to Vang Vieng for a field installation.

Photo Courtesy of Fred Sass.

haste to depart the besieged area. With survival a principal concern, Blankenship scuttled any consideration of gross weight, correct seating, or engine operating parameters, as he maxed out engine RPM to obtain sufficient lift to depart. Just before becoming airborne, charges previously set and calculated to destroy the fuel dump prematurely exploded, nearly blowing the ship and its occupants out of the sky. ³⁹

The following day Jack McCauley overheard Colonel Vang Pao, whose troops and people held commanding hill positions just east of Vang Vieng, conversing with several news people. During the interview, Vang Pao reported that on the preceding night Chicom paratroopers had jumped into the Vang Vieng area to reinforce Pathet Lao attackers. One reporter, dubious as to the statement's veracity, inquired how Vang Pao was so certain that Chinese paratroopers were involved. In a version persisting over the years, but never publicly substantiated that Chinese participated in the Lao theater, VP theorized that the men appeared much taller and did not look Lao. Moreover, they conversed in a strange language. ⁴⁰

USG

The loss of Moung Sai in the northern Beng Valley in Military Region One, and Vang Vieng in Military Region Two, prompted Ambassador Brown to contact his superior, Dean Rusk, in Washington. He expressed concern that if enemy forces north of the Nam Lik chose to push south against FAR forces, the government troops would not hold. Consequently, the entire flood plain would be engulfed, and Vientiane threatened.

In the event that enemy units moved south of the Nam Lik, or threatened the river towns of Luang Prabang, Thakhet, Paksane, or Savannakhet, Brown stated that the enemy could not be allowed to continue toward major Lao centers "*beyond a certain point.*" He requested

³⁹ Burt Palmer *Air America Detail* 4.
Burt Palmer Emails, 03/14/04, 05/15/04.
Fred Sass Emails, 08/28/02, 09/03/02.

⁴⁰ JJ McCauley Letter, 01/28/91.



Before the loss of the site, an Asian AT-6 pilot (either Lao or Thai) departing the Vang Vieng strip on a northern bombing mission.

Babitz Collection.

authority to employ B-26s still based at Takhli for offensive action, and the introduction of U.S. or SEATO troops to save the day. Although he realized that such moves would abrogate ceasefire negotiations and violate Lao neutrality, he envisioned few other options in what he considered an urgent situation.

On the same day that Rusk received Brown's plea for help, a concerned President Kennedy ordered a late afternoon high level meeting to be convened and attended by representatives from several agencies. Seemingly contradictory to the current situation, he stressed the urgency of an immediate bilateral ceasefire and preservation of the administrative capital at Vientiane. There was general agreement among advisors that introducing a large invasion force into Laos was not warranted. This was the case even at the risk of losing the country. The possibility of an adverse Chinese response to the situation was one factor contributing to this thinking. However, to continue a "carrot and stick" approach in pressing for a ceasefire, President Kennedy refused to rule out U.S. intervention. Possible United Nations action was to be pursued, and worldwide allies contacted for advice and help. Further deterioration of the Lao situation would likely require stationing troops on South Vietnamese and Thai soil. Therefore, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara was tasked to have his people begin contingency planning in the event that this action became necessary. ⁴¹

VIENTIANE EXODUS

During this period of major Pathet Lao and Neutralist movement south on Route-13, Washington and other official quarters alleged that the enemy might shift their focus toward population centers on the Mekong. Hostile and active enemy bands and agents already roamed various areas on the Vientiane Plain--some reportedly only three miles from the city. Incident reports of planes fired at and struck by small arms fire within the Wattay Airport traffic pattern became common talk. Terrified residents maintained a hair-trigger status. Therefore,

⁴¹ Joint Chiefs of Staff, 48.

Bill Leary April 1961 Notes, Ambassador Brown to Secretary Rusk, 04/26/61.

McGeorge Bundy, Memorandum of Meeting on Laos, 04/26/61.

it surprised no one when an Air America bus driver arrived at the USOM compound north of town at 0400 hours and began pounding on the helicopter pilots' front door. The Operations Manager in the vehicle indicated that from yet unsubstantiated reports, an attack on Vientiane by Kong Le forces appeared imminent. Consequently, they were needed at the airport to help evacuate people should that become necessary. He also stated that rumors circulated Pathet Lao teams had already infiltrated parts of the Vientiane complex, and if anyone attempted to stop them on the road to Wattay Airport, don't ask questions, just shoot to kill.

Kathy Moher, visiting her husband again, hurriedly packed as much of their clothing as possible, while Tom and Charlie Bade collected firearms. ⁴²

Before leaving for the airport, they knocked on the doors of the other five houses to inform their neighbors of the latest developments. They received no response, but closer examination revealed unlocked doors and open windows. Obviously, except for the Air America pilots, the compound was empty, USG personnel having previously evacuated. They discovered later that U.S. Operations Mission (USOM) personnel neighbors, alerted at 2400 hours, but without notifying them, had already departed for the airport where they currently stood by to depart Wattay. Charlie hopped in the front seat of the Volkswagon bus with a machine gun and other arms and ammunition, while Tom and Kathy entered the rear. Despite apprehension, after a short ride they arrived at the airport without incident.

The pilots climbed into their respective cockpits and warmed the engines against the possibility that they would soon launch for Udorn.

Despite the potential and serious nature of the situation, humor and local color still prevailed. Kathy Moher, standing nervously beside the helicopter, craned her neck and yelled up at Tom that she felt an urgent call of nature. Tom shouted over the noise of the roaring engine, "OK, OK, go to Operations building bathroom." However, she noted Operations was located 200 yards away at the end of the dark flight line, and was reluctant to leave her position unaccompanied. As an acceptable alternative, Tom yelled for her to go into the three-foot high elephant grass on the field perimeter directly behind the ship. Then,

⁴² JJ McCauley and Pat Sullivan had already relocated to Udorn by the 22nd.

swiveling and leaning out the cockpit window, he observed her shadowy figure unzipping her britches and squatting.

Next, he heard a loud noise as several excited soldiers popped up from the weeds. Apparently, she had unknowingly crouched over a concealed Lao soldier and directed a stream of urine full blast in his face, for he sprang up wiping his kisser. Panicked, Kathy leaped up with the soldier, but she was unable to move as her pants and panties hung around her ankles. As a flashlight played on the hapless girl, with the situation still unresolved, Charlie Bade yelled at her to drop down while he sighted his gun in her direction. The soldier, seeing the American pointing a weapon toward him, out of self-preservation instinctively threw an arm lock around her waist and held her firmly in front of him. Like a Conga line, the other soldiers lined up behind the two writhing figures and waved their arms shrieking for the round-eyes not to fire. Kathy joined the dancers, hopping back and forth screaming in Japanese, while trying to squirm free. The terrified and perplexed soldier clung to her so tightly that she was unable to raise her hanging drawers. While Tom and Charlie directed their guns at the mob of dancing fools, they realized that the unfolding scene was the most ludicrous event they had ever witnessed. It was too much. Unable to contain themselves any longer, Tom and Charlie broke into gales of laughter. Soon the soldiers, realizing that the threat had passed, also began laughing, and released Kathy. Adjusting her clothing to a more modest state, but still unsettled, she darted onto the ramp and began to berate and curse the pilots for their mirth at her expense. After the soldiers sheepishly filtered out of the grass and Kathy calmed a bit, Tom had them escort her to Operations.

Later in the afternoon, after events had quieted somewhat in the city, Kathy determined to return to a more peaceful life in Bangkok, so the couple went to the Operations desk and inquired about dependent evacuation. Clerks indicated they would have to first query the Customer as to a legitimate evacuation and determine who would pay for it. Tom was aware that the Customer, and all but a few dependents, had departed Vientiane three hours previously. He pointed this out to the Operations people, but, like the tail wagging the dog, they cited that previous problems precluded aircraft evacuation authorization without official orders and paperwork. However, Tom had an ace in the hole and it really was an exercise in futility, for the two remaining Wattay-based H-34s were slated to join the larger Udorn fleet soon anyway, and there was no better time than the present.

Before departing, Tom and Charlie resolved to conclude some unfinished business in

town. Noting that the houses abandoned in their compound were subject to wholesale thievery, the two decided to "liberate" appliances and furniture deemed useful. Not considered government employees under the existing contract, their decision stemmed partly from denial of Post Exchange (PX) and embassy commissary privileges. Until now, they were relegated to purchasing desired creature comforts on the local Vientiane market at outrageous sums, aware that household merchandise in the shops was originally stolen (or spirited away) from post exchange (PX) inventory, and sold on the local black market by Chinese wheeler-dealers. No, they would not lose any sleep over appropriating a few objects probably scheduled for swap for new items during the next fiscal year inventory. It was easy to rationalize that they might even be doing the USOM folks a favor.

"Borrowing" a truck, the duo departed for their compound. Systematically browsing through empty houses, they selected desirable objects. Using block and tackles, they loaded soft mattresses, refrigerators, stoves, and desks. During the process, Lao soldiers arrived with open trucks brimming with household goods. Apparently, they had also been pillaging compounds, this one being the last in line. After a short discussion, the pilots convinced the armed looters that the house belonged to them and to leave them alone. Then, completing their "business," they locked all doors for security, returned to the airport, loaded the helicopters with goods and people, and then, without local authorization, departed for Udon. Once there they redirected the purloined household goods to their Bangkok residences, replacing more costly rented appliances.⁴³

⁴³ Tom Moher Tapes.

Following years of RLA military training and substantial U.S. monetary support, it became glaringly apparent to all interested parties that in its present state the Lao Army would not fight the more determined enemy. With more men and ground and air assets than the enemy it was not a problem with a balance of power. The predicament involved the lack of will to fight for a cause that seemed hopeless, and something no one seemed to understand or care about. Additionally, there appeared no logical or attainable plan in place to counter or defeat the Pathet Lao, the Neutralists, and their extra-territorial Vietnamese masters by using only exposed RLA forces advancing along poorly maintained lines of communication (LOC). Stabilizing and turning the situation around required greater irregular guerrilla warfare efforts and tactics only deemed viable by indigenous hill tribes--mainly using the Meo clans of Xieng Khouang Province.

By April, while constantly expanding their area of operations in Laos, United States Army Special Forces personnel became involved in the Ban Padong operation. With additional Air America helicopters projected for high mountain operations around Padong, indeed already working there, their mission became a reality. Unlike Special Forces participation with the lowlanders in Vietnam, from the commencement of the Lao incursion, Pentagon planners envisioned American Field Training Teams eventually working with the fierce mountain people, whom they judged, if history proved to be an accurate indicator, would fight the communists. However, politics interceded and this aspiration only came to fruition after most Washington officials, totally disaffected with General Phoumi Nosavan's failed attempts to hold the enemy at bay and stem their flow southward, decided to initiate a different tact.

Since Phoumi and other Lao government officials traditionally did not trust Meo tribes, they were relegated to the bottom of the RLA logistics chain. To rectify this situation, and eager to prevent theft by corrupt Lao officials, USG bypassed normal delivery methods and directed additional military support diverted to Vang Pao's paramilitary forces from Takhli and other supply channels, including one from CIA stocks at Kadena, Okinawa.

With the introduction of supplementary Marine helicopters and increased emphasis on supporting Meo units following the promising beginning in the Kiou Cacham area, in taking the fight to the enemy, the Department of Defense considered the time ripe for deeper inroads



Meo families and part of a White Star Special Forces team relaxing on a hot day at Padong.
Clarke Collection.



A portion of the Padong training base and Meo residents.
Clarke Collection.

into the mountains.

Because Special Forces teams were projected to perform the same training tasks as the Thai PARU, Pentagon Army generals desired to assume complete control over the expanding Lao situation. For some time, intense wrangling and lobbying prevailed within the Defense and State Departments (including CIA) regarding the ultimate authority in the northeast region of Military Region Two. Apprehensive about language problems and potential security breaches derived from so many military channels, State preferred CIA's more clandestine participation. Additionally, from past experience, the Agency harbored the perception that if the U.S. military administered the Meo program, a general officer certainly would eventually command the operation that totally excluded State from the equation. Then, with unlimited military resources in the inventory, DOD would introduce an excess of military personnel resulting in an all-American show that would expose U.S. breaches of Lao neutrality to the entire world. Conversely, the Agency possessed few qualified people to run such an operation, and to achieve targeted goals had to ensure indigenous participation. For these reasons--plausible deniability, and, if politically necessary, a rapid disengagement from the theater--Meo Program Manager, Bill Lair, adamantly insisted on minimum American presence upcountry. ¹

By late March, highest-level command personnel in Washington resolved the controversy over utilizing White Star teams to help train Meo already staged at Padong. Special Forces staff, lobbying the Department of Defense, won approval to introduce one team commanded by Captain Bill Chance into Padong, and then to other fledging sites. Two members of this team, survivors of Team Moon, eventually arrived at the site. Despite their late entry into this eastern portion of Xieng Khouang Province, the men were familiar with Meo fighting abilities, as ongoing small-scale recruiting and training had already proved somewhat fruitful with hill tribes west of Sala Phou Khoun in the Kiou Cacham area.

Supplementing a task Thai PARU teams had already satisfactorily performed, White Star went to work training the Meo, ordering supplies, and, more than likely, monitoring Agency people. Despite protestations to the contrary, Agency Case Officers initially considered Special Forces soldiers inadequately trained or adapted for the demanding work required of

¹ Bill Young Interview at the Royal Hotel in Chiang Mai, Thailand.
Bill Lair Interview, 11/06/95.



Meo people observing a helicopter operation from a vantage point above the Padong runway.

Babitz Collection.

them at Padong. A couple of reasons for this were obvious to Bill Young. Born and raised in Southeast Asia, Young conversed fluently in several languages, whereas White Star members required interpreters to function. The Army team also demanded daily airdrops and costly helicopter supply missions consisting of ice, beer, steaks, and kerosene to run the refrigerators and other unnecessary creature comforts. In contrast, the PARU only required one supply drop per week of live chickens, rice, and Thai food. Despite these more obvious detriments, Young grudgingly admitted that White Star positively assisted the program. ²

By early April, soon after Vang Pao's unsuccessful mission to interdict and sever a portion of Route-4, the enemy, perceiving further hit and run operations from the fledging Meo army, began movement toward Padong. After installing 75mm pack howitzers on nearby hills, they began shelling the stronghold. ³ Counter fire from the defenders' heavy 4.2mm mortars (called four-deuce) thwarted Pathet Lao attacks, which did not resume in earnest until May.

Because of the enemy presence on northern ridgelines, and depending on weather conditions, entry via the Paksane salient by hugging the south side of the valley, or flight directly from Vientiane, became the accepted route into the area for helicopter crews. Consequently, most helicopter crews considered a Padong assignment unsavory, and the most challenging and dangerous place to work in Laos. ⁴

TRAINING CHALLENGES

Not all pilots considered mountain flying and navigating trouble-free. Peers judged former Marine officer and permanent hire, Dan Gardner, particularly deficient. Originally stationed at Brigade Hawaii HMR-161's squadron, Gardner piloted HRS helicopters (H-19). Consequently, he lacked H-34 training, proficiency, and experience. For this reason, management allowed him additional flight time in a second pilot role while transitioning to the H-34. Selected as one of his instructors, Malcolm Bird flew several times with Gardner.

To help instill additional confidence and familiarity flying in the mountains, Bird planned Gardner's last flight prior to upgrading to Captain around the Paksane/Padong area. Arriving early at Paksane Town, the Customer scheduled troop lifts into the hills southeast

² Bill Young Interview.

³ Sannikone 101.

⁴ JJ McCauley Letter, 01/28/91.

Thai PARU establishing and supervising the installation of a crew-served 4.2 inch mortar tube next to a cornfield.

Clarke Collection.

of Padong. Gardner's performance that day appalled Bird. Because of what Bird perceived as poor aptitude, and an even worse attitude, during twelve shuttles to an identical site, Gardner failed to navigate and locate the landing zone twelve times. It appeared that the casual Gardner simply did not care. During the entire period, he kept his "head up and retracted," constantly flying wrong headings and incorrect time distances.

Upon return to Udorn that evening, Abadie handed Bird paperwork to complete Gardner's upgrading. At the thought of the deficient man being released to fly by himself, Bird began to laugh. After regaining a modicum of composure, he related Gardner's poor performance that day. With a straight face, Abadie sarcastically inquired, "*Then, you are telling me he requires another flight or two before upgrading?*" The discussion ceased when Bird declared that, in his opinion, Gardner would always require a keeper. He did not fly with Gardner again, and someone else, perhaps Jack McCauley, eventually signed him off as PIC. At least near term, it proved to be a poor decision, for in future months Gardner displayed weird tendencies that concerned most crewmembers.

Bird also helped train Patrick Grady Sullivan, still relegated to a copilot status because of his lack of H-34 experience, proficiency, and slow transition progress. Bird worked frequently with Sullivan, and believed that he knew him somewhat better than any other pilot in the organization. During many conversations, he discovered information leading him to believe that Sullivan had crashed in nearly every aircraft type he ever flew: First a single-engine SNJ plane during Pensacola training, then an F-9 jet. After assignment to Glencoe, Illinois, while in the status of copilot, he participated in the U.S. Navy's final blimp accident. Afterward, while assigned to helicopter training--the erroneous theory being that anyone can fly helicopters--he misjudged an autorotation and pranged a tandem rotor HUP.

Neither additional training, nor upgrading, progressed quickly or particularly well with Sullivan. Despite Bird's efforts, Sullivan's lack of helicopter proficiency, and severe monsoon weather in the Padong area, severely limited the stick time normally afforded trainees. It became perfectly clear to Bird that his charge encountered problems understanding the vagaries of high altitude, humidity, and low visibility flying in the mountains. Bird found it easy to feel sorry for the affable man, but judged him not the type of pilot to ever perform to acceptable standards in the harsh Lao environment. ⁵

⁵ Malcomb Bird Emails, 06/22/02, 07/06/02.

Without satisfactory progress, and with numerous pilot complaints that he could not adequately handle the job, CJ Abadie, who never intended to keep Sullivan in the first place, delayed upgrading him, and continuously recommended that headquarters Taipei terminate the man. After apprising Rousselot of the pilot's unusually slow improvement, the chief pilot received a memorandum dated 25 May instructing him to do everything possible for Sullivan. Using Marine Corps parlance, Rousselot added that Air America pilots must cut the mustard to stay aboard, but, as a senior manager, Abadie must prescribe moral constraints, being as considerate as possible in each individual case. In closing, he hoped that Sullivan would continue favorable development. Reading between the lines, Abadie realized that Rousselot wanted the man retained.

Sullivan, under pressure to perform, and well aware of his downhill struggle to survive, in defense twixed the Vice President of Operations (VPO) that he had never received adequate H-34 ground training. Furthermore, no one had ever provided him proper reading material or H-34 NATOPS manuals. His message contained a true statement, but failed to reveal the rest of the story. The majority of pilots, especially permanent ones, already possessed extensive H-34 training and experience before consideration and hiring. Additionally, without sufficient time or available facilities, local management failed to regard formal ground training a high priority for the hurriedly conceived field operation. However, the point Sullivan conveyed in his message to Taipei--at least for the time being--saved his bacon. ⁶

Including Bird's and other instructor pilot (IP) efforts, which far exceeded the norm for transitioning pilots, management provided Sullivan with about fifty additional flight hours. When queried, Bird indicated a reluctance to endorse Sullivan for upgrading, but Abadie, citing pressure from above to either put him to work or terminate the man, insisted on an immediate decision. Thus, against his better judgment, Bird certified Sullivan, but entered a poorly disguised disclaimer in the remarks section that read, "*The standard for certification having previously been established with the elevation of Dan Gardner to Captain, Patrick Sullivan satisfies that standard of performance.*" Afterward he counseled Abadie to only schedule Sullivan for work in the low country until he gained more single

⁶ Robert Rousselot, 05/25/61 Memorandum, Abadie.

pilot experience. As luck would have it, at first Sullivan appeared to perform satisfactorily.⁷

One story from the field tends to illustrate that Sullivan had the talent, but perhaps not the mental attitude to perform as a pilot in command. It was rare for Ron Clarke to fly with another pilot, but he did fly as Co-pilot three or more times. One of these "stick buddy" days was with Pat Sullivan, and it was likely that Ron was along in the role of a safety pilot. They were flying northwest of Vang Vieng when an anxious radio call from a Customer indicated that a site containing a sizeable ammunition dump was about to be overrun, and they were needed to haul as much ammo as possible to another position before the enemy arrived. Clarke attempted to contact other crews to help, but no joy.⁸

At the site the aircraft was loaded with ammunition--the cache was eight feet tall, ten feet wide and fifteen feet long--which they ferried to a small outpost generally only large enough to accommodate one helicopter. On the third trip to the original site, Sullivan was about to touch down when a wisp of smoke was observed rising from the ammunition pile. Realizing the danger, he immediately rocked over and added full power to vacate the area before an explosion occurred. As he began to accelerate, Clarke yelled over the ICS to "kick the tail to the pile." Having been qualified in nuclear torpedo dropping, Clarke believed that a narrow tail profile would sustain a shock wave more effectively than the large side of the helicopter. Sullivan complied. As explosions commenced, they remained low, barely clearing a row of trees not far from the ammunition pile.

Following the excitement, then quite low on fuel, they returned to the outpost. After several radio attempts in the blind requesting a drum of fuel, another pilot answered.

The fuel arrived a short time later. However, with only one cleared spot already occupied, the pilot selected a small knoll fifty yards from the outpost. A small tree grew off to the side. Sullivan and Clarke watched with interest as the pilot approached and began a deceleration to reduce ground speed. Then as the PIC leveled to land, the onlookers could see the tree getting shorter.

After shutdown, inspection revealed damaged blade caps. Because all blade tip weights were still intact, the machine was determined safe to ferry to Udorn. The drum of fuel was

⁷ Malcomb Bird Email, 06/22/02.

⁸ No Joy: A Navy/Marine term, in this case, indicating no radio contact was achieved.

rolled to Clark's ship and pumped into the forward tank. Both helicopters were cranked up for departure and, with the second ship whistling loudly from the damaged blade tips and loss of the engineer-designed aerodynamic taper, the ferry flights to home plate were uneventful.⁹

THE SAGA OF "DANGEROUS DAN"

About the time permanent hires started arriving in Udorn to replace the temporary employees in July/August, Bird occasionally worked in the Chief Pilot Office assisting JJ McCauley while CJ Abadie journeyed to Bangkok for a meeting or a few days' rest. During this period, Gardner was scheduled to work at Thakhet. Lacking proper maps and with few reliable navigation aids available, but a small area to work, pilots judged Thakhet one of the more benign places to fly. Many described flying there a piece of cake. Navigation to the site was easy. One simply flew east from Udorn until reaching the Mekong River. If off course, and the riverbank consisted of mud, one turned south, and north if rock. Thakhet lay at the center point of this geological transition.

Although not flying long as PIC, Gardner had already displayed curious and abnormal tendencies that caused many peers to scratch their heads, and which eventually became the grist for many stories. After crewing with him for only one day, most Flight Mechanics refused to fly again with the seemingly fearless and dangerous pilot. Justifying their position, they cited that when so motivated, after locking down throttle and collective lever, he sometimes descended into the cabin section for a change of venue. Then, with the cockpit empty, he lounged, obtained a drink, or relieved himself out the cabin door. During another occasion, a Flight Mechanic, noticing the aircraft slowly ascending, looked up at the altimeter. It read 9,000 feet. Curious, the mechanic climbed into the left seat and discovered the pilot fast asleep. Word of his antics quickly spread and amazed all crewmembers, for no one ever heard of a Marine pilot performing such crazy acts.

Carl Diggs, a former U.S Army noncommissioned officer (NCO) and an older, more experienced Flight Mechanic, described by many as knowledgeable and reserved, did not object to flying with Gardner.¹⁰ One particular day, Diggs, departing from his customary alertness, opted to nap during the hour-long flight, for he had been up late the previous night

⁹ Ron Clarke Emails, 06/03/15, 07/16/15.

¹⁰ Burt Palmer Email.

performing maintenance tasks. To relieve the boredom of long flights, Gardner often read paperback novels. Following take off, he established a general easterly heading, trimmed the H-34 to cruise configuration, activated the stabilization equipment button (ASE), and, after reading awhile, kicked back with his more important task: a nap. As on other flights, he invariably dozed and sailed far beyond his destination. However, this time when he awoke, low clouds cloaked everything as far as he could see. Trying to establish a fix, he flew for an extended time before landing on a mountain top that fortuitously protruded through the clouds. Assuming that the marginal conditions would soon dissipate, he continued to run the engine until low on fuel. Then he retarded the mixture lever to idle cut-off and secured the aircraft.

Within a few hours, Udorn operations received a radio inquiry demanding an explanation as to why the scheduled helicopter never arrived at Thakhet. As per Standard Operating Procedures (SOP), following unproductive radio calls, a physical search commenced with a pair of H-34 crews flying search patterns between Udorn and Thakhet. Radio operators also alerted fixed wing pilots transiting the Military Region Three area to be alert for the missing aircraft. Without a positive sighting, an expanding search intensified the next day, which carried over into the following day. Finally, a C-45 Beechcraft pilot reported what appeared to be a helicopter perched on a hill overlooking jungle trails--later generically called the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Aware that the distance Gardner covered might entail a need for fuel, McCauley loaded two fifty-five-gallon drums of fuel, and the two rescue teams launched from Thakhet. With a minimum of effort or further incident, they recovered Gardner, Diggs, and the H-34.

During the ensuing Udorn debriefing, Bird asked Gardner why he had failed to employ his high frequency (HF) or ultra-high frequency (UHF) radios and attempt to inform someone of his plight. Gardner responded curiously that he chose not to deplete electrical power stored in the lead-acid battery. The reply to the next question puzzled Bird even more. If concerned about his battery, why hadn't he employed the auxiliary power unit (APU) to produce electricity? He replied that the noisy unit's chugging might alert the bad guys to his position. When enlightened that other aircraft observed his exposed helicopter for miles in all directions, he provided no convincing answer. The incident continued a mystery to interested parties. They questioned how any pilot, even one engrossed in reading, could fail to observe the Mekong River at flood stage. Also, with the elapsed flying time from the Udorn

base far in excess of that required, why did the man choose to continue east, while never once looking west to observe if he might have passed the river? The issue and revelations would have further confounded listeners and astounded Bird even more had he not served as one of Gardner's instructors during his protracted H-34 transition.

Carl Diggs seemed relieved to be home safely. When pressured for his version of the incident, he reluctantly stated, "*I ain't never gonna fly with dat crazy man no mo.*" However, Diggs's duties included that of Chief Flight Mechanic. Therefore, after digesting his statement, he relented and actually flew a majority of the scheduled flights with Gardner to spare other Flight Mechanics possible harm from the erratic antics of the dangerous and unpredictable pilot. ¹¹

¹¹ Segment Sources:

Mike Marshall Email, 09/11/99.

EW Knight Emails, 05/17/00, 05/19/00, 06/01/00.

Malcolm Bird Emails, 06/22/02.

Burt Palmer Reply to 07/07/02 questions.

Burt Palmer *Air America* Detail 4.

During the final week in April, Ambassador Brown cautioned his Washington superiors of a possible Armageddon in Laos unless drastic action was soon taken by USG. With the Lao crisis approaching levels never previously seen, Washington meetings begat acrimonious confrontations in which top administration policymakers, Lao Task Force advisors, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff hashed over and reviewed old pros and cons regarding introduction of military forces into Laos or Thailand. ¹

As usual, ardent opposing views proliferated concerning the proposed options. Military hawks like Admiral Arleigh Burke opted for intervention. Even Averell Harriman, whom President Kennedy appointed Ambassador at Large to direct the U.S Geneva negotiating team, believed that a small show of force in Thailand would greatly strengthen USG's negotiating position. However, members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, severely burned during the recent restrictive Korean War policy, and believing a conventional war impossible to win in Southeast Asia, wanted no part in a limited action unless authorized to use all assets contained in the military arsenal. This list included nuclear weapons. Other measures suggested attacking China and using Takhli-based B-26s to prep pre-landing operations. The Secretary of Defense also opted for a supporting nuclear option should troops be required. Moreover, he advised that timing was essential during the worsening situation.

When asked his opinion at a meeting with President Kennedy, General MacArthur, still bitter following the United Nations and United States no win stance demonstrated during the Korean War, cautioned the president not to commit Americans to a ground fight in Laos. ²

Despite the April meetings concluding without a firm agreement on a specific course of military action, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, anticipating the worst, cabled CINCPAC to prepare contingency plans to move brigade size forces of 5000 U.S. combat troops into Udorn, and an identical number into Da Nang, Vietnam, along with supporting units and air assets. Although

¹ A separate meeting with congressional leaders on 27 April revealed almost unanimous objections to deploying U.S forces into Laos.

² Joint Chiefs of Staff, 48.
President's Secretary Evelyn Lincoln's record of 28 April meeting between MacArthur and Kennedy.

decisions to implement troop deployments or SEATO Plan 5/60--calculated to move major units into Laos--were not yet firm, the Joint Chiefs of Staff expected implementation of the Thai portion to be revealed on the first. Other preemptive measures had taken place on the 26th when the Joint Chiefs of Staff alerted CINCPAC to prepare airstrike missions against North Vietnam and southern China. ³

Docked in Subic Bay after a month at sea, the Amphibious Ready Group once again received orders to sail for the Gulf of Siam. Concurrently, as a show of force, additional elements of the Seventh Fleet deployed toward the Indochina Theater. ⁴

The next day, recognizing President Kennedy's reluctance to go to war over the Lao situation, Secretary of State Dean Rusk sent his boss a memorandum outlining two viable solutions for the Lao problem. The first dealt with procedures to follow if the communists agreed to a ceasefire by 2 May. The second, presupposing no ceasefire, advised that Laos, supported by the U.S. and Britain, should take its case to the United Nations, and the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization should implement SEATO Plan 5, ⁵ or deploy a SEATO force into Thailand, which could move into Laos if considered necessary. ⁶

Supporting a case for U.S. military intervention in Laos to SEATO, world opinion, or an international conference on Laos, would be immeasurably smoother if firm evidence of Viet Minh Army participation in attacks on RLG positions could be verified. However, despite RLG allegations of several Viet Minh units operating in the country, no independent confirmation was forthcoming or positively confirmed. Naturally, North Vietnam leaders were silent on the subject.

MAAG Laos was positive about commie presence:

³ Pentagon Papers Gravel Edition, *The Kennedy Commitments and Programs, 1961*, the Laos Annex (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971).

Marek Thee, 363-364.

Arthur Schlesinger, 283-284.

⁴ Edward Marolda, 69.

⁵ Occupy a defense line along the Mekong River without taking offensive action.

⁶ U.S., Congress, Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, *The U.S Government and the Vietnam War* Ibid, Cease-Fire in Laos; (<http://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/pentagon/congress1.htm> originally dl), 7/31/02.

"Viet Minh technicians, weapons crews, and advisors accompanied Pathet Lao forward elements [in battle]."

They also were certain that Viet Minh units were present in rear areas around Sam Neua and Xieng Khouang Provinces to instill *"PL morale and consolidate control."* But because of the difference in tactics, there did not appear to be regular Vietminh Army units leading attacks.⁷

INCOUNTRY SITUATION

While the hottest month of the year slowly waned in favor of the impending rainy season, military events steadily intensified toward a bottomless pit leading to war. Communist land grabs increased. Important government sites north and northwest of Luang Prabang in Military Region One, at Nam Bac, Moug Sai, and Ban Nam Mo, changed hands.

In Military Region Three, South Vietnamese teams had been conducting reconnaissance missions in the Tchepone area since the first of May, and had reported more than three battalions of enemy troops pressuring FAL outposts. As pressure escalated, the crossroads village of Tchepone was lost in early May. This was particularly alarming, for if enemy units captured the entire highway--the Ho Chi Minh Trail--to South Vietnam before implementation of a ceasefire, then the door to South Vietnam's Northern provinces would be open to guerrilla operations.⁸

More alarming, only twenty-five miles north of Vientiane, Ban Keun, a small town located on the east bank of the Nam Ngum just short of the northern foothills, temporarily fell under enemy influence. Maintaining pressure on his superiors to effect something--even if it was wrong--MAAG Commanding Officer General Boyle cabled dire warnings to CINCPAC leaders regarding the Lao Kingdom's future. With enemy troops attacking in force throughout the country, apparently intent on gobbling up as much territory as possible before a potential ceasefire, Ambassador Brown strongly requested that SEATO countries intervene, supplemented by coordinated B-26 airstrikes. Military leaders failed to sanction the requests, but on the 26th the Joint Chiefs of Staff alerted U.S. Pacific Command (CINCPAC) to

⁷ Joint Chiefs of Staff, 73.

⁸ JCS, 72

prepare for possible air strikes against North Vietnam and southern China. ⁹

The Royal Lao Government's hold on Laos continued precarious. As Co-Chairmen of the Geneva Conference on Indochina, the governments of the Soviet Union and Great Britain had since December, and as recently as 24 April, attempted to reconvene a Geneva conference on Laos that had been initiated in 1954. Through the auspices of India's Prime Minister Nehru, they also attempted to reestablish the inspection watchdog International Commission for Supervision and Control (ICSC or ICC) when and if a ceasefire actually became effective. The International Control Commission (ICC), composed of Polish, Canadian, and Indian representatives, formed the Geneva Accord entity established to ensure that all parties in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos adhered to the original 1954 ceasefire. However, with virtually no power to enforce its mandate, and ineffective in commission of its duties, by 1959 the Lao Prime Minister dissolved the ICC. ¹⁰

After U.S. prodding, the RLG issued a statement declaring:

"The Chief of the General Staff of the National Army was ready to make contact at any time with the responsible chief of opposing forces to come to agreement on the day and hour of an effective ceasefire."

Since Pathet Lao rebels still professed allegiance to the King, the RLG considered Luang Prabang a suitable place for a meeting on the 28th. However, Kong Le demanded, and Souvanna Phouma concurred, that negotiations would be impossible unless Phoumi or the RLG representative travelled to Xieng Khouang. A counter-proposal by the British *"for military representatives to meet under a flag of truce at a specified point where opposing forces were in actual contact"* proposed a meeting at a predetermined location on Route-13 just north of Ban Vang Khi, a point almost equidistant between Vang Vieng and Ban Hin Heup. ¹¹

⁹ Oudone Sananikone, 83
JCS, 49.
Edward Marolda, 73.

¹⁰ Joint Chiefs of Staff, 45.
Ogden Meeker, 110, 111.

¹¹ JCS, 46, 47, 52, 53, 58.

By month's end, broadcasting over Pathet Lao radio, Kong Le appealed for ceasefire discussions to begin at Ban Namone on 1 May. Despite pressure from Ambassador Brown, Phoumi, reluctant to meet within enemy lines, proposed a more neutral point on Route-13 between opposing forces.¹²

At the time of the May ceasefire and the reconvening of the fourteen-nation Geneva Conference, the combined Souphanouvong-Pathet Lao and Souvanna Phouma-Kong Le forces dominated the Lao military situation. With General Phoumi's army largely disorganized and demoralized, had enemy units chosen to continue their successful offensives, they likely could have rolled up most important river towns along the Mekong River. Therefore, there was little else for the Western powers to hope for but an immediate ceasefire.

Despite the grim scenario facing the RLG, communist leaders in North Vietnam, China, and the Soviet Union elected to accept a ceasefire and international negotiations. This decision probably resulted from concern about late April U.S. military preparations to intervene in Laos, and resulting in a nasty confrontation the communist powers did not wish to pursue. Occupying most of north, central, and substantial parts of southern Laos, the communists could negotiate from a very strong position and, in the case of no resolution, were well situated to continue offensives. In parts of Laos not already controlled, they could gain concessions and negotiate a favorable agreement whereby they could eventually achieve political success in the RLG.¹³

On 1 May, American military leaders modified their opposing stance on Laos and collectively agreed that unless parties implemented an immediate ceasefire, the U.S. must threaten military action. On the same day, toward the heralded eleventh-hour, the U.S. postponed and then cancelled the Seventh Fleet alert when communist elements officially sanctioned a Lao ceasefire and it became clearly evident that the Geneva Conference would resume. The communists' decision relieved Kennedy from a politically unwelcome choice of committing troops into Laos.

¹² JCS, 61.

¹³ Special National Intelligence Estimate, SNIE 58-3-61, The Situation and Short-Run Outlook in Laos, 09/28/61.

Possibly tipping the scale in favor of a bilateral ceasefire, Royal Princes Souvanna Phouma and Souvannouphong, the respective leaders of Neutralist and Pathet Lao governments located on the Plain of Jars, journeyed to communist nations for consultation in April.¹⁴ At each country visited, Souvanna issued statements that gave the impression of being more leftist than neutral. In China the half-brothers met Premier Chou-En-lai, and later Mao Tse-tung. During discussions, Souvanna unwisely agreed to accepting "foreign aid," to include substantial road construction in Military Region One, a project which would emerge to haunt him in later years. During the two-faction junket, a conciliatory Souvanna Phouma visited the Soviet Union and Nikita Khrushchev, who at the time probably possessed the greatest influence of the communist powers to reach an agreement on the Lao problem with the West. Souvanna ended his good-will visits in North Vietnam, consulting with President Ho Chi Minh and other high-ranking officials regarding their country's future. It was not his first trip to Hanoi. During December 1961, Souvanna Phouma, the leader of the neutralist government in exile, had signed a series of agreements regarding aid, trade, improvements to border crossings, and North Vietnamese access to logistical arteries through eastern Laos to South Vietnam. Apropos at the time, these agreements would also present serious difficulties for Souvanna, Laos, and the West in later years.

These concessions, plus the enemy's virtually effortless victories, acting from a position of strength and tipping the military balance of power, and controlling most of northern Laos, the pendulum swung toward accepting a ceasefire. For the commies, with very little to lose and everything to gain, the arrangement provided to them an uncomplicated option. For now, North Vietnamese leaders, primarily interested in the reunification of Vietnam, believed that Laos could await a predictable endgame.¹⁵

¹⁴ There were three separate and different governments in effect in the kingdom at the time.

¹⁵ Arthur Dommen, *Conflict* 230, 356.



Approximate 1961 de facto ceasefire line dividing Laos. The initial negotiation talks were at Ban Hin Heup on the Lik River near Route-13.

A report from the Vientiane U.S. Embassy on 2 May stated that:

*"Contact with enemy forces had been made near Vang Khi and a ceasefire was now in effect in the Vang Khi-Vang Vieng area...The PL officer was to arrange for talks to work out a nation-wide ceasefire."*¹⁶

During the early morning of 3 May, in what would constitute a change from an active shooting war beginning from his August 1960 coup, Kong Le broadcast an order for his troops to cease all hostilities. He also appealed to the other two opponents to terminate their warlike actions and send representatives to Ban Namone to discuss a coalition government formation, the selection of Geneva Conference representatives, and a lasting solution to the Lao problem. At Premier Boun Oum's bidding, Phoumi similarly issued orders for his troops to terminate all countrywide fighting.¹⁷ Hence, producing a Western transition from a military to a political solution in Laos, governments issued de facto ceasefire orders to all factions, and JFK deferred sending troops to Laos. However, in accordance to those ten-percenters who never got the word, on the same day, news of the ceasefire failed to preclude PL attacks in the field and the last-minute capture of Moung Phalane on Route-9 in Savannakhet Province.¹⁸

BAN HIN HEUP

The three-faction peace talks and negotiations concerning Lao's future took place over a period of five months at two sites adjacent to Route-13. Planning to talk about talks, they tentatively began on 5 May a little north of Ban Hine Heup.

Before discussions commenced, preparations included flights by Don Babitz to government positions at Ban Sen Sum, Ban Keun, and the Mako landing zone to coordinate with Army commanders and local officials. On the second, he attempted to land at Ban Hin Heup, but found the site horizontally obscured in fog. However, at his passenger's insistence that they must land to discuss last minute details with local leaders, and with only limited vertical

¹⁶ Joint Chiefs of Staff, 64.

¹⁷ Joint Chiefs of Staff, 66.

¹⁸ Oudone Sananikone, 84.

visibility, he managed to "screw his way to the ground in a very unique approach that literally dispersed fog the last hundred feet." ¹⁹

A casualty of war, now largely overgrown by the jungle, portions of the shell shocked, abandoned village spread over both sides of the east-flowing Nam Lik near a rocky entrance leading to a five-mile divide that spilled into the larger Nam Ngum on the Vientiane Plain.

The area, for many years deemed a strategic location for the defense of Vientiane, had since the fall of Vang Vieng represented a stabilized front line separating the bad and good guys. Prior to hostilities, the site, located sixty miles from Vientiane and a hundred miles from Luang Prabang, had served as a waypoint to replenish fuel and supplies before continuing a trip in either direction. ²⁰

On the morning of the planned talks, two Air America H-34 crews staged at Wattay Airport and commenced loading mixed civilian and military representatives from Prince Boun Oum's government. A host of international correspondents, intent on sniffing out details of the negotiations, also boarded. Don Babitz, piloting Hotel Bravo, flew these personnel forty-three miles north to the site's south bank. After depositing his passengers, he departed for Don Kho and then Vientiane. For the remainder of the day, he shuttled people to and from Hin Heup and other sites within the immediate area. ²¹

After departing the helicopters, the six RLG envoys left the media people on the south bank, and engaged a boat to cross the swift flowing Lik River, where a military bridge built during the French colonial era once stood. The laborious movement to the enemy side required

¹⁹ Don Babitz May 1961 Flight Records.
Don Babitz Email, 7/21/04.

²⁰ Oudone Sananikone, 84.

²¹ Don Babitz May Flight Records.



A static Soviet MI-4 Hound helicopter, one of the leftist faction's mode of transportation to and from the peace talks.

Knight Collection.



Destroyed French bridge at the Nam Lik river crossing. A rude, damaged empty fifty-five-gallon drum pontoon foot bridge floats in front of the main bridge.

Babitz Collection.



A broader view of the destroyed bridge over the Nam Lik at Ban Hin Heup leading to a government camp. A smaller pontoon bridge had been erected to a hamlet upriver from the downed structure.

Clarke Collection.

considerable time, and first meetings rarely ended before late afternoon. ²²

According to a MAAG report to CINCPAC, "an FAL ceasefire committee had met with a Pathet Lao ceasefire 'sub-committee.' The meeting had been inconclusive because the PL committee had lacked 'power to talk terms.'" ²³ Besides agreeing to disagree regarding almost everything, early posturing over a truly neutral location for serious talks consumed the parties on the second day. Incredulously, at one point opposing sides proposed rebuilding the destroyed bridge and holding discussions midway across the bridge. ²⁴ However, observers detected some progress in the fact that "the PL had been represented by qualified officers for the first time." ²⁵

On the same day, President Kennedy met with his advisors for continued discussions concerning the Lao and Vietnam situation. Pessimism generally prevailed and most attendees doubted the West would gain anything tangible from the ceasefire or formation of a coalition government.

Representatives held another meeting at Hin Heup on 8 May. Once again, no agreement was forthcoming over a negotiating site. Like the dog chasing its tail in a circle, Lao government representatives agreed on Ban Namone for military deliberations if the Pathet Lao would come to Ban Hin Heup for political discussions. Unacceptable to FAL because the site was inside enemy territory, the PL still desired that all talks be conducted at Ban Namone. ²⁶

After initial bilateral fencing at Ban Hin Heup over the thorny neutrality question, and the advent of seasonal rains causing seventeen air miles north to Ban Namone. Although located only a few miles southeast of Vang Vieng, the Lao village of seventy wooden stilt houses surrounded by small rice paddies appeared more suitable. At first Lao government officials hesitated, harboring concern about delegates' safety venturing so far into enemy territory. Apprehension soon dissipated among the Vientiane group when part of the resurrected International Control Commission for Supervision and Control in Laos (ICC),

²² Oudone Sananikone, 85.

²³ Joint Chiefs of Staff, 70.

²⁴ EW Knight Email, 05/20/02.

²⁵ Joint Chiefs of Staff, 70.

²⁶ JCS, 75.

comprised of Indians, Poles and Canadians, returned to Vientiane on 8 May. Within three days, after contacting principal factions, they concluded that the ceasefire was holding. To allay the RLG delegates' fears, and to guarantee their safety, ICC members requested to accompany them to the new site at Ban Namone on Saturday the 13th. ²⁷

Since an oral ceasefire had been declared, over several days, Pacific Fleet commanders "*gradually relaxed the high state of operational readiness.*" While still maintaining a twelve-hour alert status, ships scattered for Subic Bay and Okinawa. ²⁸

Despite his positive interest and stance on successful Lao negotiations, on the 15th President Kennedy approved intelligence and harassment missions by South Vietnamese units into southeastern Laos, and, if necessary, the use of U.S. advisors in attacks on the North Vietnamese supply center at Tchepone, Laos.

BAN NAMONE

Finally deemed a satisfactory arrangement for all parties involved, high-level ceasefire talks continued at the Ban Namone site into September.

Contrasting with the previous reception at Hin Heup, this time Pathet Lao and neutralist delegates met RLG representatives at the helicopter, amid the multitude of flag waving villagers. Emulating Asian politics where the core of any negotiation assumes a circuitous route before resolution, polite greetings, lengthy speeches, procedural discussions, and other mundane matters punctuated initial gatherings. Having interacted over the years in matters relating to government or war, principals from all sides knew each other very well. ²⁹ Hence, during the protracted meetings, in spite of disagreements and wrangling, the factions generally negotiated well enough to eventually recommend plans for establishing a new coalition government, a National Assembly, and election schedules.

After the initial meeting, Ambassador Brown reported that parties agreed to continue "political and military discussions" at Ban Namone. The delegates, choosing to completely ignore the Padong area issue, stated that there was a countrywide ceasefire in place, and all

²⁷ JCS, 87, 88.

²⁸ Edward Marolda, 74

²⁹ Oudone Sananikone, 92.

parties agreed to reiterate ceasefire orders to their combat units. ³⁰

With a prerequisite Lao ceasefire apparently in place and talks ongoing at Ban Namone, on 16 May, the fourteen-nation Geneva Conference convened on the Lao neutrality issue and continued in session until "final" resolution on 23 July 1962. Participants included: the Union of Burma, Kingdom of Cambodia, Canada, People's Republic of China, Democratic Republic of Viet Nam, Republic of France, Republic of India, Kingdom of Laos, Polish People's Republic, Republic of Viet Nam, Kingdom of Thailand, Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and the United States of America.

Subsequent Ban Namone meetings in May focused on the question of a coalition government consisting of Rightists, Neutralists, Leftists, and "a *tri-partite Lao military commission to aid the ICC in the regulation of the ceasefire.*" Meanwhile, continued fighting in the Padong area stimulated accusations of ceasefire violations by both parties. The Boun Oum Government vigorously complained about Pathet Lao attacks. In turn PL leaders disputed the air supply of Padong by planes and helicopters. Despite statements made to the ICC, the PL insisted that actions taken by their troops were merely in self-defense, or in response to the other side's aggressive actions. Despite plans to visit the contested area, the ICC never investigated the claims. Nevertheless, Ban Namone talks continued. ³¹

Continued hostilities in Xieng Khouang Province and the June loss of Padong stymied talks for a time, but failed to impede progress toward a political and military solution to the Lao conundrum.

By early June, it appeared as if the way had been cleared for tangible progress when, during a two-day Kennedy-Khrushchev dialogue in Vienna, both superpower leaders echoed thoughts on the ceasefire and "*reaffirmation of their support of a neutral and independent Laos.*" ³² By the second week, Princes Souvanna Phouma and Souphanouvong addressed members of the Geneva Conference setting forth their ideas and policies relating to their political and ideological persuasion, most of it negative relating to that of the RLG. ³³ Despite doubts about a positive outcome in several diplomatic quarters, following the four-day meeting in

³⁰ Joint Chiefs of Staff, 92.

³¹ Joint Chiefs of Staff, 106, 110, 120.

³² JCS, 7, 8.

³³ JCS, 26, 27.



Boxes of "Hard Rice" (munitions) being loaded onto a helicopter at the Padong site by both male and female Meo to supply an outlying outpost. Fuel drums containing 115/145 aviation fuel are evident to keep thirsty R-1820 engines ticking.

Babitz Collection.

Zurich, and after attempts to influence Souvanna, the three Lao Princes hammered out an agreement that closely mirrored an eventual Conference declaration.³⁴ In a joint communiqué, they reinforced the idea of neutralization and independence of Laos, and the principal of reestablishing a "provisional government of National Union (i.e. a coalition government) formed by direct designation and appointment by the King. Other items mentioned included implementation of the ceasefire and unification of the armies into a single national force."³⁵ Phoumi initially seemed satisfied with the statements emanating from the meeting, especially deference to the King's authority.³⁶ However, despite the USG sea change in policy toward neutrality and subsequent American pressure to cooperate in accepting Souvanna as the Prime Minister, hard liner General Nosavan ranted in opposition to any perceived capitulation and communist encroachment within the government. In July, the neutralist representative presented stipulations to prevent military advances past positions controlled by adversaries during the ceasefire announcement. Extremely detrimental to the Meo effort and CIA support in Military Region Two, the proposed regulations would:

*"Forbid troop concentrations near the stabilized front; ground military aircraft and prevent all aerial intrusions into territory held by the opposing faction; forbid the movement of guerrillas, weapons, and supplies across the front..."*³⁷

³⁴ JCS, 40.

³⁵ Joint Chiefs of Staff, 45.

³⁶ JCS, 47.

³⁷ JCS, 76, 77.



Royal Lao Government and leftist representatives greet each other after being delivered to the Ban Namone peace talks. A Western photographer accompanied the group to record the meeting.
Clarke Collection.



Wearing a bush hat manufactured from parachute panels, John Combs photographs Hotel November and faction representatives from the RLG, RLA (red berets) and Pathet Lao (barracks caps). International Control Commission (ICC) members (British, Indian, and Polish) and men from other nations are in the group to monitor the peace talks.

Clarke Collection.



A Pathet Lao delegate watches as an Air America pilot decelerates for landing in an overgrown rice paddy near Ban Namone to discharge passengers attending the peace negotiations.

Clarke Collection.



The Royal Lao Air Force had one French Allouette helicopter assigned to deliver dignitaries.
Clarke Collection.

Over the next month, the RLG countered by introducing measures to roll back any troop movements as of 25 April. ³⁸

Proposals to augment ICC capability to respond to and investigate ceasefire violations in a timely manner by providing the commission three H-34s from U.S. stocks were not immediately addressed because of a lack of machines and current mission requirements. ³⁹

August meetings at Ban Namone bogged down regarding the ICC function and the formation of a national army. Further disputes centered on selection of the Prime Minister. Although the RLG wanted at least two candidates submitted to the King, center and left representatives closed their ears to any other talk but from Souvanna Phouma. ⁴⁰

ACCOUNTS FROM NEGOTIATIONS

Unaware of what to expect, Air America Captain J.J. McCauley led one of the first Western faction trips into the Ban Namone negotiation site. Crews landed beside the Nam Mon. Initial relations with the communist security force proved anything but cordial. Within the designated Air America parking area, Pathet Lao soldiers equipped with 9mm Soviet "burp" guns ringed the H-34s. Before the Russian Hound's arrival, soldiers allowed American crews to walk toward the village schoolhouse, the site of the peace talks. However, when the Russian helicopter slowly approached the landing zone, and terminated at the opposite end of the village, attentive guards, wildly gesturing with their guns, herded the Americans back to their ships. On a subsequent trip, McCauley wisely remained close to his own ship. ⁴¹

Hal Clark and I.D. Maze also participated in one of the early flights. Following the landing of a Soviet Hound near his helicopter, Maze jumped from the cabin door to check for

³⁸ JCS, 101.

³⁹ Joint Chiefs of Staff, 113.

Author Note: H-34 helicopters from the helicopter inventory were not transferred to the International Control Commission (ICC) organization in Vientiane from Air America stocks until the following September.

⁴⁰ JCS, 124, 128.

⁴¹ JJ McCauley Letter, 4/25/91.



Air America crews viewing a parked Soviet MI-4 helicopter at the bilateral peace talks. Captain Dick Crafts far left; Captain Sam Jordon second from right.
Knight Collection.

engine leaks, whereupon a Vietnamese or Chinese looking guard forced him back into the cargo compartment. On a subsequent trip, Maze and the Soviet helicopter crews established a nod and grin relationship. Consequently, the crew sauntered to the H-34 to examine it. After breaking the ice, ID decided it would be alright for him to reciprocate. Wrong: for while climbing up the side of the Hound, he heard the metallic sound of a bolt snapping shut, and the hard prod of a rifle barrel in the small of his back. ⁴²

Following the definitive warning and other unpleasantness, future trips were programed to a designated spot on the opposite side of the river from the Hound landing pad.

RLG negotiating teams normally included six principal VIPs and several recording secretaries. Flying only a few miles south from Vang Vieng to Ban Namone along an accessible road, a Russian Hound carrying communist teams landed on the opposite bank. RLG delegates and ICC personnel then walked across a small wooden bridge, past the Hound landing zone, and down the trail to a mud-floored, shell-shot schoolhouse, described by some individuals as little more than an open shed, which had been designated for talks. Chinese and Vietnamese technicians tape-recorded the sessions. ⁴³

Because of the early confrontations with Pathet Lao guards, American crews normally remained near their ships, as did the two young Soviet pilots and their flight mechanic. An older stern-looking person, perhaps a political commissar, remained close to them. Over time, Soviet Bloc crew composition at Ban Namone varied. Even a few Asian-looking types arrived, manning the crude, unfinished-looking equipment. ⁴⁴

When in the field, American crews maintained an apolitical stance toward the Lao situation, and only flew missions as directed. The presence of good guys and bad guys concerned them very little. At times, depending on the area and day one flew, it often proved difficult to establish who represented which faction because of ethnic similarity and a propensity for the Lao to sporadically change sides. Within a few days, tensions relaxed and American crews enjoyed a casual lunch with the Soviet Bloc pilots. Afterward, they spent the

⁴² Burt Palmer Email, 03/14/04.

⁴³ Major General Oudone Sananikone, 92.
Jim Coble Email, 05/17/02.

⁴⁴ Jim Coble Email, 01/30/02.



Pathet Lao troops dressed in an assortment of clothing and carrying a variety of weapons marching along a village road during the bilateral peace talks.

EW Knight Collection.



Soviet MI-4 Hound departing a designated landing zone at Ban Hin Heup and then the Ban Namone 1961 peace talk site.

Sass Collection.

afternoon climbing over each others' aircraft. Americans referred to themselves as Air America and the Soviets as Air Russia. The Buzz Sawyer comic strip popular in American newspapers closely paralleled what occurred at this time.⁴⁵ Helping to pass long hours, Jim Coble brought a Polaroid camera and portable record player. During his four visits while interacting with the locals, he snapped mug shots of the numerous children swarming around the area, and thrilled them with classical music.⁴⁶

Over the months, on a rotating basis, many different Air America crews participated in the peace talk shuttles. Depending on individuals involved and days flown, experiences varied slightly. Most agreed the duty constituted a choice, relaxing assignment, far removed from the daily grind, and one in which you did not worry about hostile fire. Business hours at the site generally extended from 0900 to 1700 hours. Some pilots considered it the best deal around. During opportune cases, it was unnecessary to cage French bread and wine for refreshment, but merely liberate food intended for the delegates. Crews regarded the picnic hampers provided by the fashionable Lan Xieng Hotel that were crammed with ham and cheese sandwiches on French rolls, cooked chicken, delicious pastries, bottles of Vichy water, wine, imported beer, and jugs of strong coffee a memorable delicacy, especially when compared to the normal daily fare of tasteless military "C" rations.⁴⁷

While ceasefire violations and political vexations waxed and waned throughout the country, from day to day a pilot never knew exactly what reception to expect at Ban Namone.

Captain Dick Crafts experienced a negative incident when he crossed the bridge to obtain a closer look at the Soviet helicopter. Pathet Lao troops attempted to block his passage, but always a headstrong person, not one to be denied, Crafts pushed past them. Other curious crews followed. However, when they attempted to venture closer to the machine, guards brandished rifles, forcing the group to retreat and view both the helicopter and delegates

⁴⁵ Fred Sass Email, 09/03/02.

⁴⁶ Jim Coble Email, 01/29/02.

⁴⁷ Malcomb Bird Email, 10/28/02.
Jim Coble Email, 05/17/02.

from a respectable distance. ⁴⁸

Accounts of interaction and interpersonal relations varied. In contrast, Jim Haver, during later trips to the site, recalled no Russian helicopter or anyone else but a sister H-34 crew and a single Pathet Lao guard. After disembarking and crossing the stream, the delegates were gone all day. On one occasion, he jokingly pointed his finger at the guard. Taking umbrage to the "foreign devil's" gesture, the soldier chambered a round and pointed his rifle at Haver, who instantly slithered around to the other side of the helicopter and thereafter sat in the shade and minded his business. ⁴⁹

Not all excursions to Ban Namone resulted in hostility for the crews. During one trip, Malcolm Bird experienced a minor engine problem. After his Flight Mechanic completed repairs to the engine, Bird decided to leak check and flight test the aircraft. Aware that the Soviet Premier owned an H-34, and believing there was nothing to hide regarding Sikorsky technology, he invited a Czechoslovakian pilot to accompany him on the flight. The flight impressed his comrade in arms, especially after Bird turned the controls over to him. A few weeks later the Soviet pilot reciprocated, allowing Bird into his cockpit. However, before the helicopter broke ground, the meeting prematurely terminated. During the short experience in the Hound, Bird discovered a key Soviet crew chief function: stabilizing the vibrating instrument panel so the pilot could read the instruments at power settings above idle RPM. Perhaps this was considered too cozy interfacing with a Cold War adversary, for Bird never encountered his Soviet counterpart again. ⁵⁰

Burt Palmer participated in the movement on two separate occasions. He recalled hauling food, drink, and Lao representatives to the site. After arrival, everyone sat cross-

⁴⁸ EW Knight Email, 05/19/02.

⁴⁹ Jim Haver Email, 07/05/02, 02/07/03.
Jim Haver July-August 1961 Flight Time Records.

⁵⁰ Malcomb Bird Emails, 10/28/02, 06/21/03; 05/13/14.
While attending ground school instructor training at Mainside Pensacola, Florida, after his Air America experience, Bird used Hound photographs for a show and tell session. An intelligence officer present confiscated and classified them so he could no longer own them. However, he was not intelligent enough to request the negatives.

legged in a circle and proceeded to eat and drink. When the drink took effect, naps commenced. Later they held short negotiations and returned to Luang Prabang. On the second trip, Palmer looked at a Soviet Hound and compared it to the H-34. He observed that the blades rotated counter clockwise, and the tail rotor assembly mounted on the opposite side of the tail cone from the H-34. A fourteen-cylinder radial engine, similar to the American R-2800 model, attested to the machine's power. The cabin section revealed raised commode type plastic covered VIP seats. A covered rectangular hole in the floor provided an exit point for paratroopers. He estimated the Hound's troop capacity at between sixteen to eighteen souls. In contrast to using manifold pressure to gauge power demand in the H-34, the Soviet pilots flew by means of a blade angle of attack. While on the transmission deck, his critical eye noted a Rube Goldberg method of routing square lines and tubing, not at all like the symmetrical flex lines and hoses manufactured in the U.S. ⁵¹

AS TIME GOES BY

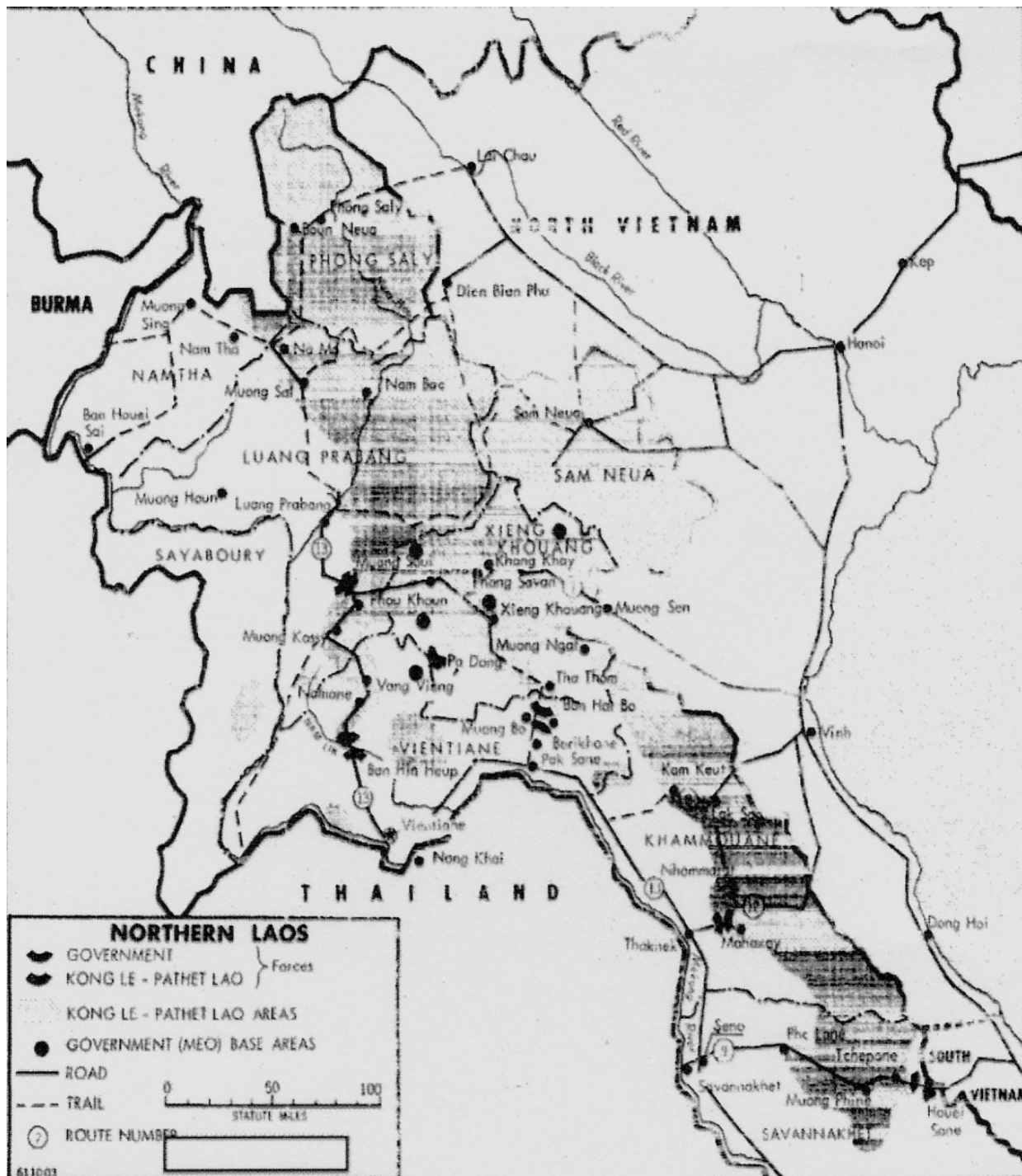
During the first week in September, exacerbating the delay and disappointments surrounding the negotiations, Phoumi refused to go to Ban Namone until certain conditions were satisfied. Continuously worried about an adverse political solution, and distracted by the Berlin crisis, Joint Chiefs of Staff members cautioned about an increase in enemy forces, and speculated over looming dry season hostilities. In the Chiefs' strong words, the worsened Lao situation necessitated immediate action (AKA SEATO Plan 5) *"to prevent a complete communist takeover of Laos and the ultimate loss of all Southeast Asia."* ⁵²

Failing to implement provisions agreed upon in Zurich, hoping to move the talks back on track, and lending prestige to the process, after proposing a meeting at Luang Prabang, the three principal Lao princes--neutralist Souvanna Phouma, leftist Souphanouvong, and rightist Boun Oum--proposed a meeting at Luang Prabang, and then agreed to meet at Ban Hin Heup.

As recorded by the Agency:

⁵¹ Burt Palmer Emails, 03/14/04, 07/10/04.

⁵² Joint Chiefs of Staff, 171, 174.



Battle lines were essentially the same since the May ceasefire. Ban Namone is plotted on Route-13 south of Vang Vieng.

CIA Map, 10/03/61.

"In their meeting at Namone on 27 September, the [Vientiane] group and the delegation representing Souvanna and the [Pathet Lao] reportedly agreed on a new meeting of Souvanna, Souphannouvong, and Boun Oum. The site agreed upon-Hin Heup, about fifty miles north of [Vientiane]-represents a concession by the government, which had been insisting on [Luang Prabang]. However, the dividing line between the opposing forces runs through Hin Heup and the timing of the meeting and its precise location within the town apparently remain to be decided.

Phoumi, in conversation with Ambassador Brown on 26 September, appeared to have adopted a more lenient view of Souvanna...Ambassador Brown states that Phoumi gave every impression of a sincere desire to reach agreement with Souvanna on a government under Souvanna's leadership. Phoumi did, however, say that negotiations on the government's composition would be protracted, as he would negotiate strongly on which individuals were 'truly neutral'" ⁵³

"Souvanna Phouma, Souphannouvong, and Boun Oum are to meet at Ban Hin Heup on 6 October to continue negotiations and resume discussions on the formation of a coalition government. This meeting will take place in territory controlled by [Vientiane] on the south bank of the Nam Lik River, which divides the town; thereafter meetings are scheduled to be held on alternate sides of the river.

General Phoumi told Ambassador Brown on 1 October that Souvanna would be acceptable as premier if agreement could be achieved on the composition of a coalition cabinet which would reflect a proper 'balance' between the three groups..." ⁵⁴

On 6 October, along with General Nosavan and various supernumeraries, the men gathered at Ban Hin Heup, site of the original ceasefire talks. During three days of intense talks between representatives, the parties agreed that, pending the King's approval, Souvanna would assume the post of Prime Minister in a new coalition government. ⁵⁵ However, although agreeing to a sixteen-man cabinet, they failed to settle the issue of an equitable allocation of cabinet posts among the three factions. Hence, the struggle for a neutral Laos continued..

The week following the Ban Hin Heup talks a letter of appreciation unexpectedly arrived in CJ Abadie's office from Brigadier General Andrew J. Boyle, the Commanding Officer

⁵³ CIA Bulletin, Laos, 09/28/61.

⁵⁴ CIA Bulletin, Laos, 10/03/61.

⁵⁵ Joint Chiefs of Staff, 179, 184, 238.



Dressed in khaki, Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese soldiers lounging in front of a corrugated tin roof building during the 1961 Laos "ceasefire" peace talks.

Knight Collection.

of MAAG Lao. The missive expressed the general's gratitude to the H-34 helicopter crews for their participation in the latest Ban Hin Heup talks. Couched in glowing terms, it described Ambassador Brown and General Phoumi's warm appreciation for the *"indispensable, complex operation performed by Air America helicopter pilots."* During the period they had transported RLG officials, the press, and other individuals to the site for the historical meeting between the three princes, not recovering at Wattay Airport until after dark. The general was personally pleased with the entire support expended for the final important meeting, and considered Air America's efforts a contributing factor in engendering what might mark the beginning to an overall settlement between the Lao leaders.⁵⁶

However, with General Phoumi still adamantly opposed to a provisional coalition government, or leftist control of river towns, and Pathet Lao reluctance to surrender any power attained from military strength, negotiations between the three factions at the Ban Namone proceeded slowly and sporadically.

"Peiping has given a blunt warning that large-scale hostilities may be resumed in Laos. According to a 9 November broadcast from Peiping, the Geneva talks have reached a point where 'no more negotiations are possible.' The choice now, according to the broadcast, is a coalition government or 'the outbreak of war.' During the past two weeks, the Soviet representative at Geneva has indicated concern over the danger of a 'renewed outbreak of military action' in Laos and has repeatedly urged that a coalition government be rapidly formed.

*In Laos itself, no progress has been made toward a political settlement since 18 October, when Souvanna Phouma received King Savang's approval to attempt to form a government. Souvanna has issued a new call for tripartite talks to be held in the [Plain of Jars] on 17 November. He has given some indication, however, that if the Boun Oum government persists in its opposition to this site, he may be willing to meet again in Hin Heup, the neutralized site north of [Vientiane] where agreement on Souvanna as premier was reached by the three princes early last month."*⁵⁷

⁵⁶ General Boyle's 10/13/61 Letter to CJ Abadie.

⁵⁷ CIA Bulletin, Laos, 11/11/61.

The verbatim litany of shouda-wouda-coulda continued:

"The talks on a coalition government now planned to be held in [Vientiane] would be the first meeting of the three princes since the October conference at Hin Heup. At that meeting, it was agreed that Souvanna should be designated by the King as 'premier of the future provisional government of national union' and should, in order to facilitate the formation of the coalition, be empowered to call a further three-princes meeting at a time and place of his choosing.

Subsequent to his meeting with King Savang on 18 October, at which time he was charged with formation of a coalition cabinet, Souvanna made the first of several calls for a meeting of the princes on the [PDJ]. Boun Oum and Phoumi repeatedly rejected these proposals on the grounds that there was no further need of a meeting in view of the King's selection of Souvanna to form a cabinet, that it would be demeaning for Boun Oum to visit the [PDJ] considering Souphannouvong's refusal to accompany Souvanna to [Luang Prabang], and that there would be no guarantee of personal safety at the [PDJ].

On 17 November, after receiving repeated rebuffs from Boun Oum and Phoumi, Souvanna dropped his insistence on the [PDJ] and, supported by Souphannouvong, agreed to meet with Boun Oum at [VTE]. Preparatory meetings among the princes' representatives, held at the [PDJ] and [Vientiane], reached a deadlock over the issue of the princes' security in [Vientiane]. Souvanna and Souphannouvong each insisted on being accompanied by a one-company security group as well as 'demilitarization' of a portion of [Vientiane]. Boun Oum and Phoumi on 24 November rejected these conditions, maintaining that such large contingents of opposition forces in [Vientiane] might lead to serious incidents.

*Phoumi's abrupt about-face on the question of security procedures probably does not reflect any fundamental change in his attitude toward a Souvanna-led coalition. Phoumi is apparently convinced that any coalition led by Souvanna would inevitably be dominated by the communists, and he will not easily be led to support such a government unless substantial concessions are granted by Souvanna and Souphannouvong."*⁵⁸

"Projected coalition talks in [Vientiane] by Boun Oum, Souvanna Phouma, and Souphannouvong floundered at the outset on 27 December, with Boun Oum reverting to insistence that further tripartite discussions are unnecessary and that it is up to Souvanna to try and

⁵⁸ CIA Bulletin, Laos, 11/27/61.

form a government through direct approaches to various political figures in the country. Boun Oum took this stand after Souvanna and Souphannouvong paid him a brief 'courtesy visit.' Their cool reception to the capital was marred by recriminations between the [Pathet Lao] and [Vientiane] factions. While it is possible that the good offices of the ICC and the diplomatic corps in [VTE] will prevail upon the three princes to begin negotiations, this initial incident is a gauge of the extent of the present regime's distaste for a coalition with the [Pathet Lao] under Souvanna's premiership...

In Washington officials concluded:

*"The breakdown of princely negotiations in [Vientiane] appears imminent. Under these circumstances, the prospects have sharply increased for a renewal of military operations in Laos. There are indications that the [Pathet Lao] and Kong Le forces are increasing preparations for such a contingency."*⁵⁹

Exemplifying the realism that nothing political or otherwise ever achieved a hasty conclusion in Laos, punctuated by delay, and turtle-walk progress, meetings between parties continued until the middle of 1962, when all parties finally signed Geneva agreements to establish a new Lao government. Then a poignant question was posed among doubters: was a lasting peace actually at hand?

⁵⁹ CIA Daily Brief, 12/28/61.

The sizeable region encompassing Military Region One consisted of Luang Prabang and Houa Kong Provinces. Luang Prabang contained loftier mountains, interspersed with many rivers and valleys. The lengthy and wide Mekong River in the region formed a natural border and barrier from effortless incursion along portions of China, Burma, and Thailand. Located well north of the RLA headquarters at Luang Prabang, the presence of North Vietnamese army divisions across the border in the Dien Bien Phu area historically and constantly threatened Lao existence. Long distance travel in the remote and ethnically diverse area proved seasonally difficult, and even during the best of times, was always arduous and time consuming. When available, riverboats and aircraft provided alternate transportation to ox carts, or walking. For this reason, when they became available, military planners highly prized the well-suited UH-34Ds to support the RLA and Special Forces missions in the Luang Prabang region. Then, with suitable tools available, they deemed it possible to create a wider military presence in Military Region One, and attempt to contain hostile southward inroads.

JIM COBLE

Prior to the fall of Vang Vieng, Jim Coble began conducting missions from Luang Prabang, double crewed with other Captains Dom Guccione, Don Babitz, and Al Barbes. From mid-April until the Company rented a house, he worked the area alone except for an occasional two helicopter RON. As previously noted, Kiou Cacham and other local sites within a small radius of the royal capital became an early focal point of operations. Coble flew an early trip to the west far north up the Nam Beng Valley to the Moug Sai crossroads village where a spook and missionary presence persisted until almost month's end. By then, withdrawing under enemy pressure, the RLA forfeited land communication between Luang Prabang and Nam Tha, and provided the enemy with a strategic airhead and springboard base to conduct operations against Houa Kong--more often called Nam Tha Province--and the lower Beng Valley.

Directed by Colonel "Nookie" Nelson's "C" team and other Customer types at Luang Prabang, by 21 April, Coble, on his own, and without benefit of an additional pilot to assist with navigation or radio communications, began flying supplies and personnel to the most



The Mekong River and towering mountains north of Luang Prabang seen through smoke and haze.
Clarke Collection.



A tributary, possibly the Nam Ou, entering the Mekong River above Luang Prabang at a distinctive bend where the river flows easterly on its way to the South China Sea.

Clarke Collection.

Streams descending to lower levels produced interesting waterfalls.
Clarke Collection.

remote western and northwestern reaches of the kingdom. Some of the more noteworthy towns in Military Region One he serviced included Sayaboury, Pak Beng, Moung Sing, and Nam Tha. Unless a mission entailed interim stops at the Mekong River towns of Pak Beng or Ban Houei Sai, he flew directly sixty to eighty miles over rough and hostile mountain terrain to Nam Tha or Moung Sing and back. In good weather distinctive mountain peaks, the Beng and Nam Tha river valleys, and the Nam Tha River provided him with prominent navigation landmarks. Occasional hostile fire prompted route deviations, although adverse weather conditions constituted the real enemy, and he always managed to arrive safely at his destination.

KMT

From the inception of his work at Luang Prabang, Captain Coble's experiences flying in Military Region One were intense, interesting, and noteworthy. One early movement involved continuing to recover and repatriate Kuomintang (KMT) stragglers from the country.

Following the 1949 defeat of Chiang Kai-chek's Nationalist Chinese (or KMT) Army and his displacement to Taiwan (formerly Formosa), under pressure from Chicom consolidation in Yunnan Province, remnants of the Chinese army retreated south from Yunnan into Burma along the Thai-Lao border. By 1951, under the auspices of the Truman administration, USG policy makers tasked CIA field agents to regroup and refit 11,000 KMT forces to contain communist inroads farther south. During the first years, Civil Air Transport and Air America planes flying out of Taiwan provided the "bullets, beans, and bandages" for the reconstituted army to harass and invade Yunnan Province. However, attempts to gain political or military goals were largely unsuccessful.

By 1953, Burmese Government officials, wary of an uninvited occupying force lodged on its eastern border, and the possibility of a Chinese border crossing to deal with the problem, appealed to the United Nations General Assembly and other world bodies to develop a viable solution to the Chinese presence. Because of international pressure to reduce the number of Nationalist forces in the country, between November 1953 and May 1954, USG arranged for Air America C-46 crews to repatriate 7,000 Chinese to Taiwan. But, for various personal reasons, several thousand KMT refused to leave Burma and Thailand, and the boil continued to fester.

Following the Taiwan Strait crises during the fall of 1958, the Taipei Government and USG again began furnishing arms, ammunition, and Chinese Special Forces training cadres to



Captain Jim Coble holding a personal weapon next to his trusty steed.
Coble Collection.

the KMT. Two airfields were built in the jungles of Burma to supply the irregular forces.

In 1959, KMT leaders enlisted the temporary support of 3,500 Karen and Shan tribals, a dissident border Burmese people, to harass Burmese security forces.

During early 1960, the Nationalist Republic of China sent 1,000 additional Special Forces troops to serve as a cadre to reorganize the irregular forces into more effective fighting units for future actions against mainland China.

In order to curtail KMT control of the lucrative opium trade and a perceived military threat to the region, an unknown number of Burmese and 1,700 Chicom troops launched a major preemptive strike on KMT border outposts in November. Then, in continuing action through late January 1961, they pursued the KMT thirteen miles into Burma. According to a 3 February 1961 USARMA message, 6,000 to 7,000 of the then estimated 10,000 Chinese Nationalist troops illegally fled across the river into northwestern Laos and Thailand during the final days of January. ¹

During the spring, the Taiwanese Government agreed to Burmese and USG requests to evacuate the irregulars. Since U.S official policy was still in effect to repatriate irregulars in Laos to Taiwan, in forestalling any interference from Mainland China, the State Department initiated overtures to the RLG to alert Chiang's government to the matter. ² Phoumi divulged that KMT were indeed in the country, and that several hundred longtime residents were FAL soldiers.

This was later denied in April by the FAL Chief of Staff, who stated that:

"With the exception of 100 to 200 Chinese Nationalists irregulars who had fled to more remote areas to avoid evacuation to Taiwan, all irregulars had left Laos." He went on to incorrectly state, *"There were no KMT in the FAL..."* ³

¹ Chronological Summary Lao Crisis 1 Feb-31 Mar 61 6.
Time Magazine 02/10/61, Internet Time.com Print Page-Lost Legion.
MacAlan Thompson Email, From *A Slice of Thai History: The Opium Trade*, Volume 10, Number 7 1959-1966, 02/18/02.

² Joint Chiefs of Staff, 18, 19.

³ JCS, 25, 40.

By 17 March, the first Air America planeload of what would eventually total 3,400 soldiers, 1,000 Special Forces men, and dependents departed Chiang Rai airstrip for Taiwan. Targeted for completion by the end of the first week in April, the lift continued for a few extra days (seven to twelve April) to accommodate additional Chinese.⁴

However, settled with local families, integrated into communities, and with firm roots established in the area, many individuals refused repatriation, instead electing to remain in their adopted homeland. In addition, Chinese expatriates remained to pursue their lucrative opium trade. The presence of so many seasoned warriors was too tempting to ignore. Therefore, out of this number, American field agents initially culled hundreds of volunteers, and formed a special battalion consisting of three companies to strengthen RLA forces in Military Region One.

Ostensibly, under the command of General Phoumi Nosavan, but generally autonomous and commanded by KMT officers, over time the units were quietly pressed into service as regular government troops north of Luang Prabang, and during FAL operations in the Beng Valley and around Nam Tha.⁵

Following the official KMT repatriation date and extension, in a ploy that was often employed between diplomatic personnel adversaries to quickly implement a project and circumvent normal channels, a backdoor operation was conceived to return additional stragglers to Taiwan without any government being accused of violating the original agreement. Therefore, consistent with appearances that USG complied with repatriation requests should details of the operation leak to the world, toward the end of April, four H-

⁴ Joint Chiefs of Staff, 10, Lao Crisis 1 Apr-31 May 61.

⁵ JCS, Lao Crisis 1 Jun-31 Dec 61 173.
Mac Thompson, 02/18/02.
McCoy, 134-135, 315.

34 crews began shuttling willing KMT stragglers from a wide valley south of the Mekong between Hong Sa and Xien Hon in the Xieng Lom area of Sayaboury Province. The extraction point consisted of a number of huts, a parade ground, and reviewing stand. Coble initially landed at the edge of the parade ground where troops were addressed by an officer from the reviewing stand. Over a two-day period, Air America pilots flew several hundred KMT to Sayaboury where C-46s were parked as a conduit to ferry them to Taiwan. For their efforts, the men received Project Flight pay under authorization P-61-31 dated 13 Feb. 1961.

March through April estimates reached a figure of 4,300 Chinese repatriated from the Burma, Lao, Thai border areas. Since the KMT controlled autonomous zones along thick jungle and largely inaccessible borders, attempts to corroborate KMT numbers in each country by officials varied, and were difficult to ascertain. ^{6 7}

Jim Coble still worked at Luang Prabang during King Sisavang Vong's funeral rites. The longest reigning monarch in Laos died October 1959, but because of Kong Le's coup, ensuing military and political unrest, and a soothsayer's endorsement, his cremation was delayed until 29 April. The once-in-a-lifetime ceremony engendered a large, spectacular parade. Dignitaries from around the world and the populace watched in awe as dozens of painted and ornately adorned elephants, accompanied by costumed handlers and officials, escorted a golden carriage carrying an urn housing the King's remains to the funeral pyre at the soccer stadium. After formal rituals, the son, King Savang Vatthana, lighted the fire that sent the

⁶ Joint Chiefs of Staff, 105-106.

⁷ Jim Coble April 1961 Flight Time Record.

Jim Coble Emails, 01/30/02, 01/31/02, 03/04/02, 03/27/02, 03/29/02 (2), 02/10/03, 02/11/03, 02/20/03.

CJ Abadie, Email 06/13/02.

CIA Current Intelligence Memorandum, Chinese Nationalist Irregulars in the Thai-Laotian-Burmese Border Area, 05/17/63.

By 1963, 3,000-5,000 irregulars were believed living along the border areas. They were divided into several independent groups and the Chinese element was supplemented by men from local tribes. Since the 1961 evacuation, remaining irregulars continued to raid villages, harass security troops, and cause problems for Burmese, Thai, and Lao governments. Their presence in Laos stimulated charges from the communists that the KMT were supporting the right-wing faction.

late king to his final reward. ⁸

Coble believed Special Forces leaders and Agency Customers, in order to reduce briefings and enhance the area learning curve, desired consistency in H-34 pilot assignments at Luang Prabang. Following a 13 May R.E. Rousselot complementary memorandum, channeled through ACP/H operations praising Coble's performance based on "numerous favorable reports" of his "splendid" work accomplished "under difficult operating conditions," Coble volunteered and Abadie assigned him permanently to the royal capital. Except for occasional time off, helicopter ferry trips to Udorn, or sporadic participation in the Ban Namone peace talks, he spent the major part of six months at the royal capital. For several nights, Coble ROned at "The Bungalow," a concrete hotel located across the street from Wat Phu Si that all hands considered the "best" hotel in town.

PERSONA

Madam Lynne, a late thirty something female manager working at the hotel, claimed an admixture of French-Lao parentage. Considered a classy lady by all who met her, she displayed an excellent command of French, Lao, English, and Chinese languages. A natural survivor in a fluid environment, she also demonstrated other delightful talents that endeared her to Air America crews, and at the same time, ensured for herself a ride out of town should the Pathet Lao ever threaten to overrun the area. Her aptitude for pleasing men normally gravitated to upper echelon Americans, ones capable of providing the favors she sought. Some wondered if she emulated the Mata Hari mold. ⁹

Following an off and on residence at the hotel, Coble billeted for a month or so at what he referred to as the "Spook House." The Agency dwelling sat across the steel Bailey bridge on airport road. Stu Methvin and James Campbell James, two of the first Agency men selected by Desmond Fitzgerald, Chief of the Far East Division, to work clandestinely in Laos, were the prime residents at the time. Highly educated Methvin, recalled by Coble as a good guy, played the

⁸ Jim Coble Email, 02/20/03.
Peter White, 274.

⁹ Jim Coble Emails, 02/05/02, 08/19/03, 03/07/04.

coronet as a hobby.

Campbell James presented a somewhat more interesting person. Progeny of a wealthy northeastern family, heir to the Standard Oil fortune, James had attended Yale, arguably one of the northeast's finest Ivy League colleges. Curiously, he affected an English gentleman's persona to include: a walrus mustache, a stout walking stick, a white linen suit, and a Panama hat. Reinforcing Continental behavior, James had a fondness for French Pernod. A popular news magazine of the day referred to James as a particularly memorable person, describing him as a nineteenth-century British tabloid character, "Lord Haw Haw." James was later assigned as Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma's Case Officer. A sophisticate, James was the perfect choice, for he made friends easily, spread his money around liberally, and gained considerable influence among top Lao leaders.¹⁰

FUN IN THE FIELD

The early months of work at Luang Prabang rarely afforded Coble a dull moment. During the second week of May, a Customer assigned him to conduct a one-day tour of northwest Military Region One sites carrying Washington-based "high powered suit," John Hurley, an aid to one of Secretary of Defense McNamara's whiz kids. While returning from a Helio Courier strip in Phong Saly Province, flying north of Moung Sing close to the Yunnan Province Chinese border, a collector ring clamp securing the exhaust stack on the left side of the engine compartment separated, allowing the collector diffuser ring to detach from the engine. No longer diverted into the slipstream, raw, hot exhaust gasses set the metal clamshell door on fire. Coble failed to observe much smoke, but the cockpit became very noisy.

Relaying a Mayday distress call, or any acknowledgement of radio calls in general, during early 1961, was highly problematical, especially when operating in the far north. Few

¹⁰ Jim Coble Email, 01/29/02, 01/30/02, 02/20/03.

EW Knight Email, 05/03/02.

Tim Weiner, *Legacy of Ashes: The History of the CIA* (New York: Doubleday, 2007) 212.

aircraft crews traversed the region, and the inadequate flight-following mechanism in place at the time afforded pilots little contact with a main base. For this reason, a pilot flying solo in the Nam Tha, Ban Houei Sai areas counted on his own skills to survive and counter loneliness. As a modicum of safety before leaving Luang Prabang, generally a pilot informed a responsible person where he would work that day, trusting that he would remember should the aircraft fail to return to base (RTB) at a prescribed time. When Customers assigned two or more missions in the same area, pilots attempted to keep each other informed of their approximate location. Blanket calls in the blind at times received responses from high-flying planes, but normally helicopter pilots working in remote areas accepted what the cards dealt, and they made the best of any adverse situation.

However, remote missions complicated matters. For, adding to the downside of any forced landing or crash in the huge expanse of mountains and tangled jungles of Military Region One, the possibility of a prompt rescue was slim to nonexistent. In most situations, it normally took at least a day for any helicopter assistance. Udorn possessed little means of communication, and required pilots to send daily flight time reports in from the field. If Special Forces based at Luang Prabang forwarded messages to Vientiane concerning helicopters, they never informed Coble.

Aircraft fire terrifies most pilots, for one cannot imagine a more terrible death. Therefore, highly motivated to land, after clearing territory he believed to be Chinese, he autorotated Hotel Romeo onto a level rice paddy north of a small town. Once on the ground, Flight Mechanic Lancaster attempted to quench the flames with the small fire extinguisher. Failing in this endeavor, he removed the burning door.

Fortunately, the incident occurred near a C-47 airstrip with a small Lao military presence. However, none of the Americans spoke Lao or French, and until finding an English-speaking individual, they had difficulty communicating. The isolated village contained no operational telecommunications devices. Therefore, they dispatched a messenger over a narrow dirt road to the nearest town possessing a communications link with the outside world. The telegram requesting delivery of a door and collector ring circulated through Paris, Vientiane, and then Udorn. All the delays, the distance to the town, and circuitous message traffic, obliged the crew and passenger to spend a number of days in the village.

Local natives regarded "round-eyes" dropping from the sky into their village an extra special event, and proffered customary Lao hospitality. Consequently, for the next three nights, celebratory entertainment and feasting commenced in the twenty by forty-foot concrete floored school/meeting hall. The village headman, proudly sporting a Sony multi-band radio receiver, and seemingly endless supply of Vat-69 Scotch, prepared an elaborate welcome by obtaining twenty dancing girls for the festivities--supposedly Chinese maidens who bicycled down a trail from the north. Dressed in the Lao low land style-sarongs, colorful blouses, and silver belts, the lithe figures swayed gracefully to Lamvong music provided by a makeshift string band. The parties taxed the human body, for until the wee morning hours, the girls attempted to entice the foreign men to imbibe after innumerable toasts that invariably followed unintelligible speeches.

Coupled with the exciting forced landing and village hospitality, Hurley experienced the adventure of his lifetime. After repair of the helicopter and return to Luang Prabang, the bureaucrat departed Southeast Asia armed with many colorful stories to relate to his Washington cronies pertaining to native dancing and consumption of shume, a potent backwoods rice brew fermented in ceramic crocks, covered by husks and ashes, and sucked through long reed straws. ¹¹

Despite the alleged ceasefire, the month of May continued relatively active in Military Region One. During this period, Coble flew daily trips to service White Star teams and their training functions at and around Nam Tha and Moung Sing. ¹²

His steady diet of flying from Luang Prabang continued almost unabated, except for a few rare days at Udorn after ferrying Hotel Romeo to the base for scheduled maintenance. To take up the slack during Coble's May absence, the Operations Department dispatched Jim Haver and Fred Sass on a five-day Luang Prabang RON. While there, they flew local supply missions in Hotel Uniform to Kiou Khacham and other surrounding outposts. For two days, they worked

¹¹ Jim Coble Emails, 01/30/02, 02/05/02, 02/08/02, 03/04/02, 03/19/02, 02/10/03, 02/11/03 (2).

¹² Moung Sing: Literally translated as the City of Lions, the French used a fort in the area as a redoubt during the early Indochina period. Peter White 242.



Captain Fred Sass standing in the foreground at the Luang Prabang airstrip. The Land Rover was the "Customer" vehicle of choice during the early period. The other four individuals, one a Customer, the other Fred's Flight Mechanic are unidentified.

Sass Collection.

with Special Forces Captain Shafford at Nam Tha. Missions consisted of local reconns and one outlying trip to organize a village newly created to thwart Pathet Lao activity in the area. After team members and their counterparts completed soliciting the natives' help to quell the bad guys, a party ensued. During the Baci, women served the men unfamiliar food and drink, while local men fastened strings around their wrists and mumbled unintelligible phrases to appease evil spirits and enhance good luck. ¹³

At Luang Prabang, crews remained overnight at either the hotel or one of the American houses. A radio technician and Special Forces supply man lived at one team house. He often wandered about the town partly garbed in dungarees, and sometimes with combat boots. Coble later recalled the individual, a frequent visitor to the crew house. Wearing a sarong and flip-flops, the soldier arrived carrying a cigar box containing a stack of money and a couple pair of dice.

Over time, housemates viewed him as the instigator of the longest floating crap game in the Lao kingdom, and crews believed they contributed substantially to his retirement plan.¹⁴

Ron Clarke stayed overnight a few times at the White Star team house, where decent food was readily available, but he preferred the perceived safety of the Sikorsky Hotel. This was reinforced one Sunday when machinegun fire erupted nearby and he wished that he was in the HUS at the airfield. This became possible when "C" rats were made available for the crews.

Ron worked in northwestern Military Region One on one occasion and mingled with tribal

¹³ Fred Sass Email, 09/26/02, 02/09/03.
Fred Sass May 1961 Flight Time Record.
Jim Haver May 1961 Flight Time Record.

¹⁴ Jim Coble Email, 02/20/03.
Burt Palmer Emails, 03/15/04, 03/17/04.



An Air America C-46 at Luang Prabang.
Clarke Collection.



One of the many tribal clans residing in the mountains of northwestern Laos awed by the large R-1820 Curtis Wright engine which they probably had never seen before. The people are wearing clothing distinctive to their tribe (particularly decorative female skirts) and quite different from the drab Meo black attire seen in Military Region Two.

Clarke Collection.



Hosting years of ancient civilizations, Luang Prabang abounded with Buddhist temples.
Clarke Collection.



Royal Lao Army camp in the Luang Prabang area.
Clarke Collection.



As seen through seasonal smoke and haze a RLA camp north of Luang Prabang and adjacent to the Mekong River.
Clarke Collection.



Dependent off base housing at Luang Prabang.
Clarke Collection.

women wearing colorful skirts. ¹⁵

At times, Colonel Blizzard, a tall man who always wore civvies, flew his Cessna 310 into Luang Prabang from Saigon. Tasked to gather and report military facts for Army intelligence, he landed at various sites throughout the country. Without really knowing the man's status or bona fides, from team members' deference, Coble assumed that the man must be very important. ¹⁶

EXCITEMENT

Toward month's end, while conducting outdoor training classes at a facility alongside the Moung Sing airfield, the RLA and Special Forces men experienced a surprise attack from enemy artillery. Staged from north and east ridgelines, the guns fanned out from the eleven to five o'clock position. One team member reported the initial round splashing only a hundred yards from his position, and he claimed the accurate volleys did not deviate substantially throughout the entire attack. After moving from the airfield to a pair of hills a half mile southwest, the Lao unit and White Star team hastily began preparing new defensive positions. There the knolls, each fifty feet tall and 200 yards long, joined in a saddle. As one of twenty-two district structures displaying a Lao flag, a twenty by twenty-foot fence-enclosed schoolhouse stood just to the west.

When Luang Prabang headquarters became aware of the attack, the commanding officer dispatched a plane with a PRC-10 radio operator to evaluate the current situation. After receiving a status report, the Customer briefed Captain Coble on the route to fly, and loaded his aircraft with critical cargo. Five miles south of the valley, Coble deviated from his normal daily approach. Turning west, he intersected a small river, descended just above the bamboo stands along the riverbank, and then followed it north at treetop to the schoolhouse. Noting a Lao flag waving, he landed between the hills and schoolhouse. While Flight Mechanic

¹⁵ Ron Clarke Email, 06/06/15.

¹⁶ Jim Coble Emails, 01/27/02, 05/12/02/, 05/14/02.
EW Knight Emails, 05/03/02, 06/28/02.

Moore (a former Army crew chief) unloaded Hotel Mike, workers hoisted several wounded into the cabin for evacuation to Luang Prabang. Coble continued the same routine for three days. Early on the 4th day, a C-46 crew contacted the team and informed Luang Prabang that all seemed well in the area. Based on this report, loaded with rice cargo, Coble once again departed for Mounng Sing. Utilizing the successful procedure of previous days, in a little more than an hour, he sped low along the bamboo plumes and landed near the school. However, exhibiting the subconscious sixth sense aviators often experience during times of impending peril, this time he felt somewhat uncomfortable, with a sense of foreboding. Looking around, he noted an empty flagpole. Simultaneously, what looked like a swarm of dark ants surged down the hillsides firing wildly at the helicopter. Before he could transmit a warning below, Moore, already aware of the looming danger, busily ejected rice bags, as if they flowed out the door on a conveyor belt. Within seconds, the pilot twisted on turns and pulled pitch to exit the area. Scraping the terrain at one hundred feet, he began searching for the White Star team. In the second rice paddy from the school, he spotted people running through a bamboo hedgerow. As he approached their position, what appeared to be an explosive flash startled him. However, at second glance he recognized the object, an international orange poncho hastily yanked from a backpack to signal him and to establish team bona fides. The men hustled to the helicopter without coaxing. To expedite loading, and without stopping momentum, the men hit the door jamb at full tilt letting their inertia carry them and equipment into the cabin. Carrying eight team members and three Thai interpreters (one the son of a lady who owned a book store on the Sukhumvit Road side of the Erawan Hotel in Bangkok), Coble drove twenty nautical miles southeast to Nam Tha. There, while Moore refueled and prepared the ship for the continuing flight to Luang Prabang, the team celebrated their narrow escape from Mounng Sing. During the enthusiastic rejoicing, they lauded and pounded Coble on the back for his part in the dramatic rescue. However, after such jubilation, considerably more danger and excitement lay ahead that day.

Taking the most direct route to Luang Prabang, with weather conditions steadily deteriorating toward the end of the flight, Coble sliced across a thirteen-mile neck of land separating the Mekong's flow from an easterly to southerly direction. As he flew down a narrow valley close to the deck, navigating in marginal visibility, a fast-moving thunderstorm suddenly moved in behind him. The venturi effect and the strength of the tail wind proved so powerful that he decided against risking a 180-degree turn out of concern that

gale force winds would blow Hotel Mike into trees lining both sides of the narrow valley. Compounding this problem, one half mile in front, ascending terrain merged into clouds, and mist obscured his vision beyond that point. Seemingly trapped, out of time and most ideas, it was decision time. With only one viable option available, Coble performed a high-speed roll-on-landing onto a cleared area to await storm passage--normally forty-five minutes.

After the devastating winds subsided and clouds cleared the final ridgeline leading to the Mekong, he continued to march. Proceeding down river toward Luang Prabang, two additional storm systems sandwiched the helicopter. Low ceilings and visibility shrouded both riverbanks. With no place to land except the river, the beleaguered pilot slowed to almost a hover, creeping along the east bank until spotting a landmark dock a half mile from the airfield. At touchdown, he had flown an additional nerve-wracking twenty minutes after first noting illumination of the red low fuel warning light. Given a properly calibrated system, he was certainly only minutes from fuel exhaustion. Fraught with an abundance of excitement, the memorable day marked an experience one never forgot, but was comparable to what other helicopter pilots experienced over the years.

Subsequent to returning the team safely to Luang Prabang that evening, Coble discovered, in addition to the officer and non-commissioned team house by the riverside behind the royal palace, the existence of a second team house outside of town on the road to the airport. In accordance with military hierarchy and the "rank has its privileges" cliché, it provided housing specifically for grunt types. The happy campers insisted that Coble and Moore accompany them there for extended lubrication.¹⁷

The following day Coble and Roy Moffitt departed for the Nam Tha region to assess the situation there and search for Lao troops. Moffitt, originally introduced to Coble as Colonel Moffitt when he first arrived at Luang Prabang, never wore a uniform or insignia. However, as other military personnel always deferred to him, Coble perceived the middle-aged man, who looked much like a farmer and whom he called Roy in private, was the person in charge when

¹⁷ Burt Palmer Emails, 03/14/04, 05/15/04.

Moore purchased a Boa Constrictor and took the reptile to Udorn. He kept the snake in a box in the flight line shack, originally a tent then transformed into a wooden structure located twenty-five yards in front of the hangar, and fed it items from the local market.

dealing with the RLA in the northwest region. He observed that Moffit also coordinated with the "Spooks" and appeared cognizant of everything occurring within the province. Furthermore, he believed Moffit was instrumental in obtaining his residence at the "Spook House." Previously, he had often ferried the older man to remote sites around Nam Tha and Moung Sing, where he conversed with the village men, dispersed multi-band radios, bottles of booze, and large stacks of kip.

It did not take long to find the troops. In what appeared to have been an orderly retreat from Moung Sing, wavy lines of a couple hundred stragglers strung out for miles. After they landed, Moffit, the former "PEO civilian," fluent in Lao plus many other ethnic languages, consulted with the Lao Commander. Perhaps as penance for bugging out on the White Star team, he advised the commanding officer to continue east toward the Beng Valley, and then hump to the Mekong River town of Pak Beng, where helicopters would lift them to the royal capital for refitting and retraining. Coble supplied the troops over several days while Moffit, or one of his subordinates, parlayed with their officers. Toward the end of their trek, after consolidating into a somewhat tighter column, they slogged into Pak Beng. Then, over the next two days, Coble, and three additional H-34s and crews dispatched from Udorn, transported the "intrepid" warriors fifty miles east to Luang Prabang.¹⁸

Within a couple of months, after wearing out the initial welcome at the spook residence, and with operational requirements at times expanding to three or four H-34s, headquarters Taipei internal auditor, R. M. "Rocky" Stone, arrived in Luang Prabang to seek, negotiate a lease, rent, and establish a permanent Air America crew house. With limited choices available, he eventually found an acceptable two-story, wooden shuttered dwelling located close to the Khan River and directly across from the north gate of the royal palace. The presence of armed guards posted at the gate produced a sense of security for the helicopter crews. The royal family owned a white Ford Edsel. Used as the official state limousine, it amused the crews, who truly appreciated Lao irony. To convey crews to and from

¹⁸ Jim Coble Emails, 01/31/02, 02/01/02, 02/05/02, 02/08/02, 02/09/02 (2), 02/10/03, 02/11/03 (2).

the airfield, Coble scrounged a Jeep from the Special Forces. As his own personal vehicle, he shipped an economical and efficient Japanese-manufacture 50 cc Honda Cub motor scooter from Udorn. ¹⁹

BERT PALMER

About this time, Flight Mechanic Bert Palmer departed Udorn for a permanent assignment at Luang Prabang. Directly following his arrival in Udorn, Gunner Lane had tapped Bert and several other capable and talented Marine mechanics to initiate and assist in sustaining a viable and ongoing helicopter operation. Despite the recognition, it seemed to Palmer that he worked all the time, running in circles, either repairing helicopters on the flight line, or in the dirty, barely usable hangar. The grind never seemed to end, but with a long-established work ethic, he acknowledged a lack of time off as part of the job. He also found attempts to maintain all the aircraft and determine the flight commitments highly confusing. Therefore, when Lane offered him the opportunity to relocate and assume the responsibility of establishing a maintenance outstation at Luang Prabang, Palmer readily volunteered. He believed that if the Udorn base provided necessary parts and competent maintenance crews, he could deal with and repair almost any problem.

Also influencing his decision to transfer, Palmer had participated in an earlier special mission from Luang Prabang and gained a favorable opinion of the semi-remote location. Sometime before the April loss of Vang Vieng, Gunner Lane had confidentially informed Palmer and Maze that he required their services for an extremely hush-hush mission, adding that he had chosen them because the mission required his best Flight Mechanics.

"Old Timer" Captain Tom Moher drove one of two H-34s to Luang Prabang. At the Special

¹⁹ Jim Coble Emails, 1/29/02, 01/30/02.
CJ Abadie Email, 06/13/02.
Jerry Buffington Email, 11/15/03.
Burt Palmer Email, 03/17/04.

Forces house on the airfield side of town, Palmer noted that Army personnel still wore civvies to conceal their military affiliation. Three spooks, one Tony Poe, also gathered there. Another noticeably large man in his late forties exuded an awesome command presence. They conducted little discourse, none directed toward the Flight Mechanics. After dinner, a Special Forces man ushered the men upstairs to their rooms, while, on a need-to-know basis, spooks briefed the pilots.

Early the following morning, each agent preloaded one suitcase and four one-hundred-kilogram rice sacks, while the Flight Mechanics were issued .45 caliber grease guns. The Flight Mechanics received no briefing, other than the admonition "to stay alert and remain close to the aircraft." Spook types flew in the left seat, probably to help navigate, as the pilots launched in a northerly direction. After a lengthy trip, they landed in a confined jungle clearing. Next, what Palmer described as the "scariest looking folks he ever saw" emerged from the edge of tall trees. Dressed in faded green trousers or tattered shorts, the men appeared considerably taller than an average Lao or Meo male, and displayed pronounced Mongolian facial characteristics. Heavily armed, all bore vintage rifles or carbines, and glared suspiciously at the helicopter occupants. As the Flight Mechanics warily unloaded the burlap rice bags, the spooks deplaned, retrieved the suitcases, and began conversing with the group leader. While unloading, Palmer smiled at two men but, receiving no response, hopped back into the cabin. The pilots never shut down the rotors, and within thirty minutes the flight departed for Luang Prabang. Burt never discovered exactly where they went, or what the mission entailed.^{20 21}

Before Palmer departed for the outstation, an Air Force C-130 ferried a Marine HUS-1 helicopter replacement to the Udorn airfield. The large plane back taxied to the approach end of the runway where Palmer and several other men offloaded the fuselage, the crated pylon, the four boxed blades, and other items. Used to the noise and sound of reciprocating engines,

²⁰ Burt Palmer Interview, 05/19/04.

Burt Palmer Emails, 03/14/04, 03/15/04, 03/16/04, 03/17/04, 03/18/04, 05/08/04, 06/04/04.

²¹ Author Note: Based on Jim Coble's account regarding the KMT, one can speculate that the mission involved contact with remnants of the KMT, and Agency attempts to shepherd them out of Southeast Asia to Taiwan, or obtain recruits to form a battalion for special operations within Military Region One. If the latter supposition is taken in context, then the clandestine nature of the mission is entirely understandable.

Palmer had never previously observed a turboprop plane take off. Therefore, while the pilot spooled up engines, he speculated on whether the comparatively silent engines would ever develop enough RPM and power to get off the ground. After the aircraft departed, the men repositioned the new helicopter and associated parts by the line shack for reassembly. Additional supplies that constantly arrived by air were stored in the cluttered hangar with rotor blade boxes stacked along the outside wall.

Shortly after Palmer's arrival in Luang Prabang, the Special Forces team requested that an Air America crew sling load a Jeep west to Kiou Cacham. Resident Company pilot Jim Coble coordinated the lift. Because of the Jeep's weight, estimated at over 3,000 pounds, and the high-density altitude of the site, he planned an early sunrise launch by himself, with just enough fuel onboard to complete the roundtrip. Palmer hooked the vehicle to the sling and watched as Coble climbed slowly in circles at maximum power to clear the eastern mountains.

Upon his return, Coble wore a long face. The story unfolded that on final approach he had decided to position the hook release switch to the automatic mode (loads of more than 250 pounds) for release at ground contact. According to Coble's account, when he activated the switch, the system malfunctioned and the Jeep plummeted fifty feet to the runway. Soldiers shoved the twisted remains of the Jeep to the side of the runway, and for a long-time fresh crews were advised to look for the vehicle as a positive identification for Kiou Cacham. Palmer, never a Coble aficionado, referred to the incident as "The Big Splat."

Some curious maintenance glitches occurred early in the helicopter program. Shortly after Palmer relocated to Luang Prabang, several H-34 engines began to display excessive oil consumption, beyond normal rocker box leaks. Following intensive investigation, a maintenance man discovered that during the course of resupply, planes airdropped or deposited several drums of high detergent oil at outstations. A relatively new product on the market, and relatively unused thus far, the Corps still ran in new engines and operated in the Fleet using regular military specification (Mil-1100) weight oil. Further examination revealed that Flight Mechanics, using hand pumps and funnels to fuel and oil helicopters in the field, failed to check or recognize the different Mil numbers. Additionally, a long supply pipeline not yet up to full speed, mistakes in ordering, and an engine shortage tended to aggravate the situation.



As the H-34 is unloaded, Meo tribals look on at the Kiou Cacham (LS-04) strip located on Route-13. Jim Coble's wrecked jeep sits in front of the U.S. Special Forces team thatched hootch to upper left. Clarke Collection.



Oil change with Lao helper adding 1100 weight oil to the reservoir of a UH-34D R-1820 engine at Luang Prabang, Laos. Left to right: Unknown Flight Mechanic, Pilots Fred Sass, Dominic "Gooch" Gucchione, and shirtless Flight Mechanic Bert Palmer.

Sass Collection.

When the Company phased in Taiwanese Chinese mechanics, additional maintenance foul-ups inevitably occurred. One instance surfaced when Bird and Palmer crewed an early morning ferry flight from Luang Prabang to Udorn with the intention of testing a replacement ship recently released from a major inspection, and returning it to Luang Prabang before nightfall. During preflight, they discovered that all the gearboxes were filled with red Mil-5606 hydraulic oil--the wrong lubricant. Discourse with Jack Forney, and in turn with the third-country employees--Taiwanese Chinese from Tainan maintenance base who normally worked on fixed wing aircraft--responsible for the mistake followed to avert future errors. With the units drained and properly refilled, the crew launched for Luang Prabang. ²²

During the rainy season, crews often encountered problems ferrying helicopters into and out of the royal capital. Some hairy episodes caused pilots to reflect on their mortality and profession. Since losing Vang Vieng, the only available routes avoiding overlying areas of enemy-controlled Route-13 were directly over the mountains from Vientiane, or a longer convoluted upstream route on the Mekong River. Early in June, Malcolm Bird and Jay Erickson experienced severe late afternoon thunderstorms while returning to Udorn from a day mission at LP. Later in the month, while flying upriver toward the town, and about to encounter a nasty looking squall line, both pilots elected to land on an exposed sandbar to await storm passage. They had barely landed and shut down when the full force of the tempest struck. Alarming high winds and gusts elicited speculation as to whether the storm would tumble the aircraft and crews into the turbulent water. Making matters worse, after the wind abated driving hail, sounding like stones beating a tattoo on a tin roof, pelted the ships. When the heavy rain diminished, crews peered from the cabin doors to discover a vanished sandbar with water lapping over the landing gear. By the time they cranked up their ships to depart, the rising river already tickled the H-34s bellies. After recovery at Luang Prabang, inspections revealed sufficient hail damage to necessitate main rotor blade and turtleback changes. ²³

By late June, in order to eliminate ferry time between Udorn and Luang Prabang, and to more efficiently service expanding operations, volunteers John Fonburg and Jerry Buffington

²² Burt Palmer Interview, 05/19/04.
Burt Palmer Emails, 03/21/04, 03/24/04, 03/26/04, 05/15/04.

²³ Malcomb Bird Email; Response to questions 07/07/02.

joined Coble at Luang Prabang as resident helicopter pilots. They normally worked for three weeks, and then, after soliciting a direct flight by C-46 or C-47, enjoyed a week in Bangkok. The temporary pilots remained at Luang Prabang until early September, when Abadie recalled them to Udorn for rest and rotation to the Marine Corps.

However, with permanent pilot manning levels not entirely satisfied, higher ups extended their tour. After flying missions from Udorn for a short period, they returned to Luang Prabang and remained until December, becoming some of the last pilots returning to their original military units. ²⁴

When required for special operational requirements or in the absence of TDY pilots while on R&R, operations assigned other crews and aircraft for one-or two-night RONS at Luang Prabang. Well appointed, the crew house included a refrigerator, a female cook/maid, and a handyman. Periodically, Palmer, then later Harold "Bull Dog" Butcher, ²⁵ or another Flight Mechanic, accompanied the daily C-46 Vientiane milk run to purchase food and household items at the American Embassy commissary. Palmer, the person initially in charge of overseeing the house and thus grocery purchases, collected money once a month from permanent crews. However, squeezing money out of Fonburg, renowned for his extreme frugality, proved difficult at times. ²⁶

Normally, the Flight Mechanic returned on the milk run the same day with frying chickens, steaks, hamburger meat, and other consumables, which he immediately deposited in the freezer. Then, because of periods of unreliable electricity, he taped the freezer door

²⁴ John Fonburg Phone Conversation, 06/01/91.
Jerry Buffington Emails, 11/5/03, 11/15/03.

²⁵ Harold Butcher: A retired Marine Corps master sergeant I met in Jacksonville, N.C.,
Butcher was the first person to inform me about Air America.

²⁶ One wag Flight Mechanic humorously described John Fonburg as being so cheap, he would not pay two dollars to view a snake ride a bicycle.

tight.²⁷

Big Butch arrived in Udon in the fall. Before transferring to Luang Prabang, Butcher soon made his physical prowess known to all, when, as a former part time semi-pro wrestler, he agreed to a contest with a Thai kick boxer. A first for Udon Town, promoters arranged a match in a local establishment. Excitement reached a zenith in the entertainment-starved community, and on the night of the competition, many excited locals packed the bar. Taking the initiative, the Thai boy punched Butch several times and followed aggressively with a swift kick. The second kick led to his downfall. Butch caught his ankle, wound him into a pretzel, and slam-dunked him to the floor. No future challengers stepped forward, so one might consider tough Butch the all-time Udon champion wrestler.²⁸

Over time, without becoming a haughty boys' club, the friendly atmosphere and good fellowship while socializing in the large den downstairs fostered a positive bonding among housemates. Permanent occupants enjoyed private accommodations on the second floor, with extra rooms available for transient crews. By choice, Fonburg lived in the servants' quarters in the rear of the house. Crews normally hit the sack after dark, but, if not too fatigued from the day's activity, the privacy afforded the possibility of an interesting liaison should a willing lady of the evening choose to stop by. However, a slight animosity and tension developed between more virile house members when they discovered transient, Charlie Bade, sleeping with the maid/cook, an English-speaking Chinese girl, who all described as a lovely young honey. She lived several blocks from the Air America house, and one envious and curious person observed Charlie's motor scooter parked in front of her residence on many consecutive nights.

To no avail, others constantly lusted after her favors. Predictably, male attention conferred on the young lady led to considerably more independence than a regular domestic

²⁷ John Fonburg Notes Recorded on 8/30/91.
Burt Palmer Email, 03/14/04.

²⁸ Burt Palmer Email, 03/14/04/ 03/31/04.

servant was accorded, and diminished the overall quality of meals. Moreover, the relationship violated an unwritten, but time-honored military cardinal rule that while deployed overseas **never-ever** diddle one's housemaid or cook. Thereafter, a humorous jingle arose among the men to torque another suitor not so lucky in love, *"Who laid the maid? Why Charlie Bade laid the maid."*

Madam Lynne eventually moved into the crew house to co-habit with Bert Palmer. She also helped coordinate household tasks. Possessing superior cooking skills, she produced French type cuisine that greatly appealed to the crews. However, contaminated fresh salad greens (particularly watercress, a favorite salad specialty in Luang Prabang) she purchased at the local market caused intestinal problems to more than a few house occupants. Over time, Palmer, a vigorous young man possessing a lusty libido, became known by his house mates as "Hot and Heavy." One morning Jerry Buffington, who bunked in the room next to Palmer, pulled him aside and recommended that he attempt to suppress the nocturnal groaning and grunting to a minimum.

Lynne's numerous town contacts gave Palmer pause to wonder if, in addition to her female talents, she might also be a spy. He derived this assessment during a dinner she invited him to at the home of Mac, an American friend. Ostensibly, Mac lived in Luang Prabang while conducting research for a book. A little suspicious about this claim, Palmer half accepted the explanation until, while walking down the hall for a head call, he observed a short-wave radio set large enough to communicate with Washington. Later, he also noted that the guy he then considered a spook, mostly stayed at home and rarely ventured into town.

A small detachment of French military personnel, who also rarely left their hostel, lived down the street from the Air America Bungalow. As a diversion to life at the Air America crew house, Lynne took Palmer there for an evening of drinks and ping pong. He noted that many present wore no rank or insignia on their uniforms. During the evening, Burt judged the unkempt Europeans to be civil, but not necessarily American aficionados. For an unknown reason, Lynne exhibited contempt for the Frenchmen and referred to the house as a train station. Later contemplating their actual purpose at Luang Prabang, he assumed they probably represented an intelligence watchdog group. Regardless of their function, Palmer and his

Special Forces friend Ballard occasionally stopped by for a cool drink. ²⁹

During intermittent forays into urban Luang Prabang, helicopter crews discovered that nightlife in the royal capitol was grim. Out of desperation, they only journeyed into town after exhausting house supplies of booze and beer. On one such night, following several hours of libation, they fought their way out of a bar after refusing to pay what they considered an outrageous bill demanded by the proprietor. Before leaving the Lao establishment, the irate Americans drastically altered the bar's interior. Naturally, the owner complained to authorities, and when reports of the incident reached U.S. Embassy level, to preserve their in-country status, officials required each man culpable in the act to compensate the owner. Buffington recalls paying the lofty sum of twenty dollars. ³⁰

Occasionally, events at the Air America house stimulated the men to heights of never imagined excitement. Former corporal John "Mike" Michael traded with the local Meo tribesmen to obtain a souvenir flintlock rifle. After a night of heavy imbibing, the men retired, leaving Michael in the den playing with his new toy. Suddenly a loud boom rocked the house, awakening the men, who believed themselves under attack. The panicked men rushed for the staircase to assume defensive positions, while debating whether to remain in the house or Jeep to the airfield and man the helicopters. Halfway down the stairs, they spied Michael in an alcoholic haze, with a sheepish grin below heavy eyelids. While tinkering with the rifle mechanism, he had inadvertently discharged the Meo firearm. The gunpowder, a mixture of carbon, sulfur, and bat dung that provided the necessary nitrates, had elicited a powerful explosion and obscured the room. After cursing a little, but with the situation mostly resolved and peace restored, the men returned to bed, where adrenaline still pumped through their bodies, making sleep difficult. ³¹

²⁹ Jim Coble Emails, 01/29/02, 03/15/02, 02/20/03, 03/07/04.
Burt Palmer *Air America Detail*, 4.
Burt Palmer Emails, 03/15/04, 05/15/04.

³⁰ Jerry Buffington Email, 11/15/03.
Burt Palmer Email, 03/10/04.

³¹ Burt Palmer Email, 03/10/04.

MOBERG

First Lieutenant Robert Moberg, who would later reenter the Lao theater in 1968 as an Army attaché pilot and call himself "Jack the FAC," was one of the members of an early White Star team assigned to Military Region One. He and other Special Forces personnel constantly teased Fonburg about never lacing his Marine "boondock" boots.

Passing through Vientiane on his way into and out of Laos, with only a few day trips in the middle of his tour, Moberg spent most of the time in the boondocks.³² The exception occurred when his team was overrun and scattered at the Sala Phou Khoun road junction. Afterward, they rendezvoused at the White Rose watering hole and Vientiane pleasure palaces for a week, until the team begged him to return them to the field. Moberg went to see Colonel Bull Simons, frankly saying that he and his men had come to Laos to kill communists, not to destroy their manhood at the White Rose sporting house. Simons became angry and ordered his S-3 major to stand tall while he chewed him out for failing to keep him informed about the team's situation. Embarrassed, the major turned bright red. Later, as payback, the major assigned Moberg's team to Phong Saly Province, where he believed that no white man had trod since the time of the Dien Bien Phu battle.³³

There were only three H-34s allotted to service the vast Military Region One region. During that time, Moberg flew with John Fonburg, Charlie Weitz, and Wayne Knight. The team was charged to walk into Phong Saly from Nam Tha because H-34 pilots were not allowed to fly that far north. Instead, the team attempted to jump into the province, but the Bird P-2V pilot could not find the correct drop zone coordinates. When Colonel Simons discovered where the major had sent Moberg's team, he nearly cashiered him. They consequently wound up at remote Nam Tha until it was overrun by enemy forces in May 1962.

Moberg's team departed for the States, while he remained in place for over a month attempting to assemble a Kuomintang (KMT) reconnaissance platoon from Chinese stragglers remaining from the CAT airlifts to Taiwan. The men accomplished little except for rescuing besieged White Star teams in the Beng Valley. Eventually, Simons ordered Moberg out of harm's

³² Boondocks: A military term denoting a remote area.

³³ Bob Moberg was unaware of occasional flights into and out of the Phong Saly 1,500-foot airfield and Colonel Loren Haffner's reconnaissance mission there in early 1960. Moberg would later return to Laos as an Army pilot.

way.³⁴

BIG JOHN

Flight Mechanics recognized John Fonburg's exceptional piloting skills and referred affectionately to him as a "load hacker." To a man, they would fly with the quiet man any time. Fonburg's considerable girth appeared greatly accentuated when he strapped into the cockpit seat and hunched over the cyclic. His portly shape contributed to ongoing mirth. All the men called him, "slow walking John," because of his unusual gait. Others, taxed by helicopter vibrations, marveled at his bladder control over the course of a day. Unlike lesser men, they rarely observed him urinating by the fuselage, while quipping a standard helicopter pilot phrase, "*Hey, Bert, what is causing this enormous leak under the aircraft?*"

A devotee of gluttony, Fonburg always ate and drank to excess, and spent much of his time off seated on the rear steps of the crew house, bulling and munching Velveeta cheese and crackers. Conveying a pleasant, but subtle nature, complemented with a wicked sense of humor, Fonburg assumed the role of the resident Clown Prince, but he gracefully accepted the kidding. For many years, he subscribed to the Wall Street Journal and delved deep into the stock market. Uncharacteristically, after receiving one outdated Journal and noting a huge decline in his investments, he panicked. His reaction surprised everyone.³⁵

A hyperactive sergeant, who frequently appeared keyed on uppers, dispatched aircraft to support either Meo or Lao factions from a tin shack on the south side of the Luang Prabang runway. Without benefit of area or site briefings, he merely assigned coordinates to the pilots, while the men attempted to apply them to their abysmal French maps. The highly inaccurate charts, imprinted with large white uncharted areas, rendered accurate navigation a hit or miss proposition. Consequently, a landing zone was rarely located during the first

³⁴ John Fonburg Reply to the Author's 8/30/91 Letter.
MacAllen Thompson Email Relating to Moberg's Special Forces Lao Tour, 01/12/02.

³⁵ Jim Coble Email, 03/04/02.
Burt Palmer Email, 03/14/04.

endeavor. Only after repeated flights to the same location did pilots become familiar enough with the terrain to correctly navigate to the spot and complete the mission.

Over the final three to four months of 1961, while hauling 1,000 plus pound loads, Fonburg and Buffington flew food, fuel, ammunition, troops, and other items to areas surrounding Luang Prabang. This included many Special Forces missions to the east, and occasionally northeast far up the Beng Valley, while supporting RLA operations. American hands generally considered Lao military troop efforts in this region totally worthless. At times, crews worked in the Nam Tha/Moung Sing area and helped support MEDICO, the Tom Dooley Foundation operation. They flew north to the Chicom border, perhaps beyond, and west to the Burma/Lao/Thai triangle. Within this region, they often hauled strange looking people, some ChiNats, who looked different from regular Lao and tribal soldiers.³⁶

Bert Palmer, frequently up to his elbows in sixty-hour inspections, oil changes, and other helicopter maintenance duties, flew with Fonburg by choice when the extra tasks allowed. As pilots normally flew solo in hostile areas, they constantly faced the prospect of being wounded and other incapacitation, possibly leading to the inability to handle the aircraft. Therefore, against such an eventuality, many pilots instructed their Flight Mechanics in basic H-34 air work, and, if one displayed a modicum of talent, how to land. They referred to this tutoring as "stick time." Palmer's first landing attempt at the Luang Prabang runway with John Smoot ended in a less than desirable fashion than he had imagined. In spite of this nightmare, at the end of a day, if time permitted, Fonburg offered Palmer additional flight instruction. During one of the dual flights, then considerably more comfortable in the H-34, Palmer flew a high-speed pass down the runway, followed by a hammerhead climb and a wingover at the apex. At the top of the climb, Fonberg indicated that he wanted to assume control of the ship. Then, in a dry, sarcastic voice he added, "*Bert, I believe you just interrupted Bell's telephone service here at LP.*" Looking out the window, Palmer noted almost a half roll of EE-8 communications wire dangling from the right wheel. Upon landing, a heated discussion commenced with an irate Lao officer, one which Fonberg considered highly amusing.

³⁶ John Fonburg Notes on 6/2/91 Letter.
Jerry Buffington Emails, 11/15/03, 11/05/03.

After a time, Fonberg craved more pleasure from life than just consuming Velveeta cheese, so he asked Palmer to talk to Madam Lynne about arranging female companionship for him. Lynne eventually struck a deal with a local gal who only yearned for a bicycle costing less than twenty dollars. Before forking over the cycle, Fonberg shrewdly insisted on a preliminary test to first consummate the relationship, stating that it might eventually blossom into a permanent agreement. For a month he continued to test and test, but then, deciding that the two were incompatible, sent the girl packing without a bicycle. She stomped away from the house, angrily muttering, "Cheapo. Cheapo." ³⁷ ³⁸

During one trip east, Meo tribesmen presented Palmer with a prized white puppy. Because the animal came from Ipsenville where Fred Sass had crashed, he named it Ippy. He bathed Ippy at the Luang Prabang house and arranged for Lynne to care for him during the day. At night, Ippy slept in the courtyard. Bonding easily with Ippy, Palmer obtained worm pills for his canine in Vientiane on the next commissary purchase. Then one day the pup mysteriously disappeared. Devastated, Palmer looked in vain for him all day. A week elapsed without a sign of his pet. Finally, while at an outlying Special Forces camp, a soldier divulged that a permanent Air America pilot, without disclosing the cause, had bragged to him that he had hurled the dog off the bridge into the river. As Palmer contemplated the person's motivation for the cruel act, several options seemed plausible: perhaps annoyance over the dog's excessive barking; or Palmer's liaison with Lynne had provoked jealousy; or Palmer's increasing role in the day-to-day running of the house had challenged the man's ego and triggered a serious character flaw. However, since the Special Forces soldier had sworn Palmer to secrecy, although highly incensed, he never mentioned anything to the individual, merely avoided him, and forgot the incident.

Remarkably, sickness laid Palmer low only once during his "Air America Detail." On one journey to Udorn, McKenzie, about to depart upcountry, offered Palmer his house in town.

³⁷ Burt Palmer Emails, 03/14/04 (2).

³⁸ Author Note: John Fonburg returned to fly H-34s in 1965. Over the years, he once again became the focus of much ribbing from peers, and crews spun many legendary tales from his antics.

While there, he suffered a severe viral attack. Because of constant vomiting and ensuing dehydration, he could not move from the bed and seriously believed he might die. Complicating matters, Bong, the house girl, spoke no English. This presented Burt with the dilemma of convincing her that he required immediate medical help. Finally, after comprehending his plight and obtaining assistance, she hired a samlor driver to pedal him to a town doctor. Later, when he inquired why none of his friends had checked on his absence, he learned that, aware of his sexual appetites they had believed he desired complete privacy.³⁹

LAO MESS NIGHTS

Over time, Coble discovered that his overall duties did not always include war-related issues. Two Lao colonels, Bouncham and Chamcham, jointly commanded the RLA Kiou Cacham detachment. Coble serviced this site so frequently, always going the extra mile, that the Lao considered him part of their family. One afternoon, after delivering the mail, the colonels directed him to return the following afternoon to ferry them and other subordinates to Luang Prabang. At 1630 hours on the appointed date, he returned. Two Americans rotating for R&R also boarded. After arrival at Luang Prabang, Bouncham declared that Coble and his Flight Mechanic must enjoy the evening partying with him and his cohorts. Dubious about attending the function, Coble protested fatigue, but failed to beg off the invitation of Lao hospitality. Still acclimatizing to Laos, his system largely rejected Oriental cooking, and although not a teetotaler, he had little interest in drinking. In addition, his understanding of the Lao language left him feeling like a mime in a time warp.

What followed, a study in the diverse appetites of the lotus eaters, was representative of several mandatory invitations during Coble's months spent at Luang Prabang. Recalled in retrospect as nights of horror, he referred to these episodes as Mess Nights, after the comparable, but far more innocuous Marine Corps drunken stag dinners.

Promptly at 1830, a Jeep arrived at the Air America house with a driver and armed soldier tasked to deposit the crew in front of a Chinese open-air restaurant across the street from the open-air movie theater. Accompanied by a pair of White Star personnel, they sat alternately between Lao officers at a long table prepared for twelve souls. Enlisted

³⁹ Burt Palmer 05/019/04 Interview.
Burt Palmer Emails, 06/27/04, 03/21/04, 03/24/04.

soldiers, pressed into service, served and assisted the guests. A senior sergeant, clutching a locked cash box, sat directly behind the colonels. The Westerners noted the table awash with a forest of liquor bottles. Following obligatory toasts to their King and American-Lao relationships, within short order, they consumed several rounds of Vat-69, Mekong whiskey, and Lao and Thai beer. Then the colonels ordered food. One after another, sumptuous dishes arrived. Coble found it difficult to determine or specify the origin or composition of the delicacies, which included eyeballs, chicken heads, and feet.

Additional toasting and several rounds of drinks followed the elaborate meal. Then, after "Sergeant Cash Box" paid the bill and packed booze for the operation's next phase, soldiers escorted them to the movie theater. Two barkers who sat in the front row translated an Indian flick into Lao over a public address system. Regardless of an actor's gender, they vocalized each character, even the singing parts integral in all Indian movies. Classified as an adventure movie, the translators turned the amplifiers up to maximum, sounds possibly heard far downriver.

Coble then discovered that the evening actually began when the movie ended. All loaded into Jeeps for a short trip to the first Train Station, one of the town's three sporting houses consecutively numbered one, two, and three--the Lao language provided no word for whorehouse. There they consumed more drinks, after which the colonels ordered a lineup. As honeys paraded out for inspection and selection, Coble instantly spotted his princess for the evening. Wrong, for he naively failed to understand that his hosts selected ladies for their guests. He failed to acquire his princess, believing that an especially perverse soul had assigned him her mother. Assuming the role of a proper guest, he escorted his consort to one of the rear rooms. Seeing Colonel Boun enter an adjoining room with his princess in tow crushed Coble's ego. At length, after the load of Chinese cuisine, rotgut liquor, an Indian movie, and liberal wallowing in sinful activities, he was ready to call it a night. Wrong again.

Drifting through a drowsy, post-coital mist, he abruptly awakened to pistol shots: bang-bang-bang, followed by a deathly silence. Was it a Pathet Lao attack? No, the colonel's three shots pumped into the ceiling signaled completion of the first round of fun. Then it was on to Train Station Two and more drinks. This time his straw got shorter. For it appeared fate had picked for him a female that someone wielding an ugly stick had pummeled often and

mightily about the head and shoulders. However, to her credit, she possessed a body that would have erected a wooden phallus on a marble statue. It was Deja Vue, albeit with a different setting, new room, adequate performance, but much quieter this time. Now Coble determined that he must flee this version of Lao fun and games, and return to the Air America house. He quickly donned his clothes, slid out the rear door, and walked six blocks to the house. However, escape from this momentous night was not possible. Parked in front of the house was the colonel's Jeep, containing the driver, the mess sergeant, and a large machine gun. With maximum gotcha humor, they captured him and returned him to number two. Within thirty minutes, three familiar reports rang out, and it was on to number three.

After one more parade, he got lucky. He picked the love of his life, retired to the back room, and after a yeoman's task of copulation, fell exhausted into deep slumber. About 0600 hours a familiar bang-bang-bang interrupted all sleep and signaled an official end to the Mess Night.

The FAL brass invited the American commander from Kiou Cacham to the second Mess Night. While Jeeping from one train station to another, he ran over several wild dogs foraging in the street. The commanding officer and one of his troops gunned down those additional animals lucky enough to escape instant death.

No matter how much he tried in the future to avoid the strenuous and somewhat ugly Mess Nights, Coble had to endure three more affairs before reassignment. Fortunately, after such activities, flight operations never commenced before 1500 hours.

Other calmer gatherings occurred at the Bungalow where American participants consumed a meal and a few drinks on the front porch. One night, while enjoying food, libation, and fellowship, heavy artillery and small arms fire interrupted the peace and quiet. Terrified, the men leapt from the porch, established fields of fire, and began hastily digging defensive positions with their bare hands. Chaos prevailed for some time until a wiser hand advised all that a partial eclipse of the moon had perpetrated the firing. Adhering to an ancient belief that the galactic frog was swallowing the moon, and partly in fun, soldiers were shooting skyward to scare the mythic frog and cause him to spit out earth's satellite. In their minds, the procedure always worked, and saved the world's population. The incident turned out to be quite humorous to the Americans, and revealed a side to Lao culture they had never previously

experienced.⁴⁰

One day, in contrast to the dangerous two-legged human varieties, Coble had an encounter with a four-legged animal. Standing along the Mekong River on a high bank was a single wild bull elephant. Curious, he decelerated and hovered to a point a hundred feet from and ten feet higher than the beast. Unnerved by his large foe, the creature began shifting from side to side, swinging his head, and flailing with his trunk. As Coble moved closer, the animal charged. Having seen enough, Coble deferred to Mother Nature's largest mammal.

HOTEL ROMEO

Not at all surprising to pilots working in the harsh Lao environment, the generally reliable 1820 Curtis Wright engines installed on the H-34s occasionally failed. One upside attached to the superb engine, the "piston banger" usually displayed some indication of an impending failure by running rough, surging, temporarily cutting out, or other similar clues of malfunction. However, in a country seventy-five percent covered with mountainous jungle topography, with a dearth of available forced landing sites, sudden engine failures could present aviators with the ultimate challenge.

On 10 June, Jim Coble was returning late from Kiou Cacham with a load of RLA soldiers, when he experienced an "unannounced" engine failure near the Elephant Rock checkpoint located a few miles east of Luang Prabang. The abrupt hair-raising stoppage, and resulting deafening silence, afforded him few options, with only nanoseconds and precious little opportunity to plan and act, relying solely on previous training and youthful reflexes, he expertly autorotated Hotel Romeo onto an east-west oriented sandbar in the Nam Khan.

Leaving half the troops to guard Hotel Romeo, Coble waded fifteen feet to shore and climbed a vertical ten-foot riverbank, with his Flight Mechanic Isaac Dewey Maze, a slender, blond, seemingly fearless youth from Alabama, and the remaining troops. They walked along river paths in the general direction of Luang Prabang. Finally, intercepting Route-13, they continued toward the royal capital. The normal six mile as-the-crow-flies flight increased by a multiplier of two walking the hilly contoured roads. Therefore, the extended journey necessitated an overnight stop in a small village.

⁴⁰ Jim Coble Emails, 07/22/02, 07/23/02, 02/16/02, 02/20/03.

They arrived at Luang Prabang the following morning and discovered that, because of the weekend, no one had even suspected them missing the previous night.

That same day, anxious to arrange a timely recovery, Coble and Dan Gardner flew the short distance to the green mermaid over established Route-13 that was relatively close to the aircraft. For several days thereafter, Burt Palmer and "Hooker" Maze described as a quiet, tireless worker, rotated to the sandbar attempting to evaluate and repair the engine sufficiently for a ferry flight to Luang Prabang. During this period, rain showers inundated the area and the river level rose substantially. Each night, Palmer forwarded progress messages on the Special Force's radio net to Bill Lane in Udorn. Parodying Johnny Cash's new country song, *How High is the Water, Momma*, Palmer inquired, "*Bill, how high is the water, Papa? Be advised the Nam Khan is five foot high and rising. Send parts.*"

During the troubleshooting phase, starting with the simplest tasks, they searched for obvious visible damage, conducted a compression check, changed sparkplugs, and then dual magnetos. Palmer then started the engine and found that even running smoothly at low RPM, the engine only developed partial power, then shuddered and cut out while increasing power. They changed the carburetor. Since established SOPs did not allow mechanics to perform a full run up, John Fonburg flew into the site to accomplish this task. All went well until he attempted rotor engagement, and encountered the identical problem as Palmer had experienced.

As work proceeded on Romeo, heavy rain showers continued to gather and course through the area, hampering progress. The water level eventually crested, elevating the river to flood stage. Following the failure to repair the machine sufficiently to fly it off the island, attention reverted to saving the machine from the rising river. To keep the H-34 afloat and tow it to the bank before the water level peaked, the men fashioned a simple cradle under the aircraft, with empty fifty-five-gallon fuel drums, ropes, and slings to maintain buoyancy.

With little more remaining to complete this segment of the recovery effort, Palmer returned to Luang Prabang. Maze remained in the field to help supervise, and volunteered to remain with the ship. Feeling insecure, the bucktoothed youth asked the Lao officer in charge of guarding the machine for a weapon, but the man refused to loan him one. Armed with only his pistol, Maze spent a long night worrying about Pathet Lao patrols and listening to unnerving jungle noises. Frustrated over delays, increasing high water, and lack of cooperation, he returned to Udorn the following day.

On the 24th, seven Air America mechanics--A. Bague, Moon Centeno, Louie Moser, M. Decosto, Mariano Canoy, A. Gonzales, and A. Abuy--were sent to Luang Prabang to help with the recovery process and ultimate repair of Hotel Romeo.

First attempts to convey the helicopter ashore failed. With water already twelve inches over the sandbar, the recovery crew, consisting of the Filipino mechanics, and several Lao army troops, turned Hotel Romeo ninety degrees to the sand bar and hooked thick ropes to the tail wheel assembly. Then all hands positioned themselves along the ropes and attempted to tow Hotel Romeo perpendicularly toward the riverbank. At first, the plan appeared to proceed well. After tugging gently on the rigging, the ship slid off the bar and entered the channel in the direction of the bank. To further complicate the recovery process, the edge of the small island lay fifteen feet from the riverbank with an estimated water depth between six to ten feet, and the jury-rigged floatation devices barely displaced the H-34's buoyancy. The tug of war continued. As the men struggled with the load and attempted to haul the tail up the inclined bank, the extreme nose down attitude and enormous aircraft weight caused the landing gear to mire in thick, goeey mud. At that point, a combination of water, muck, and especially the nearly vertical bank, created obstacles far too difficult to overcome for the available manpower. Shortly afterward, the river crested, and eight feet of water inundated Hotel Romeo to the cockpit seat level.

All work ceased, while great minds paused to evaluate the situation. The men eventually concluded that breaching the riverbank presented an impossible task for them, and required modern machinery. A search ensued within the Luang Prabang area for hardy rolling stock capable of hauling the unwieldy machine ashore. Eventually the recovery crew located an RLA engineering detachment and arranged for the unit to move a bulldozer to the site, with a Lao captain assuming the responsibility of moving the aircraft to higher ground. The dozer operator elected to grade the bank and produce an inclined ramp, and over the next two days, he scraped the bank down sufficiently to create an acceptable looking slope.

After completion of substantial earth moving work, personnel again hooked H-R's tail section to the rope cable and the recovery process resumed. Coble watched fascinated as Hotel Romeo slowly emerged from the water and slithered up the incline. Then he cringed as he heard a gut-wrenching sound of tearing sheet metal, while the ship incurred substantial damage to the tail wheel assembly and belly. For a moment, Coble believed all their efforts were in vain.



Remote site of the Hotel Romeo field engine change after the aircraft was laboriously towed to shore from the Nam Khan sandbar. The area was leveled and prepared by a FAR bulldozer operator.

Ron Clarke Collection.



Front view of Hotel Romeo with the intricate "field expedient" wooden lifting device erected to remove and install the R-1820 engines. Ron Clarke's H-34 to the right. Ron had delivered supplies to the site. Clarke Collection.



Young Lao soldiers assigned to guard Hotel Romeo during the recovery and repair process. Air America Filipino mechanic to rear wearing a straw hat.

Clarke Collection.

Finally perched on high ground, Lao troops guarded the helicopter while it dried thoroughly. When available while work continued on Romeo, Jim Coble, flying a borrowed helicopter, ferried the maintenance crew--Palmer, Bague, and a couple of other Filipinos--to and from the site. As the crew house had no extra room, and with the main hotel closed for repairs, the Filipino crew temporarily rented a house. Over several days, while Captain Coble and other pilots conducted support trips and checked repair progress, the mechanics used a field manufactured wooden "A" frame, a hoist, and other arduous field expedient techniques, to drop the old engine. Then, after a replacement engine arrived on a C-46, Coble slung the new R-1820 power plant to the site and the old motor to Luang Prabang. Other pilots, including Ron Clarke, delivered supplies during the protracted operation. ⁴¹

After installation of the new engine, working with only essentials, the talented mechanics, honchoed by Bert Palmer, cleaned the fuel tanks, wired the tail wheel assembly to the fuselage, and struggled to restore Romeo to an acceptable airworthy condition for a one-time ferry flight. Now they found the days immersed in muddy water had exacted a vicious toll on equipment. With most electronics, including navigation, communications radios, and ASE out of commission, any conditional ferry clearance became a moot point and a calculated risk. Moreover, in addition to several inoperative flight instruments, only the main fuel tank functioned properly.

Finally, on 28 June, eighteen days after the sandbar forced landing, accompanied by a covering aircraft, Coble departed the site. He leapfrogged first to Luang Prabang, then Sayaboury for fuel. While there, an anxious Special Forces Customer begged the Air America Captains to conduct resupply missions to a besieged RLA unit a few miles upriver, halfway up an east bank mountain. Although aware that they were violating Company regulations and common sense, the pilots could not refuse the life and death situation. Having accomplished this task to an unimproved landing zone that appeared recently hacked out of the jungle, the pilots continued to the Udorn base. While maintenance completely refurbished the ship, Hotel Romeo remained in the hangar for more than two months before returning to upcountry field

⁴¹ Ron Clarke Email, 06/06/15.

work.⁴²

Air America pilots often delighted in testing each other's intestinal fortitude. Coble once offered a senior C-46 pilot waiting for cargo to be loaded at Luang Prabang if he wanted to accompany him on a short mission. As the stiff-wing jockey was curious about helicopter operations, and the flight was only a fifteen-minute round trip east to the top of the prominent Elephant Rock, he accepted the offer. Arriving at the tip of the elephant with two drums of water for a surveillance unit, Coble discovered the landing zone to be in a shallow bowl. On short final, the other pilot became agitated, squirming in his seat when the airspeed indicator dropped well below what he was used to seeing while landing his plane. After depositing the load, Coble asked his passenger if he would like to see what would happen should they lose an engine. The older man answered in the affirmative. Coble then climbed to 3,500 feet, and while crossing the end of the runway, disengaged the transmission from the engine (called splitting the needles), lowered the collective, and entered autorotation. Then he adjusted the nose of the aircraft to achieve a 4,500-foot per minute rate of descent, circled 360 degrees, touched the tail wheel down, and pulled full up collective, landing on exactly the same spot he had designated at the beginning of the maneuver. After taxiing to the parking area and shutting down, Coble exited the cockpit. However, several minutes passed before the other pilot followed, and ten minutes before he could utter a word. Before leaving Luang Prabang, he thanked Coble for the flight. Coble speculated that the man never rode in another helicopter.⁴³

⁴² Segment Sources:

According to Wikipedia, derivation of the phrase Coble's Hideaway painted on the side of Hotel Romeo was a parody on the 1954 song *Hernando's Hideaway*, published by Ross and Adler for the stage musical Pajama Game. It was a way for the frustrated flight and ground mechanics to have a little fun with Coble for landing in a remote location.

Jim Coble Emails, 01/08/02, 01/31/02, 02/09/02, 02/11/02, 02/20/03, 04/03/04, 04/04/04, 04/13/04.

Burt Palmer Emails, 03/11/04, 03/12/04, 03/12/04, 03/14/04, 03/24/04, 06/27/04, 06/29/04.

Burt Palmer Interview, 05/19/04.

The Hotel Romeo engine overhaul report later forwarded to Udorn revealed a worn internal single stage supercharger and worn impeller blades caused by dusty operating conditions.

Air America Log, Canoy Account of Letter of Appreciation Written by Acting Lead Mechanic, Bill Palmer, 07/02/61.

⁴³ Jim Coble Email, 03/19/02.

One night in July, Coble received word that the daughter of Sayaboury's governor was suffering from an appendicitis attack and the Customer asked him to return her to LP for medical care. Except for occasional twilight maintenance flights to Udon, Air America helicopter pilots normally did not launch at night. The inherent danger involved in single engine mountain operations, and a lack of electronic navigation devices and visible forced landing areas, outweighed any perceived benefit. However, in this case, the political implications of the emergency overshadowed the risks.

Following a short flight, Coble landed near the airfield in a circle of head lighted Jeeps. He then returned the stricken girl to Luang Prabang, where French medical personnel delivered her to the local hospital.

Two weeks later, Coble landed in a landing zone a hundred yards from a large wood government building and attended a party to celebrate the healthy girl's full recovery and safe return. ⁴⁴

After Coble participated in RLA maneuvers to retake Nam Tha Town, Abadie reassigned him to Udon during the third week in August. ⁴⁵

BARBES

A few weeks before Coble's departure, Al Barbès, read in a dated Bangkok paper that his wife, whom he had transferred to the city at his own expense, was in a hospital after being seriously injured in a traffic accident. Incensed that Air America had failed to inform him of her accident or medical status, he left his H-34 at the Luang Prabang airfield and caught the first ride south to Bangkok. After seeing his wife and ascertaining that she was recovering nicely, he was prepared to return to work, but the Company summarily terminated him for leaving his place of work and conducting the unauthorized trip. Moreover,

⁴⁴ Jim Coble Emails 01/31/02, 03/30/05/, 03/31/05.

⁴⁵ Jim Coble August Flight Time Records.

headquarters Taipei refused to repatriate him or his wife to CONUS. Barbes took umbrage at this slight and the dialogue became rather testy, with Barbes threatening legal action. Since this would have resulted in unwelcome public media exposure, the Company eventually paid the family travel expenses to the States. ⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Malcomb Bird Emails, 07/06/02, 05/14/14.

During early May, the Acting Secretary of State, concerned over enemy ceasefire violations in the Padong area, forwarded a message to Ambassador Brown in Vientiane stressing the:

"Moral obligation and practical need to preserve the Meo by aiding them materially and politically."

Ambassador Brown responded:

"Since the beginning of the year, the U.S. had provided the Meo [then estimated at 6,700 warriors] with arms and guidance, urging them to fight the Pathet Lao.. and that White Star Teams should remain with the Meo as long as feasible." The gamble paid off, but during current hostilities, with Meo forces under pressure in Xieng Khouang [Province], the Lao government should officially declare the Meo guerrillas an integral portion of the FAL Army which held front line government positions. It was hoped this would involve the ICC organization in ceasefire violations.

Moreover, the RLG should continue to supply Meo forces with food and ammunition, but, unrealistically, no further arms...to permit the Meo to defend themselves. Offensive actions should be avoided while the ceasefire was in effect. ¹

A week later, Brown answered State's concern indicating:

"Large numbers of enemy troops had been freed by the partial cease-fire, and the enemy had embarked upon a fairly widespread and determined effort to locate and disperse or destroy the Meo auto-defense units. This enemy activity was compelling the redeployment of the Meo units from exposed positions north and east of the Plaine des Jarres to areas northwest and southeast of the Plaine. This redeployment removed the Meo threat to the enemy supply routes [along Route-7]. On the other hand, however, the Meo were now located on an arc of rugged terrain that commanded all approaches from the Plaine des Jarres westward to Luang Prabang and southward to Vientiane, and that afforded concealed lateral movement and reinforcement and sufficient depth for maneuver."

¹ Joint Chiefs of Staff, 83, 84.



Meo troops waiting for an assignment and deployment.
Clarke Collection.



A barefoot Meo patrol on a narrow mountain path during the rainy season. A "Red Beret" officer discusses latest intelligence with other clansmen.

Clarke Collection.

In rebuttal to an earlier State message regarding arms and no offensives, Brown related that the Meo would certainly resist enemy offensives, and would counterattack and create diversionary measures. As to weapons, they had already been supplied to reinforce Padong.

Brown further indicated that complaints by General Phoumi to the ICC representatives to investigate the fighting at Padong had thus far proved fruitless. ²

Reports from 13 to 23 May specified that enemy units shelled Ban Padong on eight continuous days during the period, and enemy "*probing attacks were reported on the 18th, 21st, and 22nd.*" These were among twenty-seven ceasefire violations. ³

At Padong, then one of only four remaining friendly airstrips in Military Region Two, a ceasefire--shaky throughout the Kingdom--never fully existed, and hostilities only intensified in the heart of Meo Country. Supported by Air America air assets, a White Star team, PARU units, and CIA field agents, the fortress and outposts manned by Meo posed an unacceptable threat to communist regional ambitions. Consequently, under constant heavy pressure from several ridgelines around the site, friendly forces abandoned the site in early June.

For several months in 1961, a majority of the Air America helicopter fleet and crews supported Vang Pao's operations in Military Region Two. The men hauled everything imaginable, including pigs and chickens whose fecal matter found its way into cabin section crevices. Worse, bodies of dead and bloody wounded soldiers contributed nasty smelling residue to the cabin flooring. Lacking sufficient water in the field to flush out the rough green decking, over time, one aircraft smelled so bad that no one wanted to operate it. When washing the cargo compartment at Air America facility maintenance failed to eradicate the odor, one pilot obtained a bottle of oil of wintergreen from the U.S. Navy flight surgeon attached to MABS, and liberally splashed the solution throughout the cabin floor.

This failed to help much either, and it was a long time before maintenance resolved the problem. After a long discussion regarding extra weight, a later retrofit with removable

² Joint Chiefs of Staff, 102, 103.

³ JCS, 117.

form-fitted lacquered plywood was promoted by Jack Forney. In addition to helping with the extraneous matter, the platform helped prevent damage from internal loads by spreading the weight of heavy fuel drums and wooden boxes of "hard rice".⁴

Until overnight accommodations were established, H-34 pilots serviced Padong only on a daily basis or slept in the helicopter. Later, after natives erected a bamboo and thatched roofed hooch in a shallow bowl west of the north-south grass strip, two H-34 crews RONed. The hut's interior was rustic, consisting of a bare earthen floor, equipped with two sets of bunk beds made from bamboo and parachute cord. A parachute panel lined the roof to help prevent dust, insects, and vermin from falling on sleeping occupants. Because low temperatures in the higher elevations of Lao prevailed at night, the men carried sleeping bags with their RON kits. Depending on available fuel stocks, weather, and work requirements, RONs extended to three or four nights.

Some crews considered the site a good place to RON, with Special Forces personnel always pleased to have company. They generously allowed crews to utilize the live fire range when off duty. Providing two hot meals a day, a Meo houseboy cooked a large kettle of rice, then heated a pot of assorted C-rations, and combined the mess into a "C-Rat stew." It proved acceptable fare for the hungry men. Crewmembers found the World War Two vintage rations so aged that dry Lucky Strike cigarettes burned like a fuse. After supper, the Americans generally relaxed sitting around the campfire with Chance's team drinking beer or booze and listening to Margaret Whiting's World War Two songs beamed over the Armed Forces short wave radio station. One night an unusual volley of incoming fire panicked the group, causing everyone to scurry in all directions for cover.

Padong was not always easy to find during adverse weather. Malcolm Bird was en route there using the preferred Paksane passage, but weather pushed him continuously east. Believing he was further northwest and would eventually intercept a southwest valley that Vang Pao's troops used as an infiltration route to the Plain of Jars, he arrived at a

⁴ CJ Abadie Emails, 02/13/99, 06/10/02.

Hard rice: Although the term was not used at the time it was a politically correct term used by participants for military weapons, ammunition, or any other tools of war.

Jack Forney Email, 03/18/99.

EW Knight Email, 05/04/02.

ridgeline.⁵ While circling and looking east for the Padong strip, he slowly ascended the mountainside and encountered a group of enemy troops and CJ Abadie's Hotel Delta wreck. Realizing the present and immediate danger, and using the helicopter as an offensive weapon to minimize battle damage, he increased power, dumped the nose over and directed the ship toward the enemy hoping to surprise, panic, and scatter them. Some men did run, but enough remained to inflict thirty-two holes in various helicopter locations. However, the deterrent worked. None of the damage was serious and he eventually found his way to Padong.⁶

Other tense situations occurred. Early one morning, a volley of gunfire close to the crew hut awakened Captain Jim Haver. Fearing they were under attack, he grabbed his carbine and boots that hung from a nail to keep nocturnal critters from nesting in them, and dashed outside looking for a foxhole. He discovered that the top sergeant, while starting morning coffee in the cook tent, had encountered a large green bamboo snake. From the number of holes in the ground, brass laying on the dirt floor, and the perforated snake, it was apparent that the man, startled and without thought of the implications of his act, had instinctively fired at the reptile. Creating a positive spin on the incident, Jim rationalized the incident as being substantially more effective than any alarm clock.⁷

One of the first stories circulating regarding Padong concerned an ignorant local who attempted to catch a falling rice bag during a C-46 airdrop. He was successful, but the weight and gravity took a toll on him, and it became the last bag anyone tried to catch from the air.

Pilots were not particularly enamored over Padong work assignments, or the inherent dangers in the area. To nervous souls, weather always constituted a threat and a distinct

⁵ At the time Malcolm Bird was unaware he was across the valley from Padong at the Khang Kho ridgeline.

⁶ Malcomb Bird Emails, 05/21/14, 05/22/14, 05/23/14.

John Fonburg Phone Conversation 6/1/91.

Jim Haver Email, 07/15/02.

Fred Sass Email, 09/03/02.

Jim Coble Email, 03/16/02.

⁷ Jim Haver Email, 07/05/02.

problem when attempting to arrive there via Paksane or directly from Vientiane. It might be "severe clear" around the area, yet perversely, the site always seemed socked in with low clouds or fog. A rotating crew expected the relieving crew to arrive on time despite adverse conditions, and became highly miffed at undue delays. Besides the harsh terrain and adverse weather, some aviators imagined bad guys always close to the area. Following many complaints from his charges about the next crew to work in the Padong barrel, CJ Abadie produced a current duty roster displaying crews' future assignment there. Anxious pilots sidled up to the list to view assignments on flight schedules posted at local hotels. If not on the Padong run, one could relax and enjoy another cool beer. For those selected, like bomber crews scheduled for a World War Two Berlin run, knots developed in their stomachs and uninterrupted sleep was difficult. Among the enlisted men, jokes circulated that if one screwed up, the Operations Department would send you to work resupply missions at Padong.

Some pilots attempted to prearrange their R&R trips to Bangkok directly after returning from Padong, and later Pha Khao, as it provided an incentive to return in one piece. Tom Moher observed Fred Sass--who always looked like he was talking out of the side of his mouth because of an improperly set boyhood jaw injury--after returning safely from a Padong assignment enter Abadie's office, where he loudly proclaimed, "Abadie, you SOB, they haven't killed me yet." After venting his emotions, he then wandered into town to begin several days of serious Sass sousing. Despite this outburst, intended merely to be jovial, Fred harbored no overriding concerns with Abadie. However, perhaps because of the Chief Pilot's position, he considered Ab a loner, as he did not appear to have a close relationship with any pilot, especially the Marine contingent. ⁸

Once relieved, stimulated by "get-home-its," pilots rarely thought twice about departing Padong. During foul weather, the Special Forces guys pointed out the westerly and northwest ridgeline saddles. Pilots then launched on a specific heading, climbing rapidly for altitude. When deemed high enough to clear the tallest mountains, they established a southerly heading for home plate. Even for individuals possessing military instrument ratings

⁸ Fred Sass Emails, 09/03/02, 10//09/02, 10/23/02.
Tom Moher Tapes.
Burt Palmer *Air America Detail*.



Weather was always a prime consideration while flying over the unfriendly skies of Laos. Here a H-34 pilot, flying in proximity to scattered clouds, is about to enter the mountainous region thirty miles north of Vientiane.

Mike Jarina Collection.

(generally only Navy and Marines), it proved tough, nervous flying. For about an hour, or until attaining visual flight rule (VFR) conditions, they would grind away on instruments (IFR) for the Air America base, hoping to obtain a positive lock on the non-directional beacon (NDB) before exhausting fuel. On one occasion, a pilot achieved a steady needle on the beacon located fairly close to Udorn. Relieved, he reported his approximate position "in the blind" at an altitude of 4,000 feet. Immediately afterward, another pilot excitedly reported the same flight level. Then another called at "Angels Four." For a few moments, a severe pucker factor prevailed, and the situation certainly emulated the old seat-of-the-pants flying of yore. However, tempting fate always provides drawbacks, and within a month of blatant risk taking, the practice inevitably led to disaster. ⁹

MALCOLM BIRD

The April loss of Vang Vieng allowed the Agency and Vang Pao to utilize the extra helicopters at Padong. At first, Malcolm Bird, called "Tweety Bird" by John Fonburg, and many of the other pilots spent the lion's share of their flying assignments at Padong. ¹⁰ During the month, Bird RONed at the site for ten days, spent a few more in May, and considered the site his home away from home. During the course of his duties supplying outlying Meo villages, he crossed paths with International Voluntary Service (IVS) worker Edgar "Pop" Buell. "Pop," a former dirt farmer from Middle America, entered Laos in October to advise the natives and employ his agricultural skills at the Plain of Jars crossroads town of Lat Houang. Now he coordinated humanitarian aid to refugees in parts of Military Region Two, and would become a beloved and legendary figure to the Meo people throughout the long war.

Apparently, "Pop" took a liking to Bird, for on one occasion at Padong, he invited the pilot to a Meo wedding as a family friend. Unaccustomed to the frequent toasts, followed by obligatory shots of the fiery mountain Lau Lau whiskey (the equivalent of the most potent white lightning produced anywhere), Bird suffered a brutal hangover the following day.

⁹ Jim Haver Email, 07/15/02.

¹⁰ Tweety Bird: The yellow canary depicted in the *Looney Tunes* animated cartoon. The playful Fonburg also referred to Fred Sass as "Catsass."



Harsh mountainous terrain and semi-restricted visibility in Military Region Two during the smoky season.

Clarke Collection.

Bird discovered that "Pop" liked to gamble. While overnight at the Air America house in Vientiane, he observed the elderly gent engage in high stakes poker games with pilots that involved several hundred dollars in some pots.

Throughout the spring months of April and May, slash and burn techniques extensively used by Lao hill tribes to grow rice, corn, and opium poppies, created abundant smoke and haze. Making flying and navigation even more difficult in the smoky season, thunderstorms from approaching southeast monsoons occasionally intermingled in the restricted visibility. As pilots were still learning the area, to prevent disorientation, Vang Pao often assigned guides to shepherd the aviators safely to and from new sites. Guides were essential, for available maps contained large white patches devoid of terrain features or benchmark elevations. To avoid enemy-controlled areas across the valley at Khang Kho, pilots flew short missions close to Padong or to outposts south and east of the Plain of Jars. Flights rarely exceeded forty-five minutes. Positions to the extreme west and north of the Plain of Jars near the provincial borders of Military Region Two and Military Region One, such as the former French-Meo site at Phou Vieng, were normally serviced from Luang Prabang. One small team to the northeast, only occasionally serviced, required over an hour to reach because of the circumnavigation required to avoid a plotted quad-fifty machine gun. In this area, reputed to overlook a portion of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, one could spot movement with high power field glasses.

One particular Flight Mechanic became something of a legend shortly after arriving in country. Former U.S. Army Non-Commissioned Officer (NCO) Carl Diggs was older than other Flight Mechanics. Considered a mature and very sharp individual, he always conducted his duties in a professional manner, and never caused trouble when off duty in Udorn town. The six-foot four-inch slender black man quickly displayed prodigious feats of strength in performing his duties. For example, while loading 350-pound fuel drums for transport, Diggs turned the drum onto its side, and then rolled it up his legs until he supported the can on his thighs. Then delivering a mighty surge with his legs to elevate the drum, he rotated the steel container ninety degrees to the upright position and set it on the cabin floor. The extraordinary achievement constantly amazed onlookers. With a humble smile, Carl always refused assistance, maintaining that he could do his job more easily alone. On occasion, if pressed for time while refueling, people observed Carl lifting partially filled barrels



Lao troops conducting manual refueling at Vang Vieng without benefit of a chamois wired over the funnel. Instead, the chamois is ineffectively tied around the fuel nozzle. Flight Mechanic Carl Diggs is checking the oil reservoir dip stick.

Sass Collection.

and pouring the contents into the funnel. One White Star Captain located at Savannakhet was so impressed with Carl's feat of strength that he practiced constantly until he also managed the lift.¹¹

On one occasion, before it became foolhardy to approach the main Padong strip in a normal manner, several troops, and the dependents that always accompanied the fighters to sites, had massed to board two helicopters. When incoming rounds splashed the area, panicked people scrambled to enter and cram into the cabin sections. Observing the onslaught of soldiers and dependents intent on swamping the helicopter, Diggs stood in front of Bird's H-34 to reject the excess and achieve a manageable payload load.

The overloaded ship still required a rolling takeoff to generate the necessary speed and lift to achieve flight. Assisting Diggs, an indigenous interpreter assured everyone the pilots planned additional trips. His calming words satisfied most individuals, who withdrew to drainage ditches alongside the airstrip, or to the village west of the strip. Despite Carl's efforts, one persistent trooper continued to climb onboard each time Diggs turned to strap other passengers into their seats. During the third attempt, Bird observed Carl boot the man, propelling him high into the air to a height approximating the rotor blades. Malcolm mentally awarded Carl a large gold star for placekicking a trooper the furthest distance with the greatest accuracy.

Early on the first day of his final tour at Padong, Bird prepared for a thirty-five-mile flight to Phou Fa (Site-16), a western Meo base close to the Nam Khan, a large river that delineated the Xieng Khouang (MR-2) and Luang Prabang Province (MR-1) border. The mission, a typical Vang Pao excursion, planned to re-supply outposts, pay families, and troops, and generally show the flag. Case Officer Tony Poe, along with a PARU team that included fierce warrior Thai Muslim Daja Adulrat, operated in this mountainous region. There they continued to recruit and train Meo volunteers from the local area. Striving to secure Vang Pao's western flank and implement the encirclement strategy on the Plain of Jars fringe, they planned to eventually skip from mountaintop to mountaintop, gradually moving further north and gaining strength while preparing to conduct minor forays into enemy territory.

Most pilots agreed that the elevated, rough outposts to the west of Padong were

¹¹ John Fonburg Letter, 11/16/91.
EW Knight Email, 07/28/03.



Attired in cold weather gear, celebrated Thai PARU Daja Adulrat at Agony (VS-16).
Joe Hazen Collection.

difficult to service. In addition to being located in an unfamiliar area with access necessitating flight over mostly enemy territory, fuel availability presented the main consideration. If topped off with sufficient fuel for a return trip--a full load of gasoline generally lasted three plus hours--pilots could haul only small payloads from the 3500-foot ASL Padong strip to a higher altitude. Conversely, if a pilot adjusted his fuel quantity commensurately to accommodate a larger load, he had to know if the remote site possessed proper gasoline. As customary during preparation for a long flight in the rainy season, Bird delayed until he received a pilot inflight weather report (PIREP) from a high-flying C-47 pilot who indicated a clear area in that region. With this positive information, light on fuel, and packed with supplies, Bird departed with his Flight Mechanic and Colonel Vang Pao, who was riding in the left seat.

Much to the surprise and chagrin of many inexperienced pilots, weather patterns changed rapidly in the Lao mountains, especially during the monsoon season. Flying at altitude, Bird encountered no problem en route, but as he approached the site, a low cloud layer rapidly developed, rose to the landing zone level, and obscured most of the mountains. Although Vang Pao recognized two conical hills protruding through the mist that bracketed the village, weather conditions completely clobbered the saddle containing the elevated 5,400-foot site. Bird, now past the fuel load point of no return, briefly considered recovering at Luang Prabang, but quickly rejected the option as unreasonable. For several minutes, he loitered in vain searching for entry to the site, while hoping the clouds would clear. When it became obvious there would be no near-term change in weather conditions, Bird realized that he desperately needed to land before fuel exhaustion occurred and gravity created an unthinkable situation. As a calculated risk often inherent in helicopter operations, Bird made the decision to attempt an instrument penetration into the site. As a tool for such an eventuality, since his first day in Laos, he had recorded altitudes of sites visited. After coordinating with the site Customer, who heard the helicopter orbiting overhead, he devised the most rational plan available. Using ultra high frequency automatic direction finding (UHF-DF) equipment in the cockpit, he lined up between the hills poking through the gauzy layer. Then he initiated a slow, shallow instrument approach. Referring solely to the gages, guided by electronic azimuth signals from Tony Poe's emergency radio and the Flight Mechanic's directions, the exceptional pilot successfully landed. The maneuver demonstrated a highly skilled and joyous accomplishment, but not one often repeated at such a demanding

site--one that had gained a gallows humor categorization of "Agony" among stiff wing jocks. Bird, highly miffed at the fixed wing pilot who relayed the erroneous PIREP, briefly considered striking him mightily about the head and shoulders should he ever discover the gentleman's identity.

After refueling, the crew performed several re-supply shuttles. Toward late afternoon, with weather still threatening, the mechanic topped the ship off with fuel for the return trip to Padong.¹²

ACTION

As serious hostilities escalated and enemy infantry encroached on the Padong area, frustrated Special Forces personnel attempted to harass and discourage enemy advances. Using Helio Courier planes as bombers, they air dropped hand grenades in glass Skippy peanut butter jars and created ersatz napalm bombs manufactured by introducing soap powder as a thickener into drums of 115/145 fuel. (This mixture was often called "hot soup.") During the critical period, Ron Sutphin removed the rear door and loaded his Helio with activated mortar rounds. He and his drop man flew several bombing sorties per day in and around the Plain of Jars for eleven consecutive days. Normally only creating dust plumes, this unique form of warfare appeared ineffective to most pilots. Merely a pinprick, the methods were only a temporary interlude in the determined communist strategy to chase the Meo interlopers from their occupied territory. Toward the middle of May, the enemy introduced additional mountain guns to the elongated Khang Kho ridgeline. Then well within range, they pounded the Padong area with increased intensity. A week before, following artillery barrages that forced Fred Walker to abort a landing, to forestall future operational delays, the natives hacked out a short Helio Courier strip on a sloped area above the western hollow where American hooches were located. Although there is no documentation of any STOL airplane using the alternate strip, removed from direct fire, H-34 pilots found this a much safer location to operate for six weeks.¹³

¹² Malcomb Bird Emails, 07/07/02, 09/02/02, 09/02/02, 06/21/03, 08/30/03.

¹³ Bill Leary Interview with Ron Sutphin.
Malcomb Bird Email, 10/28/02.



T-6s flown by Thai pilots occasionally conducted operations in the Padong area.
Clarke Collection.

However, unfortunate incidents did occur. After landing and securing his engine, incoming mortar rounds impacted close to Bird's aircraft. With the blades still unwinding, he planned to jump onto the landing gear and scurry to a protective ditch located parallel to the ship. The plan failed, resulting in an ungainly exit from the cockpit and a painful injury. While evacuating the cockpit, Bird's feet tangled and he plunged several feet, landing sprawled on his right side over the horizontal gear strut. The trauma resulted in nasty looking bruises extending from his knees to his upper rib cage. The White Star team medic, "Doc" Wheeler," examined him for cracked ribs. Concluding that they were fine, he gave Bird pain medicine, and he continued to march.

Flying the following week was not much fun, particularly while sitting or bending to enter the cockpit. As a precaution, Wheeler advised him to go to a hospital in Bangkok for a battery of ex-rays, but other pursuits took precedent. Later stateside ex-rays revealed that he had fractured the head of his right femur, which eventually required a total hip replacement.¹⁴

HELIOS

Most helicopter pilots were initially unfamiliar with Helio Courier aircraft, but they soon became impressed with the plane's capability to haul up to either 1,500 pounds of assorted equipment or six passengers, and with the skilled pilots' ability to land at extremely low speeds on degraded mountain airstrips. Jim Haver recalled watching one plane land into a strong wind and being able to walk alongside the plane until it touched down. Shirley Holt saw one aircraft touch down across the runway at Udorn in a thirty-five-knot crosswind. Then, to his surprise, the pilot took off, raised ten feet above the strip, and let the wind blow him backward.

Two Helio pilots, Fred Walker and Ron Sutphin, initially worked in the Theater, attempting to persuade reluctant Customers to utilize and fly in the machine. A bit of a perverse individual, Sutphin liked to scare the passengers, but Walker was very conservative, and not particularly dramatic. Less experienced Helio pilots were Bob Smith, Gary Malmberg, and Bill Andresevic, who had only been flying the machine since April. They all performed

¹⁴ Malcomb Bird Emails, 10/31/04, 11/06/04.

superb work at Padong, flying into the site with much needed H-34 fuel, executing airdrops when unable to land, or reconning enemy gun positions across the valley. Moreover, they assisted and escorted new H-34 drivers, who experienced trouble with hot season engine oil leaks and foul weather navigation north of Vientiane.

The few friendly Meo strips hacked from ridgelines in the region were normally quite rough, but became measurably worse for Helio Courier pilots during the rainy season. Driving rain eroded landing surfaces, creating ravines, ditches, and nasty potholes that could seriously damage the fragile plane's undercarriage. These factors, plus an abnormally weak tail section, led to incidents.

After a Helio landing accident at Meo headquarters, a Customer asked Jim Haver to sling the fuselage to Wattay Airport. This would be a first for him. Because of the extreme altitude (5,000 feet ASL) and load factor, he could not dislodge the unwieldy object from the ground. From a hover, realizing a successful lift unrealistic, he attempted to cut the load using the cyclic "pickle" switch. Nothing happened, for he had initially neglected to activate the system. Therefore, holding the cyclic steady against his left knee, he swiped at the covered switch several times with his right hand until turning it on and achieving the cut. Then, after landing and consulting with the Customer, as an alternative to a fuselage sling load, he flew slowly south to Vientiane with both wings strapped firmly to the H-34 belly.¹⁵

Incoming one-hundred-and-twenty-millimeter mortar fire commenced while John Fonburg and Jerry Buffington slept at Padong. Against such an eventuality, they had parked their H-34s a considerable distance off the side of the strip. Their main concern then centered on their own safety and finding a deep hole if necessary. The following day, worried about the random shelling destroying his arms cache, Vang Pao assigned them to re-position the ammunition depot to defilade in a western hollow several hundred yards from the grass strip. During the transfer, they spent several hours dodging incoming rounds. To show his appreciation, Vang Pao invited the pilots to lunch in his thatched hut with his many wives and extended family. Afterward, he directed two wives to present the pilots with handcrafted

¹⁵ Jim Haver Emails, 07/05/02, 03/09/03.
Shirley Holt Email, 06/12/09.

silver Meo necklaces for their morning efforts. ¹⁶

During this critical RON period, Jerry Buffington suffered from acute diarrhea, a lingering gift from Madam Lynne's cooking at the Luang Prabang house. Unable to fly more than twenty minutes before feeling an urge to defecate, he normally autorotated into a landing zone with all switches and valves turned off, then leaped from the cockpit to seek relief. ¹⁷

BAN SAN TIAU

Broad spectrum communist attacks on smaller guerrilla camps had begun prior to the May cease fire and subsequent enemy movement toward Padong. Working out of their normally road bound environment, the enemy telegraphed their intentions. San Tiau (VS-02), a Meo guerrilla training base located thirty-five nautical miles northeast of Padong, ten miles south of the Ban Ban Valley and Route-7, had been under enemy pressure since March. The 200 trainees and village ADC troops at the camp were instructed by a PARU team and paramilitary Case Officers Jack Shirley and Tom Ahern.

On 19 April, Shirley contacted Fred Walker, who was orbiting the area in his Helio. He calmly stated that the base was under attack and the troops urgently required 82mm mortar ammunition. As the situation worsened, subsequent requests were received for .30 caliber machine gun ammunition and hand grenades. Bird and Son pilot, Dutch Brongersma, attempted to air drop supplies, but had to abort when an errant parachute snagged the horizontal stabilizer. Dutch managed to recover at Paksane.

By the 21st enemy attacks measurably increased. Bill Lair, concerned about his people, had Walker fly him over the site in a Helio Courier. Establishing contact with Shirley, he advised the defenders to evacuate should it become necessary. With the situation tenuous,

¹⁶ Bill Leary Interview with John Fonburg.
Jerry Buffington Email, 11/05/03.
Malcomb Bird Email response to 07/07/02 Questions.

¹⁷ Jerry Buffington Email, 11/05/03.

Walker and two H-34 crews were assigned standby status to evacuate the Americans.¹⁸

The following day, Shirley reported that the site still held in the face of repeated attacks. His command post (CP) was not under fire, and patrols could find no tangible evidence of enemy to the south or east. With this conduit still available to depart San Tiau, and for troop morale purposes, he advised against being evacuated by helicopter.

Sunday was a completely different matter. By then, North Vietnamese infantry were noted maneuvering into position in order to deny the defenders escape routes. Helicopter evacuation was now out of the question. After incurring only a few casualties, Shirley, Ahern, and the other defenders departed the heights of Victor Site-02 along a planned escape route to a small settlement five miles south, retaining their weapons and not being pursued. They spent the night at the rally site.

PARU team members had the foresight to haul the camp radio when they departed. Radio calls were received, and an evacuation order issued the following morning. Ron Sutphin located the group and forwarded their position coordinates to interested parties. H-34 crews subsequently retrieved the Case Officers, PARU, wounded, and other tribals.

After consultation with Vang Pao and Lair at Padong, a new base was established ten miles further west of San Tiau. Tom Ahern returned to his former day job at the Vientiane Embassy and Jack Shirley relocated first to Ban Na (VS-15), and then assumed senior agent status at the Padong site.¹⁹

MOUNG NGAT

Moung Ngat (VS-01), formerly a French outpost in the nineteen fifties, was located well east of San Tiau, only a few miles from the North Vietnamese border. According to enemy rationale, the remote government site represented yet another isolated organized mixed Meo-Kha-Thai PARU force that, despite signing of the recent bilateral cease fire agreement, required elimination. In other words, the enemy's presence was considered too close to the

¹⁸ Bill Leary 1961 Notes.

¹⁹ Tom Ahern Book, *Undercover Armies: Central Intelligence Agency and Surrogate Warfare in Laos, 1961-1973* (Washington, D.C.: CIA History Staff, 2006), 66, 69, 72-73.

sensitive North Vietnamese border.

Lacking the presence of American Case Officers, the small force at Mounng Ngat was not as fortunate as the San Tiau warriors. On 13 May, while defenders slept, enemy artillery shells began impacting buildings in the large grassy bowl. Then, just after daylight, two Pathet Lao and Vietnamese battalions lay siege to friendly positions. Emulating General Giap's Chinese-acquired military policy, that of total disregard of high losses in order to achieve an objective, employing human wave assaults the enemy, charged into accurate Thai-directed 12.7 caliber machine gun and 4.2mm mortar fire. Initially thrown back, the enemy regrouped and was again rejected by vicious hand-to-hand combat and exploding hand grenades, but, with the threat of death from handlers to their rear, they continued to advance.

Finally, out of ammunition and options, vastly outnumbered, and nearly surrounded, and after fighting the good fight, defenders still able to function scrambled from their bunkers and dashed at high port for the safety and concealment of a tree line. However, exposed and sky-lighted, enemy fire raked and dropped many troops. Those unscathed were intercepted by an enemy patrol. Hand-to-hand combat for survival again ensued. Finally reaching the trees, hardy Meo familiar with the area enabled the surviving men to reach the rally point.

By the 15th, the remaining force reached a friendly outpost. Bill Lair and his pilot searched the area until 17 May, when the surviving PARU were discovered and flown out.

Several brave and resolute PARU lost their lives during the engagement. Therefore, Lair vowed never again to afford the superior and better equipped Vietnamese fighters an opportunity to eliminate Meo defenders in a static battle like that at Dien Bien Phu. Thus, evolved Lair's sensible policy of retreating when pressured, to live and fight another day. Now that two important eastern enclaves were lost, and without additional men and arms, Lair and his Vientiane superiors were concerned that nothing would prevent enemy forces from rolling up Meo irregulars in all sectors surrounding the Plain of Jars. ²⁰

JACKSHIRLEY'S WAY

Long before the siege of Padong peaked in May, despite respecting the man, Bill Young became disillusioned with Jack Shirley's methodology. He continuously questioned the senior

²⁰ Tom Ahern, *Undercover Armies*, 78-80, 82.

man's determination to remain exposed at Padong, for it became abundantly clear that increased daily enemy activity caused the site to become less tenable, especially in the forward downslope position. He perceived Jack as being much too "Gung Ho" in his quest to present a positive example for Meo troops stationed at the site. However, Young understood that Shirley mirrored Vang Pao's core philosophy that holding Padong demonstrated symbolic Meo resistance. In addition, the troops' families resided there, and the area afforded an excellent place for a semi-normal life to produce crops. More importantly, after being kicked around Military Region Two over many years, the people had to take a stand somewhere. Young believed that Vang Pao would attempt to remain at Padong. But he was aware that, after evaluating the meager resources of men and materiel available to this fledgling army, even Bill Lair harbored private doubts about clinging to hotly contested terrain. In confidence, the Boss Man maintained that if the enemy wanted a location badly enough, and expended maximum assets toward that end, then the friendlies should reposition to a new site. However, true to his original word not to interfere in Vang Pao's plans, Lair wisely kept his counsel.

The logical approach route for enemy troop movements toward Padong lay along the Nam Siam streambed flowing southeast from the PDJ. Over the months, Meo demolition experts had placed numerous mines and booby traps along foot trails paralleling the watercourse and adjacent paths, but they had failed to chart the locations. Consequently, these silent killers caused more casualties among careless Meo than were considered worthwhile.

Shirley erected his tent directly in line with the enemy's projected advance to the heights of the camp. Although against his better judgment, Young's tent sat next to it. When first exposed to enemy shelling, even Vang Pao and his troops demonstrated enough sense to move their original campsite rearward to safer ground near the western located ammo dump. Still determined to show the flag, Shirley stubbornly remained in the open. Young frequently questioned Shirley's judgment, which he believed was somewhat impaired by his twenty-four-hour beer drinking. Overtly taunting enemy gunners, Shirley incredulously strolled around the site in silk Chinese pajamas and shower shoes. The worse the situation evolved, the more he imbibed. Reasoning with him proved difficult and ineffective, as Shirley insisted that movement to a safer area displayed a lack of courage. Young failed to comprehend this line of thinking. As portrayed to him by superiors, their assigned mission did not involve warding off the enemy and holding the perimeter with a weapon. Moreover, he understood that Lair had issued specific orders to his field Case Officers not to become exposed to hostile action

that would result in capture or death. Consequently, Bill felt like a complete fool attempting to uphold Shirley's misguided ideals. ²¹

HOTEL KILO

As murky weather enveloped Military Region Two on 15 May, the first of two serious helicopter crew episodes during the month unfolded. While flying a direct route north from Vientiane to Padong in order to fulfill provisions supporting contract number 39-007, Captain Ed Shore crossed over the Ritaville Ridge gap and entered the large, sparsely inhabited Nam Ngum Valley region abutting Military Region Two's mountain ranges. ²² In addition to crewmembers Captain Shore and Flight Mechanic John P. McMorrow, several RLA troops and roving reporter Grant Wolfkill rode as passengers on Hotel Kilo (Naval Bureau Number 144630). Wolfkill, a *National Broadcasting Company (NBC)* photographer and relatively new correspondent in Laos, after exercising his "divine right" as an exalted media person, caged a ride on Hotel Kilo and occupied the vacant copilot seat.

"Lee" Holt was scheduled to fly with Shore that day. However, in a strange twist of fate, during a pre-flight inspection prior to launch, a messenger arrived on the flight line from the Vientiane Operations Department informing Holt that he had been rescheduled for another mission. Ensuing events resulted in Holt not flying at all that day. ²³

Close to the hamlet of Ban Veung San, toward the north end of the valley, severe high frequency vibrations were felt through the tail rotor pedals of Kilo, indicating a serious system malfunction to the component. Shore immediately initiated a forced landing. Safely on the ground, but deep in denied territory, Shore, following U.S. Army escape and evasion training, recommended moving away from the helicopter to higher ground to await rescue. However, the older Wolfkill dissented. Influencing the group, he maintained forcefully that

²¹ Bill Young Interview.
Bill Lair 11/07/95; Bill Leary 1961 Notes, UTD.

²² Although traversing enemy territory, or what was called "no-man's-land," depending on weather, some pilots opted to fly north at altitude over this route in lieu of the lengthier trip via Paksane. In later years this gap became the site for a hydroelectric dam.

²³ Shirley Holt Email, 04/06/09, 06/02/09.



Personnel conversing at Wattay Airport Vientiane, Laos while preparing to board an Air America H-34 for an outlying site. Far left to right foreground *National Broadcasting Corporation* correspondent Grant Wolfkill, a peer, unidentified, but likely representing USOM. Crew by cabin door: Left to right Pat Sullivan wearing his trademark red beret, PIC Neal Early, and Flight Mechanic "Preacher" Bryson.

Sass Collection.

because of the current political atmosphere amid current peace talks, unfriendly elements would never dare to harm or incarcerate them. Events proved him wrong. A Neutralist patrol soon encountered and captured the Americans and marched them toward Vang Vieng. ²⁴

When Shore, passengers, and the aircraft failed to arrive at Padong within a reasonable time period, an extensive search and rescue (SAR) mission commenced. For the rest of the day, Air America pilots conducted standard grid map tracking patterns covering the route widely believed to have been used by Shore. When their efforts uncovered neither Hotel Kilo nor crew, searchers could only assume the worst.

Crews were in the air all night probing the area. Despite copious haze and smoke seriously restricting visibility, the search continued in earnest. Receiving area search instructions at Vientiane, John Fonburg and "Lee" Holt flew intermittently out of Wattay from midnight to almost noon the following day before recovering at Udorn. ²⁵

The previous night at the Luang Prabang Special Forces house, B-Team members logically assumed that Hotel Kilo's crewmembers were captured, and that an enemy unit was currently prodding them north toward Vang Vang. Consequently, they enthusiastically planned to mount a rescue effort. They reasoned that inserting a number of U.S. troops on main trails between the theoretical downing site and Vang Vieng might produce positive results. However, success depended on immediate action. To better organize and implement the plan, the following morning a H-34 pilot flew to Udorn to assemble extra troops, obtain additional search aircraft, and load fuel drums. However, once briefed on the planned interdiction details and checking a chart, Chief Pilot CJ Abadie refused to sanction the mission, claiming that the proposed landing zone was far too small to insert troops. Despite Sergeant First Class Ballard's confidence and assertion that "we can get these guys back," Abadie firmly rejected any mission using Company equipment. Disappointed, Flight Mechanic Bert Palmer, who crewed the H-34, and other Army personnel, without knowing Abadie's complete understanding of the situation, believed that a better than average chance of recovering the Americans existed. ²⁶

On the 17th, after arriving at Wattay Airport, Holt boarded Helio Courier B-835 at 0630 hours. Toward the end of a four-and-a-half-hour search, he discovered something odd

²⁴ JJ McCauley Letter, 1/28/91.

²⁵ Shirley Holt.

²⁶ Don Babitz May 1961 Flight Records and Emails, 7/19/04, 7/21/04, 8/27/04.

looking and out of place in a rice field. The object was covered with brush, tree limbs, and other trash. He asked the PIC to conduct a low pass alongside the stacked debris. Determining that it was indeed the missing H-34, they radioed the coordinates to other H-34 pilots. About the same time, they began receiving small arms fire, with a few rounds striking the aft fuselage. The enemy had not yet learned to properly lead an aircraft in motion.

After the successful sighting of Hotel Kilo, Holt was returned to Wattay Airport, where he joined PIC Ron Clarke and Flight Mechanic PJ Carl in Hotel Tango delivering ICC representatives to the Ban Namone peace talks.

Following an early delivery of dignitaries to ongoing ceasefire talks at Ban Namone on the 17th, and returning to Wattay Airport in a slightly different approach to cover additional territory in the Padong area, Don Babitz flew the next four hours as an observer in Helio Courier B-833. Toward noon, searchers had rediscovered Hotel Kilo. All were amazed at its location. During the multi-day search, plane and helicopter crews calculated that they had flown over the H-34 numerous times, but failed to observe outlines of the well-camouflaged ship parked beneath the piled trash debris close to a rice paddy berm.

Equipped with a reference point to focus SAR efforts, Babitz flew Hotel Sierra to the hamlet of Ban Veung San the following day. Circling the area, he searched for two and a half hours. Bob Campbell and "Lee" Holt in Hotel November also searched the area for an equal amount of time. Their efforts failed to reveal evidence of any missing crewmembers or passengers, while other chagrined crews realized that they had passed directly overhead Hotel Kilo on each trip to Padong. Not long after Hotel Kilo's sighting, fearing booby-traps, or bracketing enemy fire, interest waned in attempting an aircraft recovery. Discussions about firebombing the helicopter with drums of aviation gasoline surfaced, but provided mainly bar talk.²⁷

Hotel Kilo became the Air America helicopter program's fourth UH-34 loss in 1961.

Pathet Lao sources eventually admitted capturing the Americans and stories soon circulated about the captives' abysmal treatment. Hope arose that the ongoing ceasefire talks might prompt the men's early release. During a July discussion with Prince Souvanna Phouma, the American Ambassador in Paris requested the Americans' release, or information as to their

²⁷ Don Babitz May 1961 Flight Records and Emails, 7/19/04, 7/21/04, 8/27/04.

status. Souvanna promised to investigate the matter when he returned to Khang Khay. ²⁸

Because of the incident, speculation, and rumors, all helicopter flight crews began carrying an assortment of personal defensive weapons scrounged from Special Forces personnel.²⁹

Initially spirited to Vang Vieng, over several months the Pathet Lao shuttled the Americans from prison to prison, and eventually interned them on the eastern Plain of Jars at Lat Houang. The same prison held Captain Walter Moon and Orville Ballenger, captured in the Vang Vieng area during the previous month. The Pathet Lao also incarcerated Lorenzo "Freddie" Frigillano, a Filipino Air America mechanic, detained about mid-December during the battle for Vientiane. Fellow mechanic, C.B Nabung, captured with Frigillano, was killed in January.³⁰

Over time, the aggressive Moon attempted many escapes. Wounded in the head and a constant thorn in his jailers' side, guards eventually murdered Moon during another "attempted escape." ³¹

The Pathet Lao did not release the American civilians and Filipino until August 1962, a month following the second Lao Geneva Accords signing. Shore immediately returned to U.S.

²⁸ Chronological Summary of Significant Events Concerning the Laotian Crises, Fourth Installment: 1 June to 31 December 1961, Historical Division Joint Secretariat Joint Chiefs of Staff, 25 June 1962, 90.

²⁹ JJ McCauley Letter, 1/28/91.
Malcolm Bird Emails, 07/06/02.

Malcomb Bird Reply to Author's 07/07/02 Questions.
Jim Haver Email, 07/15/02.

³⁰ Bill Leary 1961 Notes. The Author met the short, squat Frigillano at Wattay Airport sometime after his release from captivity.

³¹ The Author's cousin, Reverend (Colonel) Robert T. Anderson, USA, had just completed a sermon at the Fort Bragg Chapel, when he spied Army staff informing Moon's wife of his demise. Up to that point, Moon's status was so highly classified that she was unaware that he had been captured.

Army duty, while Wolfkill produced a controversial book, portraying himself as the main character in the episode.

One former Air America pilot alleged that the helicopter crew was indeed fortunate to have Wolfkill onboard the day of their capture: he was educated, mature, reasonably fluent in French, and thus able to communicate with the captors. In addition, the NBC organization continued intense political pressure for his release.

Fred Sass had never met Ed Shore until the Air America operation. They flew together a few times and got along well. After Sass returned to the Army, he had an assignment at Fort Belvoir, Virginia, supporting the Pentagon and White House Staff. He was still there when Shore was released from captivity by the Pathet Lao and was subsequently transported to Washington for debriefing. Shore then called Sass and, while sharing dinner, related to Sass all the hell he and his mates experienced while incarcerated.. Shore eventually achieved O-6 rank and Sass attended his promotion party. ³²

Toward the third week in May, after laboriously emplacing larger and longer-range Soviet 85mm "Long Tom" field guns, the enemy stepped up pressure and increased bombardment on Padong. ³³ One gauged the enemy determination to force the Meo out during this final siege by the fact that enormously long supply lines required soldiers or conscripted coolies to haul single artillery rounds long distances to forward positions on their shoulders.

CINCPAC, believing that the enemy would increase attacks against Padong, inquired about defense measures in the area. There was also concern that FAL maintain boots on the ground there to ensure an RLG area presence. ³⁴ Within two days, MAAG Laos reported that Phoumi had previously allocated only 255 FAL soldiers to supplement the roughly 800 Meo for Padong defense; that two 75mm pack howitzers were already on site, and two additional guns, mortars, and crews were imminent. Defensive T-6 air attacks, requested by Vang Pao against

³² Fred Sass Emails, 03/28/02, 11/11/02.

³³ Oudone Sannikone, 101.

³⁴ JCS 118.

enemy positions, had boosted friendly morale. However, Chief MAAG did not foresee Padong forces holding the site long if the enemy completely surrounded the position and introduced anti-aircraft (AAA) guns. In that case, supply by helicopter and airdrop would likely screech to a halt. On the upside, he indicated that should Padong fall, the several thousand guerrillas remaining on hilltops around the Plain of Jars could continue operations to interdict enemy movements.³⁵

Padong operations were not always fruitful, and sometimes presented considerable hazards for Air America pilots. On 19 May, Bob Campbell and Lee Holt were working at the site in Hotel Bravo. Overloaded with artillery ammunition scheduled for an outpost, Holt departed the bowl using maximum power. Unable to achieve flying speed much above translational lift, losing RPM, and approaching perimeter trees, a crash seemed imminent. Then, simultaneously out of ground speed, power, and ideas, a miracle occurred. Just beyond the trees, a small clearing about the size of a basketball court appeared. As soon as the nose of Hotel Bravo cleared the trees, Holt dropped the collective to the bottom of its range. As the helicopter struck the deck hard with forward speed, Holt immediately applied the brakes. Then he noticed a fallen tree two feet in diameter lying in the middle of the field directly in the path of the helicopter. Panicked, skidding toward imminent disaster, the cockpit crew braced for a collision and ensuing cartwheel. Fortunately, someone was looking out for them that day, for the log was rotten and Bravo plowed unimpeded through the imagined barrier, but without discernable slowing. The ship continued toward the end of the clearing, finally stopping with the rotor blade system three feet from the tree line. During the maneuver, the engine was first over boosted, and then the transmission predictably over speeded when Holt hastily reduced the collective.

Because he had caused the problem, Holt assumed the risk of ferrying the machine to Udorn. Upon arrival at the Air America facility, the ground mechanics, in contrast to Holt, seemed relatively unconcerned about the incident--ho hum, just another day at the field.³⁶

³⁵ Joint Chiefs of Staff, 120, 121, 123.

³⁶ Shirley Holt Emails, 04/06/99, 05/29/09, 06/02/09, 07/26/09.

During the May fracas, Vang Pao periodically used the few Lao soldiers available to bolster the defenses at Padong. At this critical juncture, advisors devised a plan to insert four helicopter loads of troops into a valley ten kilometers northwest of Padong. In theory, the men would create a diversion to temporarily divert enemy attention away from the main site. Because of lingering bad weather, the movement required an all-day effort, and was only completed by hairy, low-level terrain flying while circumventing clouds. The pilots' efforts were wasted, for any desired results tanked that night, when the unit's commanding officer conveniently perceived heavenly stars improperly aligned for mission success. Therefore, after humping through the darkness, the unit arrived at Padong in time for breakfast. ³⁷

During such operations, pilots discovered that Lao troops possessed extremely low intelligence quotients. While rotating back to Udorn, the Padong loadmaster requested that Malcolm Bird deliver soldiers to Wattay Airport. Counting noses, he recorded twelve grunts and a lieutenant on his kneeboard for the required cargo loading papers. After ensuring that all passengers were strapped in their seats, the Flight Mechanic closed the cargo door. Then, anxious to snap scenic pictures for posterity, he requested permission to ride in the left cockpit seat. While cruising at 3,500 feet, Bird felt a gust of wind on the back of his legs, indicating an open cargo door. During the day, his rearview mirror had vibrated out of place so he repositioned it to observe the cabin entrance. Except for a missing door, everything appeared normal outside the aircraft. However, from the cabin below, passengers were heard talking and laughing loudly.

After landing at Wattay Airport, Bird noted that only twelve people deplaned. Sans one lieutenant, the animated troops buzzed with excitement. Puzzled, Captain Bird found an interpreter to help solve the mystery. Eyewitnesses related that, to demonstrate his rank, if not his intelligence, the lieutenant had leaned against the door with his hand on the emergency jettison handle. When the helicopter encountered mild turbulence, the lieutenant slipped, activated the handle, and presumably sailed into space, enjoying his first and last unsupervised solo glider flight. One possessing any knowledge of flight characteristics must assume that the curved door provided a slightly less favorable airfoil or glide ratio than the normal two to one of an H-34 in autorotation; perhaps not even as efficient as a falling

³⁷ Malcomb Bird Email, 09/02/02.

leaf. ³⁸

VP'S JUSTICE

There were no provisions for incarcerating enemy prisoners at Padong. For this reason, and to bolster his people's morale, Vang Pao conducted a harsh and terrible swift justice for prisoners, or, for that matter, anyone challenging his authority. Therefore, acting as judge, jury, and executioner, Vang Pao continued his practice for years. Two incidents in May, as witnessed by Air America pilots, served to illustrate this point.

One day Vang Pao asked Jim Haver to fly a short hop. In reply to Haver's customary inquiry about the nature of the mission, VP indicated that his troops had recently apprehended an individual who taught children communist propaganda. He wanted to create an example for his people, and to prevent a repeat of similar behavior by flying over the airstrip and throwing the perpetrator out of the H-34. Haver disliked the idea, so he advised the warlord that the helicopter and crew cost his government about a hundred dollars per hour, and the airdrop wouldn't be as effective as a five-cent bullet. The colonel considered this, and, after a few minutes, Haver heard a shot from the vicinity of the village. ³⁹

A similar incident occurred in late May when a Meo patrol captured a member of Kong Le's force. Gathered in the center of the camp, several crews observed and listened to Vang Pao's rapid-fire interrogation through an interpreter. Suddenly, Vang Pao whipped out his pistol and shot the Neutralist soldier in the head. Air America personnel, never having witnessed such a gross spectacle before, were aghast. After querying the interpreter, they discovered the reason for Vang Pao's ire. During the questioning period, the man nonchalantly said that Kong Le possessed exceptionally strong magic--as did all his followers. Vang Pao, unaccustomed to such answers, countered that he did not believe in magic. However, concerned that some of his followers might actually be unduly intimidated or influenced by the man's

³⁸ Malcomb Bird Email, 06/24/02.
Jim Haver Email, 6/15/02.

³⁹ Jim Haver Email, 07/15/02.



Located in a mountainous bowl-like depression the Padong area was often enveloped in dense fog and low clouds.

Clarke Collection.

assertion, the warlord decided not to take a chance, and subsequently executed his enemy. ⁴⁰

AMERICAN CASUALTIES AT PADONG

Disaster struck the Air America helicopter operation on 30 May when Hotel Golf (Bureau Number 148063) crashed at Padong, killing former Army pilots Charles H. Mateer and Walter L. Wizbowski. The incident marked the first death of helicopter crewmembers flying for the Madriver contract, and constituted the fifth H-34 strike in 1961.

As previously emphasized, adverse weather conditions usually constituted a dominant factor for a pilot while working at the site. ⁴¹ Typifying weather conditions at the time were Fred Sass's aborted flights to the site on the 27th and 28th while carrying reporters from Wattay Airport, and once again on the 30th while attempting to assist in recovery operations.⁴²

Other pilots encountered equal problems with Padong weather. One day Lee Holt flew to the site with another pilot, only to discover it completely socked in. To ensure that they would not fly into a mountain, they elected to proceed "on top" between fourteen to fifteen thousand feet. Holt had never flown that high in an H-34 and found the flight controls extremely sloppy. It was not a pleasant experience, so they returned to Vientiane to wait for

⁴⁰ Malcomb Bird Emails, 09/02/02, 10/28/02.

⁴¹ Adverse weather was still a problem at Padong during my tenure with Air America.

⁴² Fred Sass Email, 10/03/02.

the fog to dissipate. ⁴³

Surrounded by towering mountains and ridges from all compass points except directly north, Padong was a weather generator. Peculiar weather patterns and narrowing dew points existed to stimulate rapid formation of thick clouds and swirling fog that flowed down hillsides, churned, and persisted in the bowl-like enclosure. Despite such a dangerous flying environment, motivated pilots still elected to work there.

On the afternoon of the fatal crash, loaders assigned Malcolm Bird the identical assignment as the crew of Hotel Golf. After delivering a load locally about mid-day, he accomplished a successful landing at the grass strip.

Returning from a local resupply mission with Special Forces Sergeant Janosecki, Flight Mechanic Dale Klock, and a Meo guide, former Army pilots Mateer and Wizbowski encountered low clouds that obscured the landing area. They called Bird to inquire how he had managed to land. Transmitting on the frequency modulated radio (FM, 43.0 megacycles) reserved for normal chit chat, not aware if they possessed instrument certificates, he briefed the pilots to commence an IFR approach via the southwest ridgeline over clouds spilling from a lower valley. Then begin a 500-foot per minute rate of descent of short duration until breaking out under the 500-foot above ground level (AGL) ceiling covering the strip. Padong was located on a large ledge or small plateau jutting north from the Phu Bia massif. After passing over a portion of Padong Ridge near the site, because of the tight circling pattern required directly over the strip, pilots normally flew out over the Siam River valley, descended, and turned southwest returning to land.

It was later assumed that the pilots of Hotel Golf had elected to attempt an approach using this method. During the inbound approach, something went horribly wrong. While still in the clouds, Hotel Gulf slammed onto a towering hardwood tree leading to a rise across the bowl and a few hundred yards below the north-northeast edge facing the Plain of Jars. ⁴⁴

At about 1530 hours, Case Officer Tom Fosmire, normally located thirty miles to the northeast at Tha Lin Noi (Site-18), was on sabbatical from his duties there to assist the

⁴³ Shirley Holt Email, 03/26/09.

⁴⁴ Malcolm Bird Email, 07/06/02.
Shirley Holt Email, 03/25/09, 06/02/09.

Padong defenders. Supervising loads, he and Bill Young waited at the ammunition dump for the next helicopter to arrive. They watched as Hotel Golf popped in and out of swirling fog patches. From his vantage point, Young sensed that the helicopter pilot had miscalculated the site's altitude and was flying too low. Then he disappeared. Young assumed that following another circle beneath the clouds and fog, the pilot would shortly return and land in the bowl. Not long afterward, he heard a distant thump and a whap-whap-whap sound reverberating throughout the valley. A shrill, piercing whine followed, as rotor blades separated from the rotor head, causing transmission gears to overspeed. This was followed by complete silence. Young instantly deduced from the combination of adverse weather conditions and loud racket that Hotel Gulf had crashed.

The savvy Case Officer immediately organized people around him, and together they scooted down heavily wooded slopes, heading in the direction of the suspected crash. Reliable intelligence sources placed the enemy farther up the Siam River valley toward the PDJ, but likely in a position where they most certainly had heard or observed the crash. Consequently, Young and his group moved quickly toward the scene, reasonably confident that no bad guys patrolled between them and the aircraft.

Arriving breathless at the scene, Young was amazed to see the H-34 perched in a large tree towering above a steep slope. Apparently, the impact occurred toward the top, pushing the tree over at an angle and causing large branches to brush the slope. Like a shoddy peacock, the impaled helicopter rested solidly on the broad trunk. The sight of the destroyed helicopter excited everyone in the group, but Young and others were considerably more concerned about the status of crew and passengers and immediately began climbing the stout branches.

They discovered the cockpit a bloody, gruesome mess. It appeared as if the aircraft had contacted the tree in a level attitude. The sudden impact and immediate drive train stoppage caused all four transmission mounts to shear, after which the heavy component rotated forward, wiping out the cockpit. Wisowski still gasped, but was mortally injured and shortly expired. Apparently, co-pilot Mateer had died instantly, with much of his skin flayed and sliced into small pieces by flying debris and metal pieces peeled from the fuselage. Additionally, a branch had pierced his torso.

The spectacle proved awful for even the toughest, most seasoned warriors. Fosmire vomited. Young also felt a little squeamish. Luckily tougher Meo were present and available

to perform the dirty work of extracting the corpses. The mountain men lowered the pilots and associated body parts to the ground, where they wrapped and tied the lot in parachute cloth for transport to the strip.⁴⁵

The sudden and violent impact of the crash threw both Janosecki and Klock clear of the ship. The jolt and ejection probably saved their lives, although Janosecki suffered broken vertebrae. Employing a makeshift litter, Meo troops hastily maneuvered him up the steep slope where a helicopter waited to evacuate him south to medical attention.

Janosecki was a curious military type. Born in Czechoslovakia, he had fought the Germans as a youth and then the communists. Later, he joined the U.S. Army. He possessed a most extensive vocabulary of short vulgar four-letter Anglo-Saxon words. If one deleted the F... word, all his conversations would have been halved in content. Despite this defect in his character, he was an interesting and entertaining individual.

Except for minor bruises and minor shock, Klock, a physically powerful individual, appeared to be in reasonably good condition. Accepting the mishap as part of the job, he remained at Padong until CJ Abadie arrived to investigate the crash and question him. Then he returned to work after a reasonable period.

No one ever found the Meo guide, or knew if he had jumped prior to the crash. People speculated that if he did survive, the terrified man probably fled the scene.

Because of the rapidly deteriorating situation at Padong, other crews had been assigned to work the site that day. Since they were instrument rated Navy or Marine pilots, no one else encountered a problem landing at Padong. However, at the time, the U.S. Army helicopter training syllabus failed to include instrument flight techniques. Therefore, speculation and scuttlebutt at the Udorn base hypothesized that the cockpit crew had become disoriented during the approach and spun in.

After interviewing Klock, Jackson Forney, Air America Manager Technical Services Southeast Asia, in a maintenance report dated 5 June 1961, concluded that there was no maintenance discrepancy involved which could have contributed to the accident. Additionally, because of the severe damage incurred, salvage possibilities were limited and not economical

⁴⁵ Bill Young Interview,
Malcolm Bird Email, Reply to Author's 07/07/02 questions.

or practicable at the time.⁴⁶

As the situation at Padong worsened, less gruesome incidents occurred. One happened during a spate of adverse weather. Bill Young disagreed with the emphasis of the immediate resupply of outposts during such weather. He believed that there was no need to place an aircraft, passengers, and pilots in jeopardy for a non-critical mission that could be accomplished at a more opportune time. Taking such risks could not possibly affect the war.

On the day in question, a pilot returning from the east was cruising low under a cloud cover. While maneuvering close to the north side of the Padong mountain, attempting to find a ravine leading to the 4,500-foot landing pad, he heard the rat-tat-tat of small arms fire. One round hit the tail cone severing a tail rotor control cable.

While crabbing to the right, the pilot continued his flight path, driving the crippled machine into friendly territory. People were amazed that he was able to do this. Filipino mechanics climbed down the slopes to assess the damage, and later, a helicopter crew flew down and retrieved the crew and passengers.

YOUNG'S WALKABOUT

During the first week in June the military situation at Padong did not improve. Despite expecting the worst, a stubborn Jack Shirley still refused to move from the open area to a more secure location. Day and night, with no friendlies in front of them and in constant danger from sporadic shelling or enemy patrols, he and Bill Young were perilously exposed. Young, convinced that the site was in imminent danger of a sizable enemy attack, was worried that Vang Pao had not yet designated an adequate fallback position. Although not completely apprised of VP's intentions, he believed that the commanding officer lacked a firm, comprehensive plan to rally his people. While pondering this, he recalled that they had

⁴⁶ Segment Sources:

John Fonburg Letter, 06/02/91.

Fred Sass Email, 09/12/02.

CJ Abadie Emails, 01/20/99, 02/06/99, 02/10/99, 02/13/99.

Shirley Holt Email, 03/25/09.

Joe Leeker, Humanitarian Work.

Jackson Forney's Interview with Klock Following the Accident, 06/05/61, 32.

Ron Clarke Email, 05/31/15. *"Walt was a very fine man and a good pilot. I still think of him and Charlie Mateer every Memorial Day, the anniversary of their deaths."*

previously employed the Pha Khao area to sporadically recruit people for the Meo program. To further investigate a viable regrouping spot, the strong-willed young man unilaterally elected to walk to Pha Khao. Located seven air miles southwest of Padong, he calculated that it would take at least a day, perhaps two, of vigorous humping over difficult mountains and jungle trails to arrive at his destination. Young and six handpicked men braved booby traps, mines, and potential enemy trail watchers during the trek.

At Pha Khao, he conversed with a Meo ADC unit and, following a brief inspection, determined that the sheltered site would fulfill all essential elements necessary for a new training camp. The group then began a return march north toward Padong to apprise Vang Pao of the site's merits. Winding upland, they entered the tiny hamlet of Nhot Mhu, situated beside a clear stream. Young thought this spot, to which a few people had already trickled, might provide an excellent interim location for Padong dependents.⁴⁷

Unknown to Young, during his short absence many people had already begun abandoning a large area east of Padong. With limited space available to camp on the west side of the complex, families were already in the process of relocating to Pha Khao on foot and by air. John Fonburg and other pilots, packing H-34s with up to thirty passengers of all sizes and genders, rolled downhill off the grassy strip to initiate the evacuation.⁴⁸

Young's group proceeded halfway to Padong before hearing the din of distant gunfire. Later Meo troops spilled down the mountainside shouting, "*Don't bother going back there.*" Heeding the warning, he stopped. Jack Shirley later severely criticized Young, maintaining that his assistant had bugged out during a critical period, and left him high and dry.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Bill Young Interview. Nhot Mhu is referred to as Yat Mu on page 96 in Don Schanche's interesting, but not an always factually accurate book *Mister Pop* (New York: Van Rees Press, 1970).

⁴⁸ Professor Bill Leary, Fonburg Interview.

⁴⁹ Bill Young Interview.

ABANDONED

By 3 June exceptionally bad weather enveloped the Padong area. Low clouds and intermittent fog allowed the enemy to introduce additional artillery pieces and bypass some Meo outposts.

On the sixth, enemy artillery accurately impacted on and around the air strip preventing much air support or friendly movement. In mid-afternoon, Shirley received the contents of a radio intercept message relayed from Vientiane regarding an impending enemy attack on a Meo company guarding an approach 2,000 yards from the airstrip. Artillery fire had severed the phone line to the strongpoint, and there was no radio communication with other outposts. A regular Lao company was dispatched to reinforce the Meo, but it disappeared.

Surprising the defenders, the enemy attacked, killing and wounding two dozen Meo. The survivors, arriving at the camp, refused to fight. With the situation untenable, Shirley recommended to the site commander that they withdraw. So began a fifteen-hour march to Pha Khao.

After action reports to Washington stated:

"After two days of artillery bombardment, Ban Padong, the Meo redoubt on the southwest rim of the Plain des Jarres, fell to the Pathet Lao. The Meo evacuated, 'in surprisingly good order,' to a new position seven miles to the southwest."

MAAG stated that Meo forces had conducted a conventional defense of the site because of the significance Vang Pao (and RLG) attached to the area, and of a requirement to defend an adjacent refugee camp. In the future, MAAG personnel intended to discourage the guerrilla leader from holding pressured positions and conducting standard defenses. Instead, they would encourage "harassing tactics," movement to the rear, and evasion.⁵⁰

The same day that all remaining friendly parties abandoned Padong, Malcolm Bird and Jay Erickson worked at the site. Erickson still favored an injured right leg that had kept him grounded for about ten days in late April. During this period, some Marine pilots,

⁵⁰ Tom Ahern, 85-86.
Joint Chiefs of Staff, 11, 12.

erroneously believing that they could transit denied areas before the enemy could possibly react, adhered to the Corps doctrine of flying maximum speed at low level. Unfortunately, Erickson managed to prove this principle wrong. While cruising low west of Padong with his leg propped in the right window (a favored position while another pilot was at the controls), a bullet grazed his right thigh. Evacuated to Bangkok, he received treatment at the Seventh Day Adventist Hospital. After convalescing a few days, he returned to Udorn sporting a cane. Following the incident, weather permitting, Marine pilots began flying at 2,500 to 3,000 feet above ground level to avoid ground fire. The practice proved successful, and the number of hits suffered by aircraft and people diminished commensurately.⁵¹

During the time that Padong was under fire, Udorn scheduling personnel assigned the two H-34 crews to Padong with a primary mission of evacuating Vang Pao should the site experience a serious attack. Early that morning, carrying VP and his entourage to garner support and recruit warm bodies from outlying villages, they spent a good portion of the day away from Padong. Returning late, they discovered the site tightly socked in with conditions not likely to improve. Consequently, at Vang Pao's request they overnighted at Nhot Mhu. The small village containing ten houses was in the southern portion of a large valley west and down slope from the extended Padong ridgeline. The ideal location included a beneficial stream and walking trail leading in a southerly direction to Pha Khao.

Vang Pao awoke early the next morning, unaware of his entire garrison's nocturnal exodus from Padong. Anxious to return to his troops, he launched with Bird, followed by Erickson. At the empty camp, they observed neither good nor bad guys. After more than an hour searching the immediate area, they discovered Billy Chance's White Star team threading their way down a jungle path that wound along the western slopes of the mountain. In order to conduct a pickup, Bird chose a clearing large enough to accommodate the helicopter's fifty-six-foot main rotor blades span, plus some wiggle room. However, he could only land if he carefully positioned the tail section precariously between two trees. Praying that the ASE stabilizing gear would function properly, he kept his feet off the tail rotor pedals during

⁵¹ Burt Palmer Email, 03/12/04.
Malcolm Bird Emails, 09/15/04, 09/27/04.

the hundred-foot descent to landing. The method proved successful, but insufficient power for the altitude only allowed him to lift a couple of men out of the rough, confined area. His second trip to retrieve the remainder of the team proved just as difficult.

Tales of altruism abounded. Special Forces team members not only considered their own welfare. During the night movement from Padong, White Star medic, "Doc" Wheeler, heroically lugged two Meo children on his back to safety. Even Jack Shirley was seen carrying a baby to safety.

Shortly after the loss of the Padong base, "Doc" went to the Green Latrine Bar, one of several watering holes in Vientiane that Special Forces personnel liked to frequent for relaxation after extended stints in the field. Late in the evening, a drunken Lao captain started badmouthing Americans. During the course of his tirade, he ridiculed everything American. The Special Forces men attempted to calm him, but one word precipitated another with the irate captain eventually drawing his .45 caliber pistol and leveling it at Doc and his group. When they left the establishment to avoid a potential incident and prevent bloodshed to their comrade in arms, the captain, then at the height of his glory, crowed to those present regarding his prowess. Angry about the belligerent "piss-ant's" comments, the men left their beer on the table and returned to their compound to retrench. Within an hour, sporting weapons and reinforcements, they revisited the bar. Kicking open the door to demonstrate that they meant business, Doc sprayed the ceiling with 45-caliber grease gun fire. Then, after quizzing and ejecting the remaining Lao, they sat down to finish their beer. Word of the incident quickly circulated, and for some time Lao soldiers and citizens avoided the infamous Green Latrine.⁵²

During the hasty departure from Padong, in addition to unspiked howitzers and mortars, Captain Chance's team left other valuable equipment that they wished to recover or destroy. However, Vang Pao refused to reverse the movement of his troops for what he now realistically believed a lost cause. After reflecting on his successful trip into the site, and calculating the odds of a second landing, Bird indicated that it still might be possible

⁵² Burt Palmer Emails, 03/09/04, 03/31/04.

to land there safely, and offered to return to the site. After a cursory recon, and still finding no evidence of enemy troops, they landed. Except for some mortar damage, no looting or destruction had taken place after the pullout. Actually, it appeared that the enemy, intent on only chasing the Meo out, had never actually entered the site.

Bird kept the rotors turning while the men hurriedly loaded items. Carrying full rucksacks with what was considered critical gear over one arm, two men struggled to the ship grasping a large earthen jar that Bird had purchased and used to store cold beer. The container was about three and a half feet high and two feet in diameter, normally used to ferment native rice wine. The pot still contained a case of beer, but all the ice had melted. To diminish weight, water was dumped and the pot was then loaded in the cargo compartment. The men also destroyed nonessentials they could not take, burned remaining hooches, and everyone departed the area without incident. Following a short flight, Bird dropped the team off at Pha Khao. Since the two pilots were slated to be relieved by a fresh crew the following day, while refueling, they offered Chance's team everything they possessed including razors, shaving cream, toothpaste, extra C rations, and towels. ⁵³

NHOT MHU

Because they previously had deposited passengers, in particular Vang Pao at Nhot Mhu, they returned a few miles north to the refugee site. There, along with International Voluntary Service (IVS) volunteer Pop Buell, who had earlier walked out of Padong, and Margaret, a female public health specialist, they again spent the night in the "Sikorsky Hotels" (a first for Bird) and, because of a lingering foul weather system, for the next eleven nights. Unfamiliar with the area, and unwilling to fly over the ridge or attempt to sneak into Pha Khao through nasty weather, they assumed the better part of valor and remained on the ground. Lack of fuel was another reason not to move, for they had to preserve the amount remaining in the tanks against the possibility of Pathet Lao advances and a requirement for Vang Pao's evacuation. To pass time, Pop and the nurse regaled the H-34 crews with stories of their past work experiences and history. In turn, the crews related their own experiences. Over the next several days, they learned far more about Buell than any other Air

⁵³ The Special Forces teams rotated while Malcolm was on R&R and he never saw his jar again.

America personnel.

The relatively inactive period afforded Bird considerable time to assess reasons for Padong's demise. He speculated that because Vang Pao could not return to Padong during the night in question, direct troop control and discipline became a major problem. According to accounts, the normally gloomy evening evolved into a wet and dismal one. On a few previous days, light skirmishing had occurred at a lonely forward outpost. During the cold early morning hours, following a vigorous enemy probe at the most northern position, which resulted in a complete breakdown of fire discipline, other spooked outposts began firing randomly at shadows or evil spirits. These actions prompted the entire garrison to panic and consider a fallback. Therefore, without Vang Pao's command presence and the threat of harsh discipline to foster a strong countering stand, they had collectively bugged out. With no visible enemy presence the following day, he concluded that there could not possibly have been an attack by a concentrated enemy force on the main base. Both sides had apparently withdrawn after the brief firefight. His two unmolested trips into the position the next day supported this theory.

Over several days at the site that Vang Pao referred to loosely as the "Valley of the Happy Pigs," crews dined on sticky rice, lemon grass, and even fresh pork when available. Because they had donated all their personal gear to the Special Forces team, they were unable to properly bathe, shave, or even brush their teeth.

Expected fresh H-34 crews failed to arrive. Puzzled that no one seemed to care that they were missing, the pilots considered that their relief crews might have attempted to land at Padong, but were unable, and failed to realize that they were no longer there.

With additional refugees arriving daily, the site badly needed supplies, and Buell encouraged a flight south to request a rice drop. As soon as the weather lifted slightly, the two crews launched and snaked along a tributary beneath a low overcast to the larger Nam Ngum. Then they followed this river south to the flood plain toward Vientiane. There they informed the operations manager of Buell's food request and their current plight, and requested that he forward details to CJ Abadie in Udorn. They then walked to the airport restaurant, relishing the thought of their first decent meal in days. There they encountered

Don Babitz and a heavily bearded Fritz Hocevar.⁵⁴ They quickly realized that the two pilots were their replacements who, during the past few days, had accomplished nothing to relieve them. Hoping to effect the crew change, Bird generously offered to lead them to the RON site. They were reluctant, but, after serious coaxing, they departed Wattay north as a flight of four, in marginal but flyable weather. However, even before reaching the foothills, Babitz and Hocevar vanished without even the courtesy of a radio call. Their disappearance required Bird and Erickson to return to Nhot Mhu, and remain several additional days in the field.⁵⁵

Bird and Erickson's trip to Vientiane resulted in an immediate and much needed fixed wing rice delivery at Nhot Mhu, which nearly ended in disaster. As poor weather lingered in the area, the only alternative to dropping the critical commodity seemed to be a blind free fall through a thick cloud layer. To implement the drop, using a VHF hand-held radio, crews on the ground briefed the C-47 pilot on how to align his plane along the long axis of the valley by using ridgeline tops as benchmarks. Then they listened for selected engine noises and radioed the pilot when he was directly over the drop zone. The pilot conducted several dry runs, then, feeling comfortable with the procedure, indicated confidence in conducting a successful drop. Then something went seriously wrong during the actual drop, as rice bags scattered and crashed dangerously close to the H-34s and crews. A number of bags struck hooches and injured a small child. Unconfirmed speculation later indicated that VP had prematurely radioed the drop signal.

Ultimately relieved by different helicopter crews after the weather improved, Bird deposited Vang Pao at Pha Khao.

GET SQUARED AWAY BOY

The scruffy crews and helicopters arrived at the Udorn base during the noon hour. Some of the men wanted to leave for the hotel to get cleaned up. Instead of immediately going to town, Bird and his Flight Mechanic decided to lunch with the MABS Marines in their mess tent. While they were eating, Colonel Johnson approached their table and berated them unmercifully regarding their unkempt, barbaric appearance, and obvious lack of personal hygiene. Bird

⁵⁴ Despite no evidence of recorded flight time after the end of May, Bird's recall confirms that Babitz did fly in June.

⁵⁵ When Phu Khao achieved the status of a full-fledged training base, Nhot Mhu ceased to exist as a refugee village and reverted to an insignificant piece of terrain.

considered the abuse personal, a scathing reprimand following so many long and difficult days in the field. His heated response to the colonel's tirade resulted in his and his Flight Mechanic's immediate ejection and permanent banishment from the mess.

A few days later, Bird apologized to Johnson and explained the circumstances in detail. The colonel also apologized for his overreaction, and all was normal...for a while.

Curious about an explanation for their extended RON, Bird and Erickson queried the CPH. They discovered that Babitz and Hocevar were currently grounded, and in serious trouble. Ab had scheduled them to RON at the site up to the day of actual relief. With the exception of the one aborted flight with Bird and Erickson, the pair of slackers claimed that bad weather had prevented them from leaving Vientiane throughout the entire eleven-day period. Their unwillingness to accept a weather challenge that others overcame marked the beginning of a serious problem that presented near-term adverse implications for the helicopter program. Fortunate for them, they escaped Bird and Erickson's wrath, for neither man lived at the Pratch Hotel. ⁵⁶

AFTERMATH

On 7 June, political factions in Vientiane finally consented in principal to allow International Control Commission (ICC) representatives to participate in a flight to Padong to investigate professed ceasefire violations. The following day, the ICC Chairman, admittedly concerned about the hostilities at Padong, *"proposed that the ICC, on its own initiative, visit those critical areas where large numbers of opposing troops were in close proximity."* He *"requested prompt agreement at the Ban Namone ceasefire talks on those special arrangements, such as transportation, which would allow the ICC to make these inspections."*

Over succeeding days, the Soviets at the Geneva Conference objected to a Padong investigation, and a mid-month meeting at Ban Namone failed to stimulate much interest in the matter. Therefore, the ICC proposal proved academic and was never implemented. The opportunity passed, but it did not constitute a problem, for the site had never been occupied by the enemy and was already abandoned by Meo forces for a more tenable headquarters and

⁵⁶ Malcolm Bird Emails, 06/22/02, 07/06/02, 05/16/14, 05/21/14.

Malcolm Bird's Reply to the Author's 07/07/02 questions, 09/02/02, 06/21/03 (2), 08/30/03, 09/24/04.

training site at Pha Khao.

Not only was the opportunity lost for the ICC team to investigate blatant enemy violations, but USG or SEATO also passed over the chance to legally and justifiably commit troops to contain communist infringements on RLG established bases during the ceasefire. No matter, there would always be another time and place to act.

The façade of an effective and lasting ceasefire continued after Padong fell. Two FAL outposts, located about twenty-five miles north-northeast of Paksane near Hat Bo, and occupied after 3 May, came under mortar attacks from 11 to 12 June. Government troops subsequently withdrew a few miles south. At the same time, the enemy captured additional villages in the Paksane area.⁵⁷

⁵⁷ Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Before joining Air America, some U.S military temporaries had obtained an introduction to, or acquired experience in, mountain flying techniques. Because of the nature of shipboard missions, U.S. Navy pilots had the least experience. East Coast Marines based on the flatlands of New River had little chance to practice high altitude maneuvers except for an occasional trip to the relatively low hills of western North or South Carolina. On the other hand, pilots based at the Marine Corps Santa Anna, California, facility enjoyed the proximity of high, rugged mountains to fly over and conduct landings. Those Marines on overseas tours, because of various deployments in Southeast Asia and shipboard activities stressing vertical envelopment operations, displayed considerably more proficiency after working in difficult terrain. Mountains on northern Okinawa and northern Luzon, Philippine Islands, afforded some exposure and experience in higher elevations. Army pilots, especially youthful ones experiencing their first stint outside the States, generally exhibited less proficiency. The reason seemed obvious. Training conducted in south Alabama, except for dirt mounds constructed to simulate pinnacle landings, provided little opportunity to obtain high altitude experience, although a fortunate individual, when assigned to a North Georgia ranger camp Fort Benning, during a slack period, might receive some confidence-building mountain work with an instructor pilot. ¹

Once involved with Air America, most intelligent pilots rapidly discovered that mountain flying involved a continuing learning process. One listened to those with experience, and generally learned from mistakes; if he did not, severe consequences often occurred. Overconfidence could also lead to grave problems, for just when one supposed that he had the program nailed, unforeseen variables within the constantly shifting mountain environment could surface and cause difficulty. Additionally, at the most inopportune times, events could transpire beyond the control of any mortal. In military parlance, one could call these trials OBE (overcome by events).

¹ Fred Sass Email, 09/12/02.

HOTEL WHISKEY

Consistent with the above reference to mountain training, or lack thereof, the snake-bitten helicopter program failed to escape June without incurring another aircraft loss. On 18 June, after RONing at Luang Prabang since the 16th, Fred Sass, working under Company-Customer ICA contract number 39-007, crashed Hotel Whiskey (Bureau Number 145734) ² in the Ipsenville area. ³ Received on 25 May as a replacement for Hotel India, the ship had only flown in service a short time.

After a few morning flights, loaded with ten indigenous passengers and a White Star trooper in the left pilot seat, Sass began a low, slow approach to a relatively level pad on the side of a hill near Ban La Pan. At the last moment, a Special Forces man directing him into the landing zone suddenly snatched off his cover and frantically waved the helicopter off. ⁴ Sass, assuming that the trooper was signaling ground fire, attempted a tight right turn away from the hill to avoid taking hits. In the process, both engine RPM and rotor blade lift drastically decayed, resulting in the heavy ship settling quickly toward the ground. The left landing gear contacted the steep slope first. Without firm, level ground to accommodate the right wheel, the machine pivoted, flipped and rolled over twice. Once Whiskey came to rest, someone in the cabin section shouted "fire," so Sass quickly secured the engine. Then, with his side of the cockpit hugging the ground, he advised the Special Forces passenger to exit through the left window. He quickly followed. Fortunately, the machine failed to catch fire. All passengers, including the Flight Mechanic, managed to depart the helicopter safely, and incurred only minor injuries. Unfortunately, Sass suffered nasty bruises on his inner thighs from the gyrating cyclic that was violently ripped from his hands while the machine rolled over. After scrambling to the top of the hill and inquiring about the wave off signal, he discovered that a herd of water buffalo had approached the pad just as he commenced the critical short final to landing.

² The helicopters were still referenced to the Marine designated HUS-1 by the Customer.

³ Ipsenville was named for White Star team leader Jim Ipsen; site numbers had not yet been assigned, and village names if known were difficult for foreigners to pronounce.

⁴ Cover: Military term for a hat or headwear.



Hotel Whiskey seen lying on its right side on a hillside below "Ipsenville" where Fred Sass planted the machine.

Fred Sass Collection.

Sass could now claim the dubious distinction of the sole Temporary helicopter pilot involved in two H-34 losses. Similar to the Hotel Quebec parachute incident, deeming the incident an operational loss, management only conducted a modest investigation, assigning no blame, and Sass soon flew again. Thereafter, a joke circulated among Udorn Temporaries that if pilots were not careful, and if the Department of Defense assigned additional replacement helicopters to the Madriver project, letters of the alphabet would soon become exhausted. ⁵

Destruction of Hotel Whiskey marked the sixth H-34 strike in 1961. Except for an assessment for potential salvage operations conducted by a team headed by Maze and Carl, Air America neither attempted recovery from the inaccessible location, nor received an immediate replacement aircraft. ⁶

Those possessing weaker resolve soon recognized that many circumstances associated with the helicopter occupation were unsuitable for them. By June, several temporary flight crewmembers decided that they had experienced enough of Udorn, Laos, and Southeast Asia. Hence, they opted out of the Theater under certain provisions in the ICA contract 39-007, which allowed them to return to their respective service units. Accidents, battle wounds, deaths, inability to cope with fluid situations, insurmountable emotional challenges, and other personal factors prompted many early departures.

On 17 June, CJ Abadie received a memorandum from Bob Rousselot with the attached flight records of those who left the Company. With the personnel already reassigned, the VPO stated that he no longer required the records. ⁷

⁵ Fred Sass Emails, 08/27/02, 08/28/02, 03/22/04, 03/30/04.
Fred Sass June 1961 Flight Time Record.
CIA, Operational Casualties SEA, 12/1/62.

⁶ Burt Palmer Email, 03/31/04.
More likely, the Department of Defense refused to sanction further draw down of scarce Far East assets from an operational Marine squadron.

⁷ Memorandum from VPFO Bob Rousselot to CPH CJ Abadie, 06/17/61.

While Air America helicopter crews continued to support White Star and RLA efforts throughout Laos, as previously noted that Princes Souvanna Phouma, Neutralist; Souvannaphong (in some cases interchangeable with Souphannouvong), Leftwing; and Boun Oum; Rightwing, met in Geneva to plead their cases. Among several items covered, Souvanna seemed to agree with the International Control Commission representatives that working in conjunction with the tripartite military commission could be helpful in arranging a ceasefire, but overall, the ICC would prove ineffective. Showing a profound naivety for reality, making one wonder how he planned to conduct this task *"Souvanna maintained that the movement of Viet Minh troops through Laos and into South Vietnam could be stopped once a neutral Laos had been established."*

Although attacking USG verbally at times, Souphannouvong's presentation was deemed superior to that of Souvanna. Rightly or wrongly, he stated to the delegates at the conference that:

"NLHX [Pathet Lao] controlled 80 percent of Laos and was supported by 90 percent of the population; ¹ he was in agreement with the policies of Souvanna's Xieng Khouang government; the Laotian people themselves could solve the problems of forming a national government, organizing elections, unifying factional armies, accepting foreign aid, and improving economic conditions...; he desired the removal of all foreign troops from the kingdom."

At Zurich, on 22 June, following a mutually satisfying political breakthrough, the leaders haltingly agreed on forming a coalition government, which they called a national union government.

"...a provisional government would be formed by means of direct designation and appointment by the King and that this government would carry out a political program based on a policy of peace and neutrality."

¹ The prince failed to consider tribal clans who lived in enemy claimed areas and either supported the RLG or professed no political affiliation.

Of course, a successful ceasefire was paramount to any implementation of the policy.

Further progress proceeded slowly, for, as stated at a 28 July meeting at the White House, by a skeptical advisor who summarized the current situation in Southeast Asia as:

"...a lack of progress in negotiations among the three Princes..." He went on to say, *"The communists show no sign of wanting a neutral Laos...that they are very confident about the current military situation and see no reason for concessions...that two elements are required for a satisfactory Laotian settlement: a strong ICC and a government which gives real promise of avoiding communist domination..."*

Relating to formation of a plan to capture southern Laos with Lao, Thai, Vietnamese, and U.S. troops, President Kennedy continued to be noncommittal, but he clearly objected to an actual military invasion. Moreover, he lacked confidence in the proposal and would have to further examine it. Citing the American people's reluctance to go into Laos, he still wanted to rely on the Geneva Conference to settle the issue. ²

As a possible counter and solution to an *"unsatisfactory coalition government controlling the entire country,"* which was politically unsatisfactory to the West, partition of the country and relocation to the south was suggested in Washington. However, Ambassador Brown considered this position a distinct problem because of present Pathet Lao land holdings and real difficulties in the south. ³

Brown went on to say that the Pathet Lao *"claimed control of almost the entire country, except for pockets of land along the Mekong River."* Taking issue with this enemy claim, he stated that the RLG [through Meo and other tribal occupation] controlled large areas in Xieng Khouang and Sam Neua Provinces. RLG also controlled areas in the east and north. ⁴

² Foreign Relations 1961-63, Volume 1, Vietnam, 1961: 109. Joint Chiefs of Staff, 26, 27, 45, 48.

³ According to Lao General Oudone Sannikone, Military Region Four military assets had been reallocated for northern operations.

⁴ Joint Chiefs of Staff, 46.

OVERVIEW

Tending to sooth hawkish adherents vigorously lobbying for action in Laos, toward the end of June a Special National Intelligence Estimate (SNIE) theorized that any North Vietnamese or Chinese military involvement in Southeast Asia was unlikely over the next few months. However, without a firm Geneva agreement, if the U.S. invaded Laos, all bets were off and the assessment would change. ⁵

Within Xieng Khouang Province, with Pha Khao and other unconventional warfare tribal training sites up and running by July, high level in country sources reported to President Kennedy's military advisor, General Lansdale, that a few Special Forces operatives, nine CIA case officers, and dozens of specialized Thai PARU troops had armed and trained approximately 9,000 Meo guerrillas in Military Region Two. Planners envisioned the capability to recruit and train an additional 4,000 tribals.

The ninety-nine special Thai paramilitary police in country, formed into thirteen teams, trained Meo guerrillas and operated in the field with them. During combat conditions, they performed with exceptional courage. The PARU were also assigned clandestine missions in denied areas, while obtaining timely intelligence regarding enemy movement. ⁶

Chief of Vientiane Station, Jorgensen, assisted by Bill Lair and Pat Landry living across the street from the Air America crew house in Vientiane, and MAAG Lao advisors, oversaw command and control of the clandestine operation.

General Lansdale's memorandum to General Maxwell Taylor added that the Vientiane security forces were under CIA control. Approximately 500 Filipino technicians (ECCOIL program) augmented U.S. military logistics forces and CIA employed Operation Brotherhood intelligence information to support counter-guerrilla activity. The general also praised

⁵ Joint Chiefs of Staff, 49.

⁶ Denied area: The term connoted enemy controlled territory. It was later used to define areas of our extra hazardous Special Missions.

⁷ McCoy, 275.

Marek Thee, 365-366.

Bill Leary July 1961 Notes, UTD.

Civil Air Transport's efforts in Laos (actually the CIA proprietary Air America) providing air support to CIA and U.S. government agencies. ⁷

Facilities at Wattay Airport continued primitive by industry standards, consisting of a pierced steel planking (PSP) runway, a wooden control tower, and Quonset storage huts. Many fixed wing crews were scattered throughout the town in various hostels, apartments, and hotels. In case it was needed for military incursion, "Wattay's [daily] capacity was estimated at 36 sorties by either C-124 or C-130 aircraft." ⁸

Since the ceasefire, large numbers of Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese units had concentrated in areas throughout the country in places that endangered important government positions. To thwart any potential attack should hostilities resume, FAR units moved forward, but characteristically retreated when attacked. ⁹

Toward the end of June, General Nosavan journeyed to Washington to consult with American leaders on issues impacting Laos. During discussions, he evidenced little confidence that the Geneva Conference or the ICC would provide "an effective deterrent to communist control." Moreover, he would not be happy with Souvanna Phouma as Prime Minister, and considered him merely a tool of the communists.

Phoumi listed his assets as:

"Eight Groupment Mobiles (GM) deployed for defense. Five [located] south of the Nam Ca Dinh, and three in north Laos: one at Luang Prabang, one at Vientiane, and one in reserve." Unless the Viet Minh sent reinforcements, he believed that his forces could persevere in northern Laos. He "was reorganizing his forces and had definite military plans." ¹⁰

One operation in the Paksane area envisioned a semblance of control over Route-4, and repossession of territory and return of government control in the Nam Nhiep and Nam Sane river valleys between the river town, Borikhane, and the Tha Thom Valley. At the risk of overtly violating the unsigned off-and-on-again ceasefire agreement, aided by White Star teams assigned to Military Region Two, FAL GM-13 battalions optimistically surged out of Borikhane.

Divided into two columns, the western unit advanced twelve miles north along Route-4 and stopped at Moung Huong considerably short of the objective. Exhibiting more resolve, over time the eastern unit moved up the Sane River to Ban Man, one ridgeline short of the Tha Thom

⁸ Joint Chiefs of Staff, 116. ⁹ JCS, 1 January-30 April 62, 70. ¹⁰ JCS, 55, 60, 87-88.

Valley, before encountering substantial enemy resistance. With further advances deemed unlikely, with the October dry season approaching, and with support waning regarding political ramifications of the offensive, the Vientiane General Staff terminated the operation.

Other FAL operations clearing actions attempted within Savannakhet Province toward Mahaxay, Moung Phalane, and Tchepone came to naught. Reasons cited for failure of the operation were:

"ineffective patrolling, discipline in movement and fire control, failure to maintain contact between units, ineffective use of heavy weapons, and retention of reserves." All these issues were attributed to failure to practice what they were taught during Thai training. ¹¹ It is little wonder that MAAG's July assessments of FAL capabilities revealed poorly trained and led troops--an army *"not yet an effective fighting force."* Ongoing intensive infantry, artillery, and pilot training in Thailand (called Project EKARAD) since the ceasefire had shown some upgrading in capabilities, but enemy forces were also improving. Overall, no appreciable improvements in FAL deficiencies were predicted in the near term. Moreover, the best that could be expected from the RLA during a concerted enemy attack was a delaying action. ¹²

Meo agents scattered throughout Military Region Two actively gathered intelligence, and by August estimated Vietnamese forces to number 1,000 in Sam Neua Province. On the Plain of Jars, reliable information placed 1,200 at Ban Liang, a few miles northeast of Pathet Lao headquarters at Khang Khay, where the North Vietnamese Army provided 300 "advisors" for the war effort. More ominous to Western aircrews, 300 AAA gun crews allegedly manned positions on or around the Plain of Jars.

TIME OFF

Because of an action-packed April through May period, pilots found little relief from the daily flight schedule, time off became a catch-as-catch-can process (something the Flight Mechanics rarely or never enjoyed). If a stressed pilot desired a day off to recuperate,

¹¹ Oudone Sannikone, 101, 102.

¹² Joint Chiefs of Staff, 73-75.

he first had to convince the CPH or J.J. McCauley of his need. Then, depending strictly on operational requirements, management might accommodate the individual. Otherwise, the only escape from Udorn occurred when operations scheduled a favored pilot ferry duty to Bangkok for special maintenance or a logistic task.

After settling into Udorn life, establishing a daily routine, and reduced flight requirements, by June, management implemented time off in Bangkok for pilots. Conducted on a rotating basis, and proven worthwhile, the R&R period became a monthly procedure.¹³ Because of the proximity of the CAT-AAM offices, the centralized Plaza Hotel, numerous fleshpots, and watering holes, Patpong Road became the preferred starting and general focal point for crew activity. For the less carnally oriented and more culturally attuned types, there were countless temples to slog through, Thai boxing exhibits, horse racing, a delightful seafood restaurant in the center of Lumpini Park Lake, and a myriad of other wonders.¹⁴

Some pilots went to great lengths to blow off pent-up steam in Bangkok, and their antics often led to perverted and classic pranks. One individual, recalling a humorous affair he had previously heard about, decided to emulate it. To obtain the necessary equipment, he hired a taxi to a local open-air market where he purchased a zucchini squash. At another stall, he procured a yard of pink hair ribbon. That evening, in the confines of his hotel room, he bored a hole through one end of the two-inch diameter squash. Then, threading the ribbon through the opening, he secured it around his waist. Before departing for a big night on the town, he aligned the eight-inch veggie inside his trouser leg.

At every bar he visited, he selected a comely young lady to sit next to him. During the course of conversation, he broached the subject of the little darling walking to the hotel with him. Then he would grasp her tiny hand, delicately placing it on the hard squash between his thighs. Invariably, the ladies would squeal and scream, decline the solicitation, and laughingly proclaim, "*No! No! Farang you too big. You kill me.*"

Finally, as the evening waned, and choosing a bed partner became the paramount objective, he located the girl of his dreams and cemented a liaison for the night. Accepting his invitation, but desiring to first check the merchandise, she positioned her hand in his

¹³ This became known as scheduled time off or by the acronym STO.

¹⁴ Fred Sass Email, 10/15/02.

groin. Her eyes widened. Before she could speak, the playful pilot asked, "Is it too big?"

She coyly nodded, "Yes."

"OK. *I can fix that.*" In a swift motion, he broke off six inches of the squash, wiggled a little, and casually allowed the severed piece to slide down his leg onto the floor. The joke almost backfired, for at that moment, the shocked girl shrieked and appeared ready to faint. With that display, the pilot decided to curtail the fun. However, it required several minutes to explain the vegetable deception before the girl completely appreciated its implications. Once exposed, a sense of mirth about the hoax developed between the two, which sustained them through the next extraordinary forty-eight hours. ¹⁵

Fred Sass and Dominic Guccione became fast friends, attempting to spend R&Rs together. By then, hard work upcountry and a meager diet created a crew force of skinny and ravenous men, ones always hungry. "Gooch," a New Yorker of Italian heritage, proved an excellent judge of food, and ferreted out many excellent places to eat. On one excursion, they entered a barbershop. After completing his work, the barber demanded twice the price displayed on the billing sign. When Sass pointed to the sign and inquired about the apparent overcharge, the smiling Thai merely indicated that cutting American hair presented him with additional work. The explanation seemed plausible so, without seriously considering the answer, Fred paid the requested amount.

Once enterprising Thais realized that the influx of many Americans and their dollars presented ripe pickings, Udorn became a relative boomtown. The Snow White "nightclub" opened on airport road just outside city limits. Constructed almost exclusively from tin sheeting, the building looked exactly like its original purpose--a warehouse. The grubby interior consisted of a dirt floor. A small bandstand, dirty tables, and colored lights lined the walls to create a semblance of ambience. Since it provided one of the only "decent" recreational places in Udorn, many Air America men became regular patrons. A few visionary crewmembers perceived profit in starting a comparable venture and discussed opening a similar establishment. But, as usual, it remained only bar talk.

Not long after official Bangkok R&R commenced, the lure of American money attracted ladies of the night to Udorn. Before leaving Bangkok to return to work, a few crewmembers

¹⁵ Anonymous.
Jim Coble, 07/03/02.

provided their favorite female sufficient funds for the overnight train trip on the narrow-gauge track that wound northeast through mountains and rice paddies to the provincial capital. When the comfort girls began arriving, interested parties disseminated the information, and like a Wild West town in early America, the camp churned with excitement. Someone would yell, "*Train's a coming,*" and individuals expecting female guests hurried to the train station. On another occasion, a helicopter raced to meet the train, and much to the engineer's discomfort, landed on the tracks in front of the oncoming locomotive. ¹⁶

FIFTH COLUMN?

With lengthy and porous Lao-Thai borders not far removed from Udorn, at the beginning of the Madriver operation, some concern arose regarding airfield security and also within the American community over potential communist infiltration and activity in the Udorn area, although no local insurgency or incidents ensued during 1961. Still, following the arrival of so many lucrative American targets in Udorn, initial reports and rumors circulated about wandering enemy bands in the northeast. Despite some skepticism about the reports, as a precaution, management advised Air America personnel not to venture out at night, or in certain areas far from Udorn. Secondhand intelligence and rumor about commie activity emanated from a Catholic priest assigned to a small church along the Mekong River. From the early days, he caged H-19 rides from helicopter pilots such as CJ Abadie to service parishioners in the northeast and Laos. In return for the favors, he reported when there were questionable accounts of bad guy concentrations and their activity along the Mekong west of Nong Khai and across the river from Paksane. Occasionally, unsubstantiated reports from Udorn police officers filtered to the Customer and then to Air America about suspicious activity near the west end of the airfield. Subsequent visits to surrounding villages tended to convince government officials that local people largely exaggerated the insurgency stories. Still, it did not seem wise to totally ignore them. Over time, some venturesome individuals took long motorcycle rides through the countryside. ¹⁷

In addition to periodic warnings about potential attacks on the Udorn base, constant

¹⁶ Fred Sass Emails, 09/12/02, 09/15/02, 09/24/02, 10/09/02.

¹⁷ CJ Abadie Emails, 04/30/98, 02/10/99, 02/13/99, 03/18/99.

rumors and questions arose regarding the sympathies of an estimated 40,000 ethnic Vietnamese refugees living in the northeast where a humanitarian minded Thai government had allowed them to resettle there after the First Indochina War. Most of the group had North Vietnamese origins, causing many Thai to doubt their loyalty to King and country. They asked: Would Pathet Lao or Viet Minh infiltrate from Lao and form guerrilla cells? Would a "Fifth Column" eventually develop? However, with a live-and-let live philosophy, ostensibly the fun-loving Thai exhibited little concern over such an eventuality. For many Thai living the good life and unconcerned with remote northeast politics or developments, considered the Vietnamese relegated to third class citizen status--a low race--and they giggled at the sound of their language. ¹⁸

DEPENDENTS

Until 1962, Company policy discouraged the residence of permanent employee dependents in Udon. This restriction transpired mainly because of potential security problems, an environment considered very primitive, and living conditions incompatible with family life. However, as accommodations in the more modern Bangkok met or exceeded basic living standards, Air America authorized family relocation there.

Since arrival in March, either flight duties or assisting Abadie with time-consuming management tasks afforded Captain JJ McCauley little or no time off. After completion of the New Jersey school year, he arranged to relocate his family to Bangkok for part of the summer. During the first week of July, he received a few deserved, but rare days off. He deadheaded to Bangkok on a C-46 and then on to Taipei to link up with his family and escort them to Thailand. For their comfort, he rented a beautiful apartment in a new housing complex equipped with a pool just off Rama 4 Road. Having established his people in the relatively antiseptic Bangkok environment, unforeseen flight duties and other pressing management

¹⁸ EW Knight Email.

commitments then prevented him from visiting them for the following six weeks. ¹⁹

With fewer helicopters in the inventory, abundant rain, a ceasefire curtailing some flight activity in Laos, and Company recognition that pilot burnout was undesirable, local and far-removed Taipei management sought to accommodate permanent employees with proposed future R&R and annual leave plans. Some of the original group had worked in the Lao Theater over a year without adequate time off. In a late July exchange between CJ Abadie and Bob Rousselot, the CPH reiterated Charlie Bade's desire to visit his family in the States before his children returned to the fall school session. Rousselot was amenable to this request. If Abadie could spare Bade, he indicated that he could arrange a flight for him on World Airways. Tom Moher requested time off around the end of the year, but for obvious reasons the VPO cautioned his CPH not to allow everyone a break during the holidays. He also suggested that Moher use some of his accrued annual leave. Like McCauley, Pat Sullivan also expected his family's arrival in Southeast Asia. They agreed to grant him sufficient R&R and time off to join his family in Taipei, escort them to Thailand, and help settle them in Bangkok. Although Jim Coble, Dan Gardner, and Jim Haver seemed satisfied with normal time off, they expressed a desire for Hong Kong R&R. Even though Rousselot could not yet grant this request, he replied that he would arrange rotation of crewmembers to Hong Kong after developing a suitable plan, and after Company management approved it. The plan had to be pigeonholed because other problems associated with the Company take-over of the Udorn facility assumed priority.

Abadie had not returned to America since June 1958, and wanted to visit his parents in southeastern Louisiana. He also planned to marry a lovely Thai girl in September and desired time in the States to further consider the union and clear his mind as to continued life in Southeast Asia. Abadie considered designating McCauley as his substitute during his absence. During his past brief absences, McCauley had excelled as CPH. Moreover, after a comprehensive briefing, he would be well equipped to handle all Abadie's duties. Rousselot admitted he wanted Abadie to take leave, but was not enthusiastic about having both his CPH and Bade off at the same time. He wanted all the "old timers" present and on duty to assist in running the operation during Abadie's absence. Then, taking a fatherly tone, he expressed a desire to

19 JJ McCauley Letter.

talk to Abadie about his proposed domestic plans prior to consummation. In the end, the VPO recommended that Abadie remain in Udorn until Air America had assimilated the entire Madriver Project and the operation settled down to a more normal routine. Furthermore, during the continuing process of hiring additional pilots and Flight Mechanics, Abadie should remain ready to assist in the training, qualifying, and assigning processes. To comply with Rousselot's recommendations, Abadie deferred his leave until January.

HOTEL-HOTEL

Consistent with the one-a-month H-34 accident pattern, Air America lost another helicopter in July. Both H-19 and H-34 engines consumed the volatile 115/145-octane fuel. Extending through a long pipeline from source to utilization, supplying drummed fuel for the operation proved laborious and expensive for USG functionaries. A local Thai company manufactured, steam cleaned, painted, filled, and securely sealed the steel fuel drums in Bangkok. Drums were then trucked long distances to Thai river sites and ferried across the Mekong to Lao towns by a government transportation company controlled by Thai leaders. Additionally, planes crewed by Air America personnel flew drums containing the precious purple colored gasoline to Lao river sites, or airdropped them over remote work areas. As with any airdrop, losses occurred when parachutes failed to open and gravity and impact took its toll. Helicopter or Helio Courier crews also hauled their own fuel drums for each other. Despite problems and delivery delays, enough fuel generally moved into Laos to keep the helicopters flying.

Because of maximum flying, crews rarely had an abundance of upcountry fuel. In the case of an excess, fuel handlers used a first in, first out system. Surplus fuel drums sitting stagnant at a site for any length of time, especially during the rainy season, required proper storage. Once filled in Bangkok, a rubber gasket bung covered by a tight metal cap sealed the drum. However, if stored vertically, water would collect in the top recess and over time seep into the fuel. Consequently, foreseeing excessive time lag in usage at outstations, fuel handlers preferred horizontal storage. Sometimes this method proved impossible at more remote sites where language difficulties precluded clear understanding. Also, as a downside to long storage periods, large temperature variations in the mountains could promote internal condensation and introduce water within the tank. In addition to the water generated, depending on the delivery pipeline and length of storage in the hills, rust

could eventually form inside a barrel.

Refueling a thirsty H-34 engine by hand always constituted a difficult and lengthy proposition for crews, except for the amazing strongman, Carl Diggs. After taxiing to a fueling area, crews checked drummed fuel freshness by noting the black-stenciled fill date on the white tank top. Then, depending on the amount of fuel a pilot wanted loaded for the next mission, participants would pump the major part of four drums into the three separate interconnected tanks. If native labor or troops were available to roll 350-pound drums to the side of a helicopter, the process became easier. If not, crews participated. After setting drums upright, the Flight Mechanic wielded pliers and a stout screwdriver to remove caps and bungs. Then he smelled the gas and observed the color. If the liquid reeked of a hydrogen sulfide smell of rotten eggs, or displayed white instead of the characteristic purple color, they discarded the bad fuel. Fueling personnel utilized a silver-colored hand operated wobble pump, metal funnel, and chamois, included in all helicopter flyaway kits, to transfer and filter fuel. Used from commencement of the helicopter program, the Flight Mechanic placed a thick chamois within and over the edges of a large rectangular funnel and wired or bungee corded it securely to the sides. If properly employed, this gravity feed technique trapped most water, dirt, and rust, ensuring clean fuel for efficient engine operation, although it was very time-consuming. Depending on the number of barrels, the Flight Mechanic or pumper's efficiency and chamois thickness, fuel transfer might consume the better part of an hour.

Time in the air equated to money, especially for pilots flying with over seventy hours. Therefore, some enterprising souls attempted to speed the process by attaching the chamois directly around the fuel nozzle to take advantage of a pressurized transfer. In theory, this method worked and probably saved time. The chamois still trapped dirt or rust, but the higher pressure forced any existing water through the animal skin and created a potential for other problems. For example, on one occasion, while attempting to purge fuel from a center belly tank, Burt Palmer's efforts failed to produce any liquid. Investigation revealed a chamois lodged inside the tank. One could only surmise that a crewmember's nonstandard fueling procedure had resulted in an improperly secured skin slipping off the nozzle into the tank, and the individual being too embarrassed or afraid to report the

occurrence. ¹⁰

While flowing through ports and filters of the ultra-sensitive Bendix carburetor, any fuel mixed with incompatible water slugs failed to sustain engine operation. Using nonstandard fueling procedures, combined with the inherent difficulty of moving, storing, and transferring fuel drums hundreds of miles, and with adverse weather conditions to contend with, fuel contamination inevitably resulted in an accident and a strike of the eighth bailed H-34 during 1961. Flying personnel considered it remarkable that additional aircraft had not similarly succumbed to contamination. ²¹

Flying Hotel Hotel (Bureau Number 143063), working under contract number 1674, Captain R.B. "Dick" Crafts delivered Bill Young and a few soldiers to a newly established site on a narrow ridgeline west of Pha Khao. The spot was fairly close to the abandoned refugee village of Nhot Mhu. After spending the night, early on 27 July, Crafts and Flight Mechanic W.B. Williams prepared to depart the small landing zone for Pha Khao with three passengers. With loading complete, Young flashed Crafts a thumbs-up and observed the aircraft climb to 500 feet over a deep ravine. Suddenly the engine coughed three times and quit. Lacking sufficient altitude to allow Crafts to execute a 180-degree autorotation and return to the landing pad, the helicopter dropped like a brick and struck the hill short of the landing pad. Like a flying sled cutting a swath through the trees, the ship glided down the steep slope before coming to rest without a tail pylon. From his vantage spot, Young observed movement and shouted that he and others would start down to the ship. Although Crafts hollered back, *"Don't sweat it! Everything is all right. We're OK,"* on closer examination they discovered that two passengers

²⁰ EW Knight Email, 05/04/02.

CJ Abadie Email, 06/09/02.

Burt Palmer Email, 03/10/04.

²¹ Malcomb Bird Email, 07/06/02.



People moving in the vicinity of Dick Craft's Hotel Hotel crash.
Clarke Collection.



Dick Crafts Hotel Hotel crash.
Ron Clarke Collection.



Later cockpit examination of Hotel Hotel revealed that natives had stripped parts, skin, and Plexiglas.
Clarke Collection.

had sustained minor injuries. ²²

Following Crafts' slide down the mountainside and evacuation, he was admitted to the Seventh Day Adventist Hospital in Bangkok for observation. Ron Clarke, in the city on R&R, visited him two days after the crash and learned that he had been wearing a light shirt and trousers. The force of the crash caused the weave pattern of the seat belt to press through his clothing and deposit an imprint of the belt on his belly. Fortunately, that was the only medical consequence resulting from the incident. ²³

Following Customer recommendation, based on the current enemy situation, Air America abandoned the aircraft. After extensive evaluation and analysis, maintenance concluded fuel contamination a probable cause of the accident. Hoping to prevent such future incidents, maintenance supervisors reviewed upcountry fueling procedures and cautioned crews to utilize standard procedures. ²⁴

²² Bill Young Interview.
EW Knight Email, 01/09/02.
CIA, Operational Casualties in: Southeast Asia, 12/01/62.
EW Knight Emails, 01/07/02, 02/22/01.

²³ Ron Clarke Email, 07/16/71.

²⁴ In 1965 portions of Hotel Hotel's carcass were recovered when Udorn maintenance parts for UH-34D rebuild operations.

The transfer of almost all squadron aircraft and many HMR-163 crewmembers from the USS *Bennington* to Air America in March created a void in the aviation unit. Therefore, on 6 April, Wayne Knight, after learning that HMR-261 possessed nearly a full complement of machines and men, relocated to the USS *Thetis Bay* while the ancient Jeep carrier sailed to participate in the Pony Express SEATO operation, around North Borneo. There, close to Mount Kinabalu, he participated in a two-week joint exercise with 60 ships, including British forces and other SEATO nations. The exercise was calculated to display American military sea power and an ability to muster and coordinate allied capability. Finding the operation interesting, Knight landed on several English ships and spent a night on the HMS *Bullwark*.

After returning to the Marine Corps Facility Futema on Okinawa by 1 July, Knight, whose service obligation was nearing completion, transferred to MABS-16 to await release. Slated for rotation to stateside in August, but discovering the discharge date conflicted with a fall semester enrollment at Arizona State University, he requested to remain overseas until 21 November. Then, apprised by the MABS S-1 officer that Lieutenant Jack Rogers, Administration Officer/Adjutant of the Udon MABS detachment, would soon rotate to CONUS, Knight, who was still curious about Air America, applied for Jack's vacant position. He reasoned that the extended five-month duty dovetailed perfectly with his plans to matriculate for second semester courses, and the interim period required only a minimal addition to his tour. For the tightfisted Corps, the proposed transfer presented an instant bargain. The penny-pinching organization, realizing immediate cost savings with a live body already in place, happily authorized his request.

The new S-1 officer arrived at the MABS facility early in the second week of July. By this time, the entire operation had relocated to a raised "tent city" southwest of the runway. Erected in May to avert problems with annual flooding, the complex appeared well established to deal with the elements. Knight found the MABS administration offices situated in large canvas general purpose tents (GP) stretched over wooden frames. Co-located, Air America operations occupied a tin roofed office beside MABS. The Base Manager Tom Tucker, Communications, and Transportation departments possessed similar spaces. A gun locker

provided storage for arms that employees acquired during upcountry forays. Chock full of various weapon types, Dan Gardner appeared to have accumulated the largest arsenal.

Bell's CIA office sat in a secure room on the western-most portion of the elevated complex. Knight soon learned from message traffic that the official code name designated for the Udorn Air America helicopter program specified it as the "Madriver Project." Consistent with plans for the Company to assume total control of the operation, construction proceeded on a maintenance office across the helicopter parking area. In addition, workers continued to clean and enlarge the unused and dilapidated Royal Thai Air Force double hangar in order to accommodate heavy helicopter repair.

Immediately following Knight's arrival in Udorn, in addition to annual flooding, an unsavory flap that had been festering for over a month came to a head. It highlighted a handful of dissident Marines who, for various reasons, constantly refused to fly missions very far north of Vientiane. While processing out of headquarters Okinawa, Knight had talked to Rogers, and received a smattering of information about his former squadron mates. The perpetrators, who Wayne knew from HMR-163, included Don Babitz, Newell Sly, Ed Meixner, and Paul Walton. Fritz Hocesvar was from HMR-162. One former Navy man rounded out the group.¹

In early June, a solid month before Knight's arrival, pilots had attended a meeting at a local hotel to discuss what several perceived as shoddy aircraft maintenance. To some, it seemed that after every major inspection, mechanics released the ships with many nitpicking problems. Furthermore, it required Flight Mechanics at least a week to right the wrongs while in the field. One small group of Marines pushed the others to complain to local management concerning the inadequate repair work, and indicate that they would not fly until maintenance completely resolved the problem. Other attendees believed room for improvement a viable consideration, but judged overall maintenance acceptable for remote field operations. Moreover, they realistically believed that refusing to honor scheduled flights was far too extreme a measure. After exhausting all pros and cons, the group never collectively reached a consensus. Many of the attendees echoed opinions that they considered maintenance generally

¹ EW Knight Letter, 07/27/91.

EW Knight Emails, 07/30/00, 07/31/00, 07/05/01, 01/08/01, 05/03/02, 03/18/03, 07/02/04.

When Knight arrived in Udorn as S1 administration with MABS he occasionally worked with CJ Abadie and Tom Tucker. The men needed MABS assistance, so a good working relationship was established. USMC was the giver, Air America the taker.



A flooded portion of Okinawa Marine Air Base Support Unit-26 (MABS-26) "Tent City" showing early Air America and CIA offices.

Wayne Knight Collection-1961.



MABS rolling stock sit in floodwaters at the Udorn airfield.
Knight Collection.

acceptable. During upcountry missions from Udorn, they experienced no major maintenance problems and, because of their Flight Mechanics' efforts, little overall downtime. Other pilots, nearly swayed by the core groups' arguments, wisely opted to remain in the background and observe. They managed to survive the obvious outcome.²

From the beginning of the Madriver operation, MABS Okinawa Marines had conducted most major aircraft repairs for the fledgling Air America maintenance department and its few experienced mechanics who were neither properly geared up, nor adequately equipped with tools which could handle the numerous H-34 repair tasks and required periodic inspections. All those present at the meeting observed that none of the temporary crew chiefs joined the dissenters. The pilot force liked these men because they always obeyed orders, knew their duties, and did not concern themselves with dirty hands. Furthermore, these same men proved especially helpful when Air America hired additional mechanics during the transition, including several Filipinos. Thereafter, operations ran much smoother.

Not long after the meeting, a majority of the hard-core Marine instigators, extensively led by group spokesmen Don Babitz and Fritz Hocesvar, entered C.J. Abadie's office to discuss the issue. Speaking passionately, the men demanded assurance that the Company would upgrade or improve maintenance. In a heated ultimatum, they informed the boss that in the future they would probably no longer fly north of Vientiane if they observed no immediate improvements in maintenance. Abadie, aware of rumors that an overriding pay issue also grated on the individuals, indicated he could do nothing to help them under existing contractual agreements. He explained calmly that their refusal to fly assigned daily missions severely tied his hands. Moreover, without their cooperation, they were no further use to him. Then, following their noncompliance at Vientiane, he recommended that they talk to the MABS commanding officer, and deleted the men's names from his pool of available pilots. Since the group consisted mainly of temporary Marine pilots, Abadie quietly referred the matter to the

² Fred Sass Emails, 08/27/02, 08/28/02, 09/20/02.
Jerry Buffington Email, 11/15/03.

coordinating representative, Colonel Johnson, and promptly forgot about them.³

While the rebels remained in limbo, Johnson had little actual authority over the "civilians." He attempted to reason with the group to resolve the thorny subject, and worried how their decision not to fly would affect their future service careers. Unable to change their decision not to fly, he finally reported the issue to his superiors and forwarded details of the flap to Washington Headquarters Marine Corps. Instantly, blistering "flash" message traffic flowed into the camp demanding additional information.⁴

J.J. McCauley knew Lieutenant Babitz fairly well. While squadron mates in HMR-361 they had shared duty periods at Santa Anna, California, and the final above ground tests on Bikini Atoll during 1958. McCauley, a former senior captain in the Corps, commanded respect, was well liked by all who knew him, and became Abadie's close confidant. For these reasons, Abadie trusted and relied on him to oversee the operation smoothly during his absence. In the course of his operational duties, McCauley frequently compiled the daily flight schedule. One afternoon Babitz entered the CPH office inquiring why the schedule assigned him to flying upcountry, and why Abadie had failed to inform McCauley that he no longer flew north of Vientiane. Unaware of any such arrangement, Babitz's query both puzzled and confused McCauley. Doubtful, he questioned Babitz's reluctance to honor a scheduled mission and received the stock answer that aircraft maintenance was not up to par. Exasperated, he believed it useless to point out to the individual that if shoddy maintenance bothered him upcountry, then logically just flying to Vientiane also placed him in jeopardy. Rather than belabor his case, he replaced Babitz with another pilot. He then sought further information. Within a relatively short time, he discovered that ringleader Babitz, whom he had always considered a prime instigator, had, like a rotten apple in a barrel, persuaded or intimidated others in his group into following his actions. He further established that many other Marine

³ Don Babitz last logged a local test flight on 30 May, but probably flew to Wattay Airport in June to relieve Malcolm Bird, and except for one aborted flight north, sat on the ground for several days.

⁴ CJ Abadie Emails, 06/10/02, 08/04/04.
EW Knight Email, 05/19/00.

pilots who were disgusted by the rebel group, also resented Babitz's actions. Consistent with the tradition of attaching labels to everything, some disapproving Air America wags condemned the group and began referring to them as "The Dirty Six."⁵

In spite of Colonel Johnson's reluctance to discuss particulars of the flap in detail with him, Knight's duties as the MABS Administration Officer made him privy to most classified correspondence. Fascinated, he watched daily as the high priority issue of Marines refusing to fly in Laos reached a crisis level of major proportion in the offices of the Corps. Despite all the fervor over being "Sheep Dipped" civilians, the official Washington view hinged on the fact that the men were still actually U.S. Marine Corps officers, hence unable to refuse a legitimate order to fly. However, because of USG's policy of adhering to overt Lao neutrality, neither political nor military hierarchy could afford to allow the highly sensitive situation to boil over and become public knowledge.

Not long after Knight arrived at the airfield, a member of his old squadron contacted him and suggested that he come into town and visit. Part of their brief conversation touched on the group's current problems. To better assess the men's grievances, and perhaps assist in their dealings with Colonel Johnson, Knight arranged an evening reunion at the Pratch.

Over several quarts of strong, cold Singha beer, initial pleasantries centered on small talk like, "How are you? How have you been doing?" Then, happy to finally have the willing ear of a friendly contemporary, and to be able to vent their spleens, the dialogue eventually turned to their current problems. Knight listened patiently while Don Babitz and, to a minor degree, Fritz Hocevar, ranted and raged over the issues bothering them. None seemed to include animosity toward individual permanent pilots, but some individuals present mentioned a widening rift between permanent employees and the temporary workers about a month after commencing operations. Apparently, the distinction between the two categories of pilots became most evident in scheduling and aircraft assignments. Operations generally assigned individual aircraft to permanent pilots, and they seemed to receive priority in flight scheduling. Curiously, Babitz failed to mention either specific helicopters or maintenance problems, although some reference to fuel contamination surfaced.

⁵ JJ McCauley Phone Conversation, 01/12/91.

JJ McCauley Letters, 1/15/91, 1/28/91, 9/4/91.

Guided by the un-elected dissident spokesman, Babitz, the men protested about receiving misleading information from the beginning concerning the serious Lao situation and their duties there. They emphasized that a genuine shooting war, conducted by incompetent people, currently existed in the country. Babitz complained bitterly that Major Martin Wagenhoffer, one of his squadron's senior officers dispatched with the original group of Marine pilots to monitor the situation and initially advise the program, had attempted to get them all killed before he left Udorn for Bangkok. He also protested that they definitely were not suitably compensated for their participation in the conflict. At least one within the group had already served in Laos during the January transition of pilots from HRSs to H-34s. He knew the general scope of the Air America pay scale and benefits. Promoting the old theme that all lives have equal value, the dissenters claimed that the actual civilian pilot employees earned three to four times more for hazardous pay and per diem. Consequently, they decided not to fly again until management rectified this disparity to their liking. At the time, pay rates were generally an open secret, and rumors abounded that temporary pilots would eventually receive the higher Air America wage scale. Scuttlebutt concerning additional hazard pay seemed especially convincing to the men because of the American Voluntary Group (AVG) Flying Tiger precedent for a private war corporation that had been established during the Roosevelt Administration before the start of World War Two. Personnel attached sufficient credence to the gossip that several of the Dirty Six expended a good deal of time preparing documents in order to submit vouchers for retroactive pay.⁶ Despite all other complaints and rationalizations previously voiced that night, above all, Knight deduced that the primary basis for the flap revolved around the issue of inadequate monthly compensation.

After the broad discussion concluded, senior member former Marine Newell Sly, whom Knight respected and considered levelheaded and trustworthy, in a private conversation reiterated similar gripes, and confirmed Babitz's version. Knight finally concluded that aversion to combat flying played a much larger role in the overall situation than any man was willing to admit. He considered that perhaps their actions constituted a means to an end, to ease out of hazardous circumstances in which they no longer cared to participate. He also believed that they recognized that creating this serious problem immersed them in a whirlpool

⁶ Malcomb Bird Email, 09/02/02.

of irreversible hot water. They had cast the proverbial die the moment they refused to fly, and would never be afforded a second chance.

Knight talked to Hal Clark several times about the Dirty Six, asking about the group's dissatisfaction leading to their decision not to fly. Hal indicated that the group had significantly exaggerated the actual situation, and "*things were not as bad as the quitters indicated.*" ⁷

Addressing the hot issue, Headquarters Marine Corps ultimately dispatched a brigadier general along with an out-of-uniform investigating team to interview all available helicopter crewmembers. McCauley, when asked what he believed had triggered the actual cause for the "Six's" reluctance to fly, replied harshly, "*They are nothing but yellow bastards.*" The interviewing colonel, not expecting such a scathing outburst, frowned at McCauley's candid reply. ⁸ "Lee" Holt, who referred to the investigating team as "visiting firemen," was also interviewed. He was not sure of the agenda, or what his interviewer wanted him to say. When asked if he wanted to leave Southeast Asia, he vaguely indicated that he would leave if his services were no longer required, but was willing to remain if needed. Holt had spent his last year at Tulane University as a first-year law student and wanted to matriculate before he forgot what he had learned. Within a month, he was gone. He processed through Taipei along with three other men, including Don Babitz. ⁹

Extending the investigation to include enlisted men, the panel also interviewed L.D. "Hooker" Maze. Questions fired at him included, "*Are you happy here? Is the maintenance support satisfactory? Is the pay sufficient?*" Maze answered that, as the Marine Corps taught him, he performed all his duties without question and considered this field experience in

⁷ EW Knight Letter, 07/27/91.
EW Knight Emails,
01/09/02,03/16/03/,03/18/06/28/03/03/01/04/08/15/04/08/16/04.

⁸ McCauley Letter, 09/04/91.

⁹ Shirley Holt Emails, 04/06/09/04/0709, 07/26/09.
After arriving home, Holt recycled back into the U.S. Navy, but failed to obtain an assignment in the States. School would have to wait. After two years in Puerto Rico, he returned to Patuxent River, where he resumed his law studies. Leaving the service in 1964, he returned to his former home in north Texas. Following a stint in the Internal Revenue Service, he obtained a law degree from American University and a LIM in taxation from George Washington University. Holt practiced corporate tax law for many years and was last reported residing in Wayne, Pennsylvania.

Thailand and Lao considerably more satisfactory to him than when serving on Okinawa.

Following the interviews, the bad boys never flew upcountry again. After a cooling off period, they quietly vanished. Knight never saw or talked to the principals again. When the Six faded from the scene, pilots "in the know" considered the odious problem resolved, and no further public discussion ensued. Within a relatively short period, it was as if the episode had never occurred. With crew manning levels somewhat decreased, pilots generally reverted to single pilot status while flying, and Air America recruitment and pilot upgrading accelerated.

The Corps and other military services allowed all the pilots, regardless of the reason, to return to active duty units and continue to serve their military careers.¹⁰ For those among the "Dirty Six" who remained in the service, further advancement beyond captain proved slow, and some who remained in the Corps failed to advance far beyond the rank of major. However, following thirty years' service and courageous Vietnam service, Babitz achieved the rank of full colonel.

Promotion boards initially passed Hocevar over the first time he was eligible for captain, and again passed him over for major the first time. When Bird heard that Babitz was being upgraded to captain, he called Brigadier General McKutcheon at HQMC. He complained that Babitz was partly responsible for his protracted RON in the hills, and that he was one of the men in the group who would not fly north of Vientiane. The general indicated he would halt the promotion, but by the time he contacted the MAG-26 commander, the ceremony had already taken place, and the promotion stood.¹¹

¹⁰ Malcomb Bird Email Answer to 07/07/02, questions, 09/24/04. Account Compiled from Letters and Email Communication from CJ Abadie, Malcomb Bird, Jerry Buffington Email 11/15/03, Fonburg Letters and Phone Calls 6/2/91, 11/16/91, EW Knight, JJ McCauley, Bert Palmer, and Fred Sass.

¹¹ Author Note: Attempts to query all "Dirty Six" principals concerning their accounts and motivations have failed thus far. One or two have passed into another realm, another two disappeared completely, one suffers a selective memory loss, and yet another adamantly refuses to discuss his Air America experience.

To fairly balance others' recall of the episode, I queried Don Babitz concerning the unsavory affair. In an 8/13/04 Email Don Babitz replied:

"The situation you described was all news to me and I can only describe, in general

terms, the events as best as I can recall.

I have no knowledge of anyone who refused to fly. This is not to say that it did not happen, but if it did (while I was there), I surely would have heard about it.

As I recall that period following the hectic early days and as Air America began to stand-up on its own operation, a rift began to open between Air America and the "temps." This distinction between the pilots became most evident in flight scheduling and aircraft assignments. Air America pilots were being assigned individual aircraft and receiving priority in flight scheduling. In retrospect, this process was to be expected but at the time some in the "temp" group did not see it that way and the result was the start of a "them & us" feeling.

As time progressed and Air America was rolling on their own while the temporary workers were simply filling in, personalities took over. Sly and I hung together and tried to distance ourselves from the core of folks who seemed unhappy about a laundry list of things. I can understand why we are numbered among the unwashed, and like them, we got the leper treatment.

'Ringleader?' I am flattered that I am being elevated from near the bottom of the pecking order to ringleader. I can only assume that I stepped on the wrong set of toes along the line. However, I never voiced a complaint other than my own and that was limited to assignment of aircraft..Yours is the first I've heard of any investigation and as the ringleader I feel left out."

Selective memory? I was not there, so let the reader decide..

Before long, Knight discovered that his commanding officer, Colonel Dick Johnson USMC, was an ultra-strict disciplinarian, and a difficult individual to deal with on a day-to-day basis. Few Air America personnel realized this from the beginning. Assigned a behind-the-back moniker of "Lock-em-up Johnson," he became notorious for incarcerating those under his direct command who violated **his** rules. To create object lessons, he arbitrarily sentenced noteworthy offenders to a few days in an open pen floored with wooden pallets, and enclosed by concertina wire. Even one noncommissioned officer experienced this fate. ¹ The only exception to the colonel's open-air jail policy occurred during flooded periods when pallets floated, and the cage was deemed uninhabitable. Even rains failed to curtail his military regime. During the high-water period, he still tasked crews to cut grass within the immediate area. When water receded to reasonable levels, work teams systematically and uniformly trimmed grass to a height of two feet. Over time, he conducted several heated discussions with the unit chaplain, who considered incarceration of MABS personnel inhumane treatment. Nevertheless, "Lock-Em-Up Johnson" always won the arguments. ²

When the carpenters erected tent city, they included a ten by ten-foot post exchange (PX). One Air America Flight Mechanic became a friend of the person in charge of the PX. He obtained a monkey upcountry and, when assigned another trip, he left the animal temporarily in the care of his friend. Unaccustomed to his new digs, that night the beast scampered around the hut chattering and disturbing the sleeping men. To preserve the peace, PX guy locked the naughty simian in the store. This proved disastrous. The following morning, he discovered every toothpaste tube and cigarette carton ripped open, contents spilled, and liberally mixed with monkey feces. Colonel Johnson also owned a monkey, which his troops judged the only living creature that liked him. Following the PX incident, the colonel

¹ JJ McCauley.

² EW Knight Email, 05/30/00.

confiscated the mischievous animal and housed it with his pet. Then he sentenced the PX Marine to house arrest. Relieved to have escaped a courts marshal or Johnson's prison, the kid almost cried with joy. ³

Numerous venomous and non-venomous snakes proliferate in any tropical environment. Udorn was no exception, and several reptile stories were the talk of servicemen and Air America employees who served there over the years. When Seabees were building the Marine facility, an eighteen-foot Krait, the largest, most deadly snake ever seen in the area, was discovered in the tall grass. Another time a "Temporary Sheep Dip" type went for a ride on his newly acquired 90cc Honda motorbike. While cruising the rice paddy countryside outside Udorn Town, he encountered a farmer who had recently captured a large python. The young man bought the snake, and to solve the problem of returning the animal to the base, wrapped it around his chest and waist. By the time he arrived at the MABS facility, the snake had constricted to the point the man had difficulty breathing. Lieutenant Knight, still attached to MABS, observed the doctor and others at sick bay struggling to remove the "pet." ⁴

The following episode tends to reveal more of Colonel Johnson's twisted psyche. One night during an infrequent trip to Udorn town, Johnson received a rare rebuke to his absolute authority while enjoying a beer in the Mahpakdi Hotel. Booming Thai music emanating from the nightclub at the rear of the Mahpakdi interrupted Dick Crafts' sleep. Highly incensed, the mercurial individual, formerly an enlisted Marine corporal who entered flight training under the Naval Cadet (NAVCAD) program in Pensacola, tossed a concussion grenade igniter onto the tin roof. The explosion was powerful enough to rip out an eight by three-inch piece of the corrugated roof. The shrapnel in turn impacted several people below, causing minor injuries. Following the ear-shattering explosion, Johnson charged upstairs, checked Craft's room and, discovering no explosive device, demanded that all occupants on the second floor open their rooms for his inspection. Bird had no weapons stashed, so he allowed Johnson access to his room. However, knowing that Erickson was away, the crewmembers persuaded the houseboy to say that he had no key to the room. Other rooms the colonel checked displayed rifle and World War

³ Burt Palmer Email, 04/11/04.

⁴ EW Knight Email, 06/01/00.

Two concussion grenades and other small arms weapons obtained from Special Forces White Star teams.

Spending the night in the field, Ron Clarke was not present during Johnson's fun. Bob Campbell and Clarke did not store grenades or other military gear on the glass transom ledge above their door as other crewmembers did, and no one said anything to them regarding the incident. During the first two weeks he was in Southeast Asia, Clarke discovered that Special Forces personnel offered various types of weapons for pilot use while flying. Clarke selected and carried an automatic .45 caliber Thompson submachine gun when he flew. He liked the weapon because he could disassemble and fit the compact weapon into a small suitcase that he carried in the helicopter, and could clandestinely take back to the hotel room between flights, or when off the schedule.

Clarke was aware that Crafts, with whom he had gone through flight training at Pensacola, had experimented with grenades. Over time he developed or learned a "safe" technique of dropping them from a helicopter if fired on. Crafts would unscrew and remove the detonator and igniter from the top of a grenade, pour out the powder, pull the retaining pin and throw the detonator some distance to avoid damaging anything when it exploded. Stripping the device of lethal essentials created a dummy grenade, one with which he could demonstrate his method of securing a rubber band around the grenade to restrict the spring-activated spoon. Then he would remove the spoon retainer pin without unsavory results. The object of the exercise with a live grenade was to delay a premature air burst and clear the helicopter's tail rotor until the device struck the ground, at which time the rubber band either broke or dislodged. With the spoon set free, the grenade could explode. ⁵

Working himself into a frenzy, Johnson continued shouting orders until a subordinate gently reminded him that he possessed no jurisdictional authority over Marines while in town. Grumbling and issuing dire threats, he retreated to the base to consider additional punitive action. Afterward, he confiscated all Air America crewmembers' weapons he discovered, even

⁵ Ron Clarke, Emails, 05/22/15, 05/31/15, 06/06/15. The Thompson submachine gun was likely acquired at either Vientiane or Savannakhet. Grenades used as bombs: A product of Special Forces genius, Skippy peanut jars were also used to advantage while dropping grenades from the cockpit or cabin section.



Air America crewmembers selected diverse weapons to carry upcountry. Ron Clarke in the field with his nine-millimeter Thompson thirty round box magazine machinegun that accompanied him while flying upcountry.

Clark Collection.

venturing into town to seize them. Bert Palmer learned of the episode from Lee Booher after returning to Udorn on a ferry flight from Luang Prabang. Aware of the colonel's foray into town, others cautioned Bert to stash his weapons at the airfield. Later, Flight Mechanics concealed their weapons in their rented houses. ⁶

Despite enduring the colonel's daily tirades, Knight judged his commanding officer reasonably sane, although some lingering doubt crept into his mind as to this assessment, while standing tall and seriously threatened by a courts martial proceeding following a Bangkok R&R. Having accumulated a few days off, in August, he and former squadron pal, Hal Clark, planned a trip to Bangkok. They traveled south on an Air America C-46, for, with the support Marine R4D-8 co-pilot still on leave, military regulations prohibited passengers with only the single pilot, Captain Luke Short.

While in Bangkok, Knight met John Jacoby, his closest friend in HMR-163. At the time, Jacoby was uncharacteristically drinking heavily. Knight discovered that during the summer, he, Chuck Chambers, Gary Johnson, and Pat Reiver were assigned TDY to MACTHAI, and had flown H-34 missions in Thailand. While mostly flying around the Korat area, he and Reiver had crashed, and Reiver suffered several bad burns.

Clark and Knight enjoyed a great trip in the big city, but at the scheduled time of his return to Udorn, Knight discovered that the required Marine R-4D co-pilot was still absent. After two frustrating days of standing by at the airport for a ride, without success, Knight caught an Air America plane to Udorn via Vientiane. ⁷ Bursting with pride at his ingenuity in scrounging the return trip, Knight reported to his unit, and discovered Johnson less than delighted regarding his unauthorized stop in Vientiane. Livid nearly to the point of rupturing a blood vessel, the commanding officer indicated that he had approved and made an exception for Knight to return directly to base on the unit R4D. As the lieutenant braced against the wall, the colonel threatened Wayne with many serious charges. Johnson's anger

⁶ Malcomb Bird Emails, 07/06/02, 05/21/14, The MARCAT program did not commence until after Bird and Crafts left Pensacola, 05/22/14. Along with Ron Clarke, they were both commissioned on the same day. The latter two men opted for the USMC. Burt Palmer Interview, 05/19/04.

Burt Palmer Emails, 03/12/04, 03/14/04, 03/31/04.

⁷ Because of ongoing ceasefire talks and a continuing quest for overt Lao neutrality, the U.S. Embassy placed Vientiane off limits to all out-of-country U.S. military personnel.



USMC R4D liaison plane parked on the Udorn ramp. A portable tower, occasionally manned by an air tactical control detachment from MABS-16 in Okinawa, is seen to the left of the R4D.

Knight Collection.

then rapidly dissipated, and he never referred to the confrontation again. In fact, Knight ultimately considered him very fair, for, when asked to submit a recommendation on Knight's Air America employment questionnaire, he produced a glowing assessment. Always suspicious of Johnson's motives, Knight assumed that he merely wanted him out of "his" Corps.

Prior to the scathing dressing down, Knight had risked equal or worse censure if Johnson had learned of his five illegal flights with J.J. McCauley to Thakhet and other Lao river towns. (The last test flight was conducted on 13 September.) Wanting to maximize his exposure to the Air America operation before committing to the job, Knight bore undue risks that somehow escaped his superior's knowledge. On one trip, McCauley related to him a story about the time a civilian-attired man hailed him on the Thakhet airfield. Climbing the side of the H-34, he inquired in a heavy guttural Eastern European accent, "Vere you go?" Believing the man to be a Russian advisor, McCauley nearly soiled his skivvies. Then immediately increased the engine to takeoff RPM, shouting, "I go Udorn!" With that, the man climbed down and McCauley departed. ⁸

⁸ According to JJ McCauley, the "Russian" was most likely Special Forces Captain John Shalikashvili, a naturalized American of German, Polish, and Georgian roots. Shalikashvili (pronounced sholly-kosh-VEE-lee) remained in the U.S. Army and eventually attained the rank of general officer. After several command billets, he was later appointed Chairman of the Joint Chief of Staff, as the first foreign-born head of the Pentagon, during the Bill Clinton administration.

John Fonburg Letter.

EW Wayne Knight Emails, 05/29/00, 05/30/00, 01/07/02, 06/29/02, 07/04/04, 07/05/04, 07/07/04.

Following Padong's forced abandonment, the Meo training project relocated seven miles southwest to the fallback position at Pha Khao. Accessible by few trails, and easily guarded, in some respects the new area proved superior to Padong, but it also had an obvious downside. Similar to Padong, backed up against Phu Bia's massive protective ranges, the site plunged deep into the very bowels of tightly surrounding rock promontories. Accordingly, because of a steep approach into the rudimentary airstrip, small planes found landings difficult and often quite hairy. In addition, no suitable go-around existed should a plane elect to abort a landing. Even highly experienced cargo pilots found appropriate flight patterns within the bowl necessarily constricted, compounding problems of air supply missions, and lending an element of danger and challenge to operations conducted there. Foul weather, with all the related detriments, could also restrict helicopter operations for extended periods, and foster exciting moments when pilots inadvertently entered instrument conditions. ¹

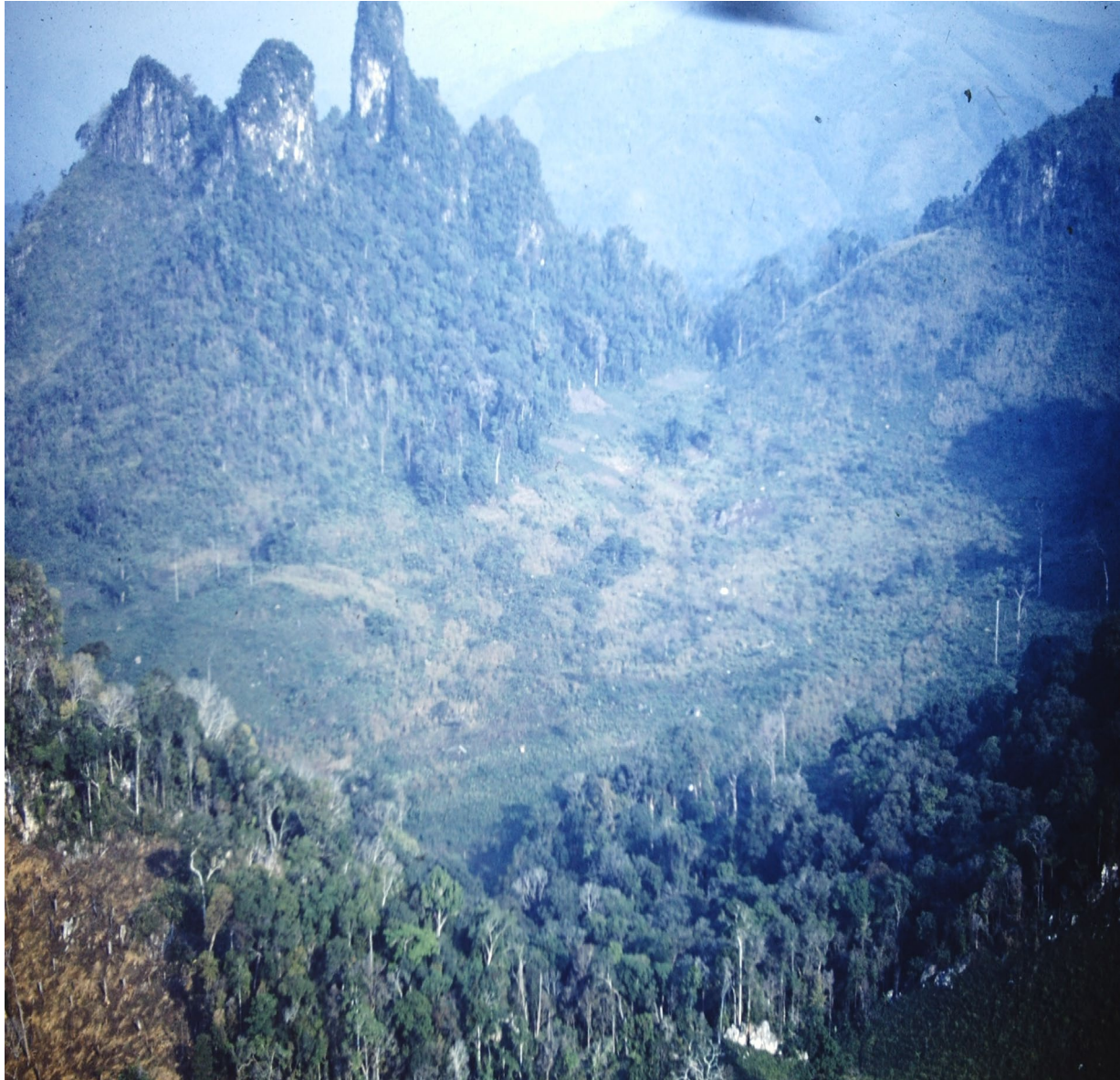
H-34 crews immediately commenced rotating RONS at Pha Khao. These trips generally lasted a minimum of two nights, with crews generally being relieved on site. Presented with weather challenges, or a shortage of aircraft because of a priority lift in another area, camp RONS often extended to three or four nights. ² Early logbook entries--PKA, Pakoa, Pa Koau, Pha Khoa--reflected confusion over transliteration of phonetic names, and approximated the actual spelling. At times, pilots referred to the site as simply "base." By August, in an attempt to standardize logbook entries of a few difficult site names, management assigned numerical designations. Therefore, for paperwork purposes, Pha Khao became Victor-102 (V-102). ³

Over succeeding months, to implement Vang Pao's vision and philosophy of expanding control over numerous Meo villages surrounding the PDJ, loaders directed the more experienced

¹ Malcomb Bird Email Answer to Author's 07/07/02 Questions.

² Fred Sass 1961 Flight Time Records.

³ By the time the Author arrived in Laos, established logbook nomenclature for Pha Khao had changed to Victor Site-14 (VS-14).



A portion of the Pha Khao complex displaying limestone karsts and harsh mountain terrain.
Ron Clarke.



H-34 Captains Dominic Guccione and Fred Sass in front of the operations-mess tent enjoying southeast monsoon weather at Pha Khao.

Sass Collection.



Major Vang Pao and Fred Sass at an outlying site.
Sass Collection

pilots on missions to new sites northeast, and then gradually to the north and east. Other aviators, deemed by on site Customers less capable, never ventured far from Pha Khao, and worked surrounding areas carrying troops, rations, and payrolls. During this transition period, pilots and Customers alike tentatively felt their way around the mountains to discover where the good and bad guys were situated, how best one could either avoid or get to them, and where to establish premier outposts. Gradual success prompted longer missions northeast through virgin territory to sites that tightened the noose around expanses of the Plain of Jars accommodating enemy lines of communication (LOC).

At first, a number of pilots, unsure of their location, incurred ground fire. After gaining additional knowledge concerning unfriendly positions and gathering hard intelligence in new areas, personnel established situation maps displaying where one could, and should not, fly. Some landing zones sat between altitudes of 6,000 to 8,000 feet. These elevations presented a maximum challenge for inexperienced pilots and reciprocating engine machines, never designed for operations at such heights. A few pilots discovered that venturing outside the established performance envelope and overspeeding, while not overboosting the Curtis Wright engine, would "save their bacon" during tenuous situations. Comprising a procedure that neither Sikorsky representatives nor the NATOPS manual would ever subscribe to, when used judiciously, the method appeared to work. In at least one acknowledged case, an abused engine lasted until TBO (time before overhaul at 600 hours).⁴

Purely as a matter of survival, pilots quickly learned other mountain techniques. The sensitive H-34 throttle consisted of a motorcycle type manual twist grip. If one failed to pay close attention to the tachometer reading and maintain engine-rotor RPM within prescribed guidelines, decay could ensue on takeoff. At this critical juncture in the departure procedure, unless the pilot undertook immediate action to counter the problem, loss of lift and altitude might result in a crash.

Such loss of turns occurred on at least one admitted occasion, when sufficient airspace below the lip of the pad saved the day. To obtain flying speed, the excited pilot pitched the nose down, regaining RPM as he dove down the mountainside. The incident presented an object lesson, one not easily forgotten. If a pilot foolishly repeated on-the-job-training

⁴ Malcomb Bird Email, 07/06/02.
Tom Moher Tapes.



Soldiers must be paid to fight. Here a newly married Meo youngster receives kip from the payroll officer.

Babitz Collection.

OJT) mistakes, he did not last long in the mountains.

Following the practice formerly employed at Padong, the Flight Operations Department generally assigned two H-34 crews to work at Pha Khao. Rustic accommodations forced the men to sleep in crude four-man huts. Sustenance consisted of canned Beanie Weenies or C-rations purchased from the MABS unit at Udorn. Should an RON extend beyond two days, meager Special Forces rations augmented crew supplies. Concerned about potential health problems, the men contended with indigenous leeches both morning and night, and hung their boots from the top bunks hoping to thwart intrusions from the nocturnal beasts.

In order to facilitate uninterrupted operations, Air America planes parachuted fuel and other necessary provisions to the airstrip. Some of the worst helicopter damage of the war may have occurred during advance base resupply. Far exceeding any positive results during napalm delivery on enemy positions, there were several instances of airdrops resulting in errant drummed aviation gasoline free falls and resulting devastating ignition by cooking fires. Recalling these and the "Greek Bomber" episode at Kiou Cacham, during announced airdrops, pilots moved H-34s as far away from the established drop zone as possible. Then crews watched with anticipation and crossed their fingers hoping the large chutes would not drift into a ship's rotor blades.⁵

Soon after the fall of Padong, consistent with White Star's six-month rotation policy, Captain Karl Nagle's training team replaced Bill Chance's men at Pha Khao. Assuming that principals never intended the site to remain a permanent base, temporary Marine pilot Bird anticipated an eventual return to Padong. His logic proved incorrect as he discovered that the rapport previously enjoyed with Chance never transferred to Nagle.⁶

During the period, stories abounded concerning the ruthless cruelty enemy patrols committed to discourage Meo villager support and participation in Vang Pao's recruitment attempts throughout Military Region Two. In one remote village, not yet protected by adequate home guard ADC units, directly after Special Forces medics vaccinated the children to prevent various diseases, Pathet Lao elements arrived, and, as a graphic warning to discourage

⁵ JJ McCauley Letter, 1/28/91.
John Fonburg, 06/02/91.
Malcomb Bird Email, 06/21/03.

⁶ Malcomb Bird Email, 09/02/02.



With a U.S. Army Special Forces White Star advisor observing progress, Meo soldiers practice .30 caliber automatic weapon firing at Pha Khao.
Sass Collection.

cooperation with the foreign devils, sliced off their arms. Despite such isolated incidents, people to people achievements and recruiting continued unabated.

Typical civic action missions entailed journeys to remote Meo villages to gain the natives' support, enlist recruits, and establish goodwill. Fred Sass, tapped for such a task, carried a contingent of Nagel's team, an Australian doctor, and an interpreter to a site. After the obligatory wrist string tying ceremony to placate adverse spirits and ensure good fortune, all VIPs and village leaders assembled in a large circle to await a feast.

Sass was curious about the fare's unfamiliar contents. A knowledgeable team member informed the pilot that it consisted of monkey brains, a delicacy only served to honored guests during special occasions. When he grimaced, the man advised him to act polite and eat. He did, but found swallowing extremely difficult. Later, while walking through the village, the doctor remarked that they were probably the first white faces the local folks had ever seen. Directly after uttering this remark, a freckle-faced, dirty blond-haired child approached them. Sass laughed, chiding the doctor that obviously another Caucasian type had preceded them. ⁷

HIRING

Consistent with USG policy to transfer entire control of the Madriver Project to Air America by September, and to achieve an overt and visible semblance of complete civilian control, the Air America office in Washington, using a one-on-one replacement of temporary pilots, hired six former military helicopter pilots during July and early August. As details concerning the Company and the Lao operation continued to be highly classified, hushed word of mouth still provided the usual method of garnering information about the organization. This time, with interservice rivalry relegated to the background, the Washington office processed candidates' applications strictly on an individual basis, but selected mostly former Marine Corps types. Consequently, George H. "Pinky" Eaton, Robert W. Hitchman, Samuel

⁷ Fred Sass Email, 09/12/02.



A typical upcountry scene with curious Meo tribals gathered after an Air America helicopter pilot landed in a mountain village in the Padong-Pha Khao area.

Sass Collection.

T. Jordon (DOH 8/4/61), Barry Cox, and Charles A. Weitz filtered into Udorn in bits and dribbles along with former Navy pilot John Andrew Glutting. Flight Mechanics Louie Jones and CP Wyatt arrived on the same flight from Hong Kong as Weitz. ⁸

Malcolm Bird was refueling at Wattay Airport when George Eaton arrived on the daily milk run from Bangkok. "Pinky" Eaton awed and amused all who observed him that day, for they rarely witnessed such unconventional dress, consisting of a baby blue suit and black knit shirt with silver thread running through it. ⁹

HITCHMAN

The word was out about Air America hiring, and Captain Bob Hitchman applied for a job with the Company in April. VPO Bob Rousselot responded the same month:

*"Captain Robert William Hitchman, Jr.
10691 Mallard Drive
Garden Grove, California
USA*

Dear Captain Hitchman:

Thank you for your completed employment application forms, recently received.

We are interested and would appreciate your informing us the estimated date you would be available if we should be able to favorably negotiate with you in regards to your employment with our company.

At the present time we do not have an immediate need for additional helicopter pilots, however, it is very probable that we will, soon be again having need for qualified helicopter pilots and it would be well if you could promptly respond to this letter, so that we could have the required information at hand, in order to further evaluate and decide whether or not we could use your services.

Your early reply is anticipated."

⁸ "Stash" Wyatt Emails, 05/09/07, 05/15/07.

⁹ Malcomb Bird Email, 06/22/02.

Anticipating a near-term requirement for pilots, Rousselot added an attachment stating that he wanted a special helicopter applicant file available for quick reference.

He also queried CJ Abadie if he knew Hitchman, and if so, to provide an evaluation.¹⁰

When CJ Abadie had previously sought advice concerning potential HUS-1 candidates, McCauley had recommended Bob Hitchman. After he had previously crashed an F-9 jet at China Lake and reverted to helicopters, McCauley had shared squadron duties with him at Santa Ana, California, in HMR-361.¹¹

Bob arrived in Udorn following the "Dirty Six" investigation. On 31 July, as part of the familiarization process Fred Sass flew with Hitchman to Ken Thao, a village in southern Sayaboury Province lying close to the Thai border. Noting that the stocky, blond pilot was highly motivated and gung-ho to earn as much money as possible, Sass speculated, "*If Bob could have strapped the H-34 to his ass, he would have done it.*" He judged Bob a good pilot, but greatly deficient in people skills. Moreover, as another one of "God's gifts to aviation," Hitchman did not appear to seriously regard others' advice concerning perils of working in the harsh environment. To some pilots, Hitchman's aggressive manner indicated that he thought he knew the score better than his peers did, and he displayed this attitude to a fault, a tendency he exhibited throughout a long career in Southeast Asia.¹²

Flight Mechanic Burt Palmer considered Hitchman a fine H-34 driver and professed that he "*would fly with him any place-any time.*" While flying with Hitchman about two weeks after the new pilot arrived in country, Burt encountered his initial combat experience. Flying directly below a cloud layer at 700-feet, they accomplished two supply missions in Sayaboury Province. During a third trip, while crossing a hilly area "all hell broke loose." Palmer, suffering from a monumental hangover derived from libations the previous evening, rested his throbbing head and arms on two rice bags near the cabin door. During the fusillade, one round struck a bag next to his elbow and flying objects stung his face. After hearing the rounds smack the aircraft, Hitchman yelled over the intercom, "*Are you OK, Burt?*" Hitchman's voice quickly jarred the shaken Flight Mechanic back to reality. Thinking that he had just received a face full of shrapnel, he refused to open his eyes for a few moments until he realized that

¹⁰ Letter received from Marius Burke. Reference, VPO-61-534-P/2, 04/29/61.

¹¹ JJ McCauley Letter, 4/25/91.

¹² Fred Sass Email.

the stinging sensation on his skin was caused by little more than a few grains of rice sprayed into his face. Because of undetermined battle damage, Hitchman aborted the mission and returned to Luang Prabang, where the Flight Mechanic discovered only minor damage. The frightening incident represented Palmer's baptism under fire. It constituted the last battle damage he experienced while working for Air America, but one he vividly recalls to this day.¹³

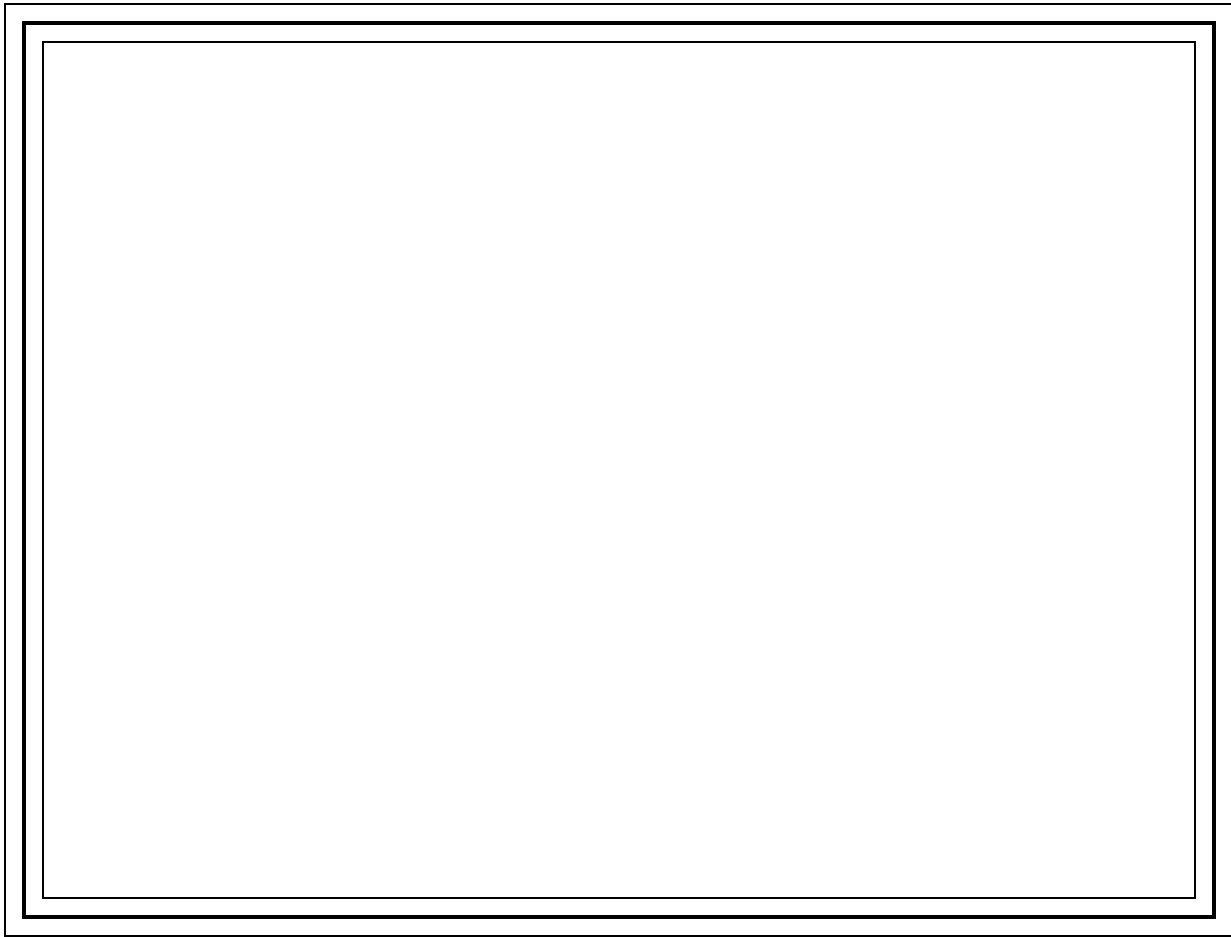
"WELCOLME ABOARD"

Andy Glutting arrived in Udorn toward the end of July. While a member of Navy Squadron HS-9 (Helicopter Anti-Submarine Squadron) located at the Naval Air Station Quonset Point, Rhode Island, he had noted that his good friend Bob Campbell had mysteriously vanished in March. After eventually discovering the reason for Campbell's disappearance, four months later, the native of Brookline, Massachusetts, decided to also pursue money and high adventure, and applied for a job with Air America. His timing was excellent. Within a fortnight, he arrived in Udorn during the peak of the rainy season. At this time, Air America operated from several large tents on raised platforms, connected by wooden walkways. Glutting found accommodations at a local hotel with other pilots. Air America provided transportation to and from the airfield, and a number of personnel owned motorcycles or motorbikes. Time off activities consisted primarily of eating, drinking, and whoring. All hands considered Bangkok R&R a monthly treat. After later reflection on all aspects of the rudimentary field situation, given the circumstances, Glutting considered the operation generally well organized and efficiently run.

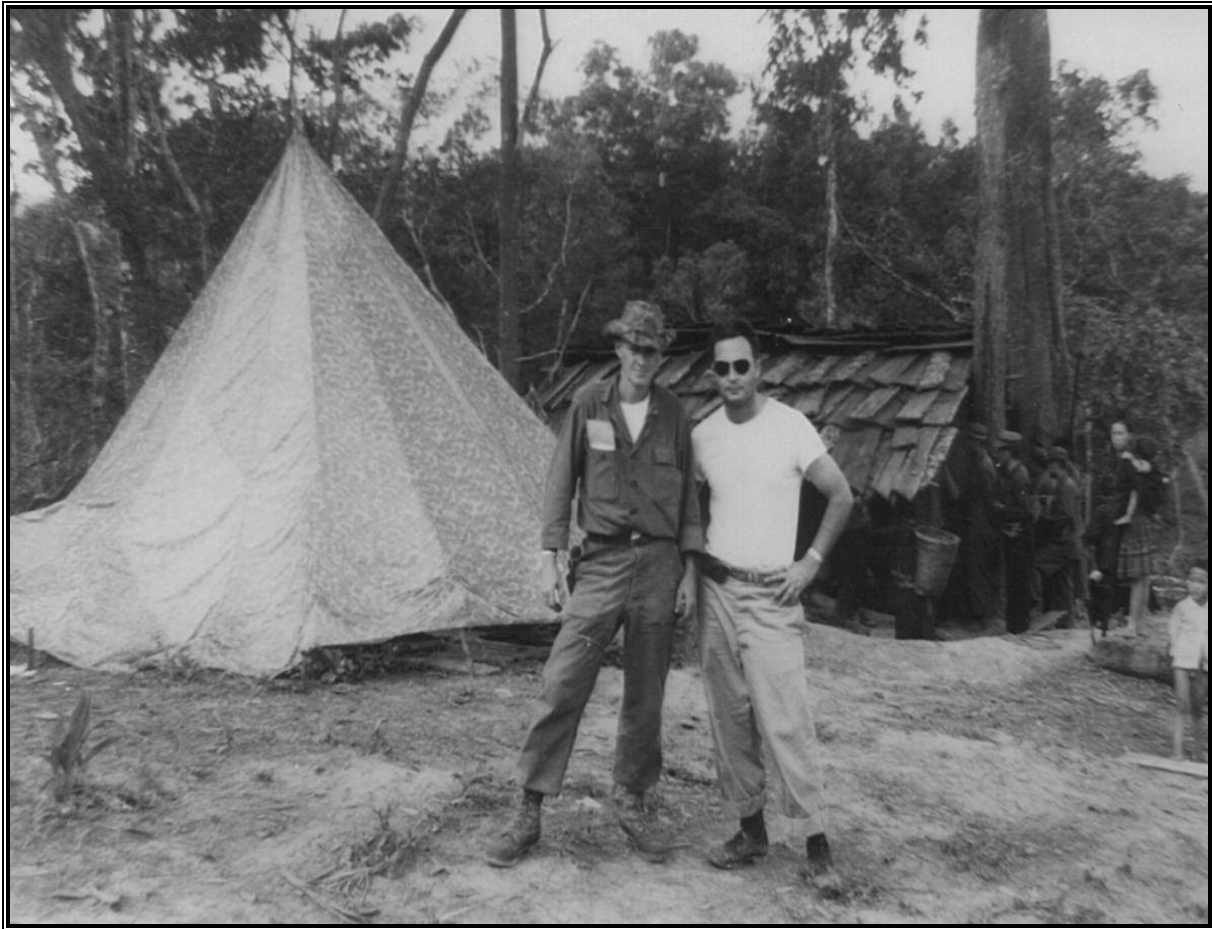
Thirteen days after commencing H-34 upgrade training and familiarization upcountry, a forced landing in a denied area involved Glutting in a four-day escape and evasion (E&E) drama that encompassed all the high adventure a person admittedly could stand. As he later recalled, the experience surpassed any sensational or lurid pulp man magazine narratives popular at the time. Moreover, during his short stint with the Company, he encountered more unique and hairy experiences that one could ever imagine or digest in an entire lifetime.

He immediately began work, flying to the Ban Namone ceasefire site on 28 July with Fred Sass. During early August, he spent a few days flying either local test flights or day missions with Fred Sass. On the seventh, they flew Hotel Victor to Pha Khao. Scheduled to RON

¹³ Burt Palmer Email, 03/11/04, 03/12/04.



Fred Sass with temporarily disabled loader at Pha Khao.
Sass Collection.



"Gooch" and a Special Forces advisor-trainer standing in front of a parachute tent and native shake-single housing at Pha Khao.
Sass Collection.

at the site, late that day he transferred to Hotel Papa and flew a few minutes with Fred's roommate, Dom Guccione. By this time, Sass had formed a favorable opinion about Glutting. He found him highly personable, with a good sense of humor, comfortable to fly with, and one who seemed an equal cockpit partner. However, being new, Glutting failed to understand the de facto protocol involved when dining with the White Star men. The hospitable soldiers always invited Air America crews to share their rations, but the crews were careful not to consume too much, because of limited provisions and long periods spent in the camp. Sass and "Gooch" watched shaking their heads as the sturdy co-pilot cleaned his plate and obtained seconds. They enjoyed a good laugh afterward when Sass clued him in about the situation. ¹⁴

DOWN IN THE WEEDS

Two days later, on a dreary 9 August morning, PIC Captain Dominick L. Guccione, Andy Glutting, and Flight Mechanic Edward Bailor from New Bern, North Carolina, were directed to fly a mixed group of Customer, Special Forces, and PARU men fifteen miles north-northwest to a mostly ethnic Meo village at Ban Na, a site they had worked the previous day. Like Padong, this site comprised another of several smaller recruiting-training camps established early in the Meo program. Separated by two high ridges, Ban Na lay closer to the southern perimeter of the Plain of Jars than either Padong or Pha Khao. Tom Fosmire, Vang Pao's Case Officer, wanted to discuss an impending Xieng Khouang Ville operation with Brian Mills, an Agency replacement for Pat Landry, whom Bill Lair had tapped as his second in command. In addition to Fosmire, White Star Captain Karl Nagel, who would later achieve the rank of general, and the Pha Khao commanding officer of the Thai Police Aerial Resupply Unit (PARU), Captain Makorn Vichitdipat, boarded Hotel Papa. Two fuel drums and other supplies rounded out the load.

Normally the pair of H-34 crews designated to work in and around Pha Khao worked together as a team. They considered this technique a much safer method of operating against the possibility that one helicopter might encounter problems. As an added measure of safety, each crew generally flight-followed the other. On this particular day, assigned to work in separate areas, Guccione and Sass were uneasy, but reluctantly agreed to the plan. They

¹⁴ Fred Sass August 1961 Flight Time Record.
Fred Sass Email, 10/09/02.

rationalized that they would probably be close enough to each other should one encounter a problem.

After departing into marginal weather conditions surrounding Pha Khao, it soon became apparent to Guccione that he might have trouble navigating and might never reach the destination. A low overcast pressing below the hills, fast moving steel-colored squalls, and continuously forming fog banks obscured his intended flight path. Fosmire, noting that "Gooch" was off course, borrowed the Flight Mechanic's helmet and apprised the pilot of that fact. Not wanting to appear disoriented, "Gooch" told the Customer not to worry, as they would approach Ban Na from a different direction. Then, reversing course, intending to squeeze back into Pha Khao, he encountered equally foul weather and discovered himself caught in a monsoon trap that often-challenged unseasoned aviators during that time of year. Forced lower and lower by worsening weather, the pilot-in-command (PIC) desperately began circumnavigating to locate an open avenue of approach to the base camp. Circling deep within a myriad of confusing valleys and cloud-shrouded, look-alike hills now completely disoriented the crew.¹⁵ Then, as they flew over lowland rice paddies that Fosmire knew were unfriendly, he again took the helmet to caution the PIC.¹⁶

After milling around the area for an hour, unable to contact Hotel Victor or any other aircraft, "Gooch" inevitably drove over an unfriendly Meo Pathet Lao village controlled by Fay Dang loyalists. Six rounds of small arms fire struck the H-34.¹⁷

Checking for interior battle damage, Bailor peered through the electronics barrier in the rear of the cabin and observed several fingers of daylight glinting through holes in the tail cone. Then, as thick, black smoke poured from beneath the engine, and with oil spraying

¹⁵ Disoriented: The euphemism disoriented replaced the normal term lost, and was used to preserve pilot ego. Today, other pilots might admit to being lost, but at the time never told anyone.

¹⁶ Jim Coble Email, 03/21/02.
Bill Leary 1961 Notes, UTD.

¹⁷ At this time Vang Pao had not intimidated or marshalled all area village clans to his cause. Several just wanted to be left alone to their own devices, or had been converted to communist ideology.

a thick coating on the cabin door threshold, he yelled over the intercom that he suspected they were on fire. Without hesitation, the former Army pilot dove for the valley floor and landed in a clearing near a clump of trees. Following a hasty battle damage assessment, Bailor discovered punctured engine oil cooler fins beneath the engine. The news could not have been worse, for the rectangular cooler assembly constituted one of the more vulnerable, but necessary components on the H-34. A gear type engine-driven pump delivered oil through the system under positive pressure. When pierced by a stick, rock, or any projectile, the cooler unit would rapidly discharge ten plus gallons of 1100 weight oil from even a tiny orifice. Then, without adequate lubrication or cooling, engine seizure would certainly follow.

Grounded, weather deteriorating, and located in a questionable area, the crew and passengers discovered themselves, using the dreaded jargon of a beleaguered military man, in "Deep Kimshi."

What occurred next marked yet another of many firsts in the fledgling Air America helicopter program. Neither dressed nor equipped for overnight camping, or evasion in the weeds, the diverse group commenced several days of Southeast Asian fun and games. Fortunately, especially for the now out-of-their-element flight crew, a survival expert accompanied them. Tom Fosmire, a long-time employee functioning in Bill Lair's early Thailand Sea Supply operation, had also taught survival techniques while in the Army and for the Agency. Because of Tom's considerable experience in these matters, the others deferred to the paramilitary agent, whereupon he assumed overall command, and under his apt guidance, saved the day. Following the ordeal, the survivors described Fosmire as a most impressive, very calm, cool, and collected individual. They also characterized Thai Captain Macorn as especially professional.

Salvaging important portions of the recently issued aircraft survival kit, the men backed off from the clearing 300 yards into underbrush. Then, using this concealment, they pushed uphill onto ridgelines believed leading north in the direction of Pha Khao. From the beginning of the trek, there were good indications that someone was pursuing them. Therefore, intent to place the maximum distance between them and the suspected bad guys, the boss-man mercilessly drove the exhausted group on for hours. At times, the possibility of capture forced him to drag and prod one out-of-shape pilot along while also goading other ill-

motivated crewmembers to continue the march. Movement proved necessarily slow, and by nightfall, collective estimates concluded that they had barely moved five miles from the touchdown spot.

The first night in the field was the worst. Riddled with apprehension of the unknown and fear of capture, the exposed men huddled together for warmth on a narrow rock outcropping. For entertainment, they listened silently to the roar from a waterfall spilling down a cleft in the rock face and experienced its damp, icy spray. Fosmire, suspecting incipient hypothermia, gave a shivering Glutting his jacket. The son of a retired U.S. Navy Rear Admiral, and not expecting the outdoor adventure, Glutting had left Padong that morning wearing only a "T" shirt. Taking stock of their provisions, they found only one package of rations remained, which provided a single dry cracker per man. Without additional sustenance, it would have been an even more horrible night had Fosmire not offered a bottle of scotch from his bug-out bag also containing a 9mm pistol.

For some time, Fosmire had conducted unauthorized visits to Vientiane to date a comely American Embassy secretary whom he deeply loved. Bill Young had worked closely with him during the early Sea Supply days in Thailand. While not operating in other areas during the northeast expansion, he often returned to Pha Khao for a rest, and covered for Fosmire during his amorous trips south. Before returning to the base, in honor of Fosmire's impending marriage, a friend had presented him with the whiskey bottle. The well received liquid courage and its warmth temporarily bolstered his companions' morale and overall outlook regarding their situation.

Still sensing that they were being pursued, using a compass they pressed on the following day and noted that the majority of ridges in the region followed a general east-west pattern. For those unaccustomed to hiking, travel up and over the summits continued to be slow, laborious, and prevented them from covering great distances in a day. They also had to cope with thick, tangled jungle. At times, they were reduced to using a bayonet to chop through thickets and growth so dense and dark one could barely see a hand in front of him. Following northerly compass bearings, they crossed mountains, ravines, and forded streams. Despite lacking food, valley streams and creeks fed by the hilly slopes provided abundant and theoretically clean water. The group spent a second miserable night warding off annoying insects and thirsty leeches.

Fred Sass experienced little problem navigating weather on the ninth. After returning

to Pha Khao and discovering Hotel Papa long overdue, he became alarmed. Following refueling, he launched, backtracked toward Ban Na, and conducted what constituted a fruitless radio and visual search. He then notified the White Star radio operator to contact the appropriate authorities in Vientiane and Udorn, and inform them that Hotel Papa and the crew were missing.¹⁸

Within a day, a full-blown hunt was organized and underway. Hampered by continuing adverse weather, an expanding square search included two Helio Couriers and every available H-34. For the next three days Customers Brian Mills, Bill Young, and others flew as observers for twelve to thirteen hours a day in marginal weather searching for the six men. After gross area searches, micro investigations of even cracks and crevices in mountains and hills revealed nothing. It astounded and concerned all involved in the quest that such a large helicopter and crew had seemingly disappeared from the face of the earth.

Then a break occurred for both SAR aircraft and the happy wanderers on the ground. Late on the afternoon of 11 August, Fosmire sighted a C-47 returning to Wattay Airport following an airdrop on the east side of the Plain of Jars. Contacting the pilot on the survival radio's preset 121.5 megacycle emergency frequency, and after establishing his bona fides, he requested that the pilot not circle his position, as he believed a tenacious enemy was still in hot pursuit. After plotting a fix on the beleaguered men, the stiff wing pilot relayed the group's approximate position to Vientiane operations. Flying a Helio Courier, Gary Malmberg was directed to the area. As he flew over the group a shot rang out from close by striking the aircraft. Before leaving the area, Malmberg provided a compass heading to a clearing for the group to move for extraction.

When word of contact with the group reached Pha Khao, Bill Young piled into the Helio piloted by Bob Smith, judged a rangy, pleasant guy with a constant smile, and they departed for the announced escape and evasion (E&E) area. They were quite surprised, as the location appeared to be 180 degrees from the area they had previously searched. Flying at a low level,

¹⁸ Following a dark period in Lao operations with flight-following, Air America developed additional radio stations. Company standard operating procedure (SOP) policy stipulated that individual aircraft report or relay approximate positions every thirty minutes. If the radio room received no report during this period, operators solicited one-hour radio searches. Should this method still result in a negative location, radio operators implemented SAR procedures.

they discovered Hotel Papa. Despite rudimentary attempts to camouflage the machine, Young noted that someone had already removed the main rotor blades. Then he recalled that the Soviets, hungry for information relating to our advanced honeycomb blade technology, had a standing reward for these components. While they were orbiting, ground fire erupted from a hillock. Confident that a search would eventually produce slow moving targets, the enemy had emplaced a deadly 12.7mm machine gun close to the village and patiently awaited arrivals. During the fusillade, one projectile struck the rear portion of the fuselage, and penetrated a seat between the pilot and Young on its way through the roof. Bits of flying shrapnel scraped Smith. Adding to his unease, Smith was naturally concerned, for he was not certain where the ground fire had impacted the plane. Slightly reassuring, the instruments appeared normal and flight controls still afforded free movement. However, to hedge his bets, while vacating the area he radioed his predicament in the blind. Lady luck rode onboard the plane that day, and they returned safely to Pha Khao.

Previously, on 8 August, enemy howitzers emplaced at Xieng Khouang Ville had commenced firing on Meo units positioned on Phou Khe and adjoining hills to the north of the valley. Led by Colonel Vang Pao, these units closely monitored Route-4 road traffic, and prepared to assault portions of the valley below. For three days, with the artillery battle never progressing beyond troops in contact (TIC), Meo gunners--more than likely fortified with PARU personnel--counter fired on the "Ville" with mortar and recoilless rifle fire.¹⁹ Then, after learning about the loss of Hotel Papa and disposition of the six missing men, Vang Pao returned to Pha Khao and began organizing his people into multiple helicopter loads for the imminent rescue attempt. The following morning, White Star personnel and handpicked Meo troops loaded into three H-34s.

On Saturday, the survivors had to cross a deep river to reach the clearing Malmberg recommended. They arrived about the same time as the rescue armada. Coordinating with fixed wing aircraft crews, Tom Moher in the empty SAR ship located the group on a low, sloping hill. Calculated to leave the bad guys well behind them, it was apparent they had moved a considerable distance the previous night.

Orbiting Helio Couriers dropped homemade bombs--grenades in Skippy peanut butter jars and blocks of C-4 explosives--throughout the area to create diversions and discourage

¹⁹ Joint Chiefs of Staff, 122.

Bill Young Interview at the Princess Royal Hotel Chiang Mai, Thailand, 10/19/95.

potential enemy interference. Helicopters hauling security forces landed and discharged troops, who then dispersed in a perimeter defense to cover the evacuation. Because of radio difficulty, Tom Fosmire's group failed to receive word of the diversionary activity. Believing they were being mortared, the terrified men dashed toward a hovering helicopter. Ironically, Bob Campbell, Andy Glutting's former Navy squadron mate, piloted the helicopter that extracted the exhausted men and delivered them to Pha Khao. ²⁰

AFTERMATH

In honor of the survivors' successful retrieval, party time erupted at the camp. Scotch and Thai Mekong whiskey--a nasty alcoholic drink tasting like kerosene flowed, and with the addition of two bottles of champagne Colonel Little brought from Vientiane for the celebration, the famished and dehydrated escapees soon became smashed.

Portrayed as a tough character in charge of White Star operations at Pha Khao, Little was affectionately called "The Shark" by his men. They also universally respected him for his trips into the field and oblivion to self-preservation in exposing himself to danger. Many Air America pilots considered Colonel Little a hands-on-person and they liked and got along well with him. Fred Sass and Dave Smith had flown the colonel to a few sites around Pakse on 31 May, and noted that his nervous troops were constantly on their toes while the crusty soldier inspected their facilities. The following day he accompanied the pilots in Hotel Victor to Savannakhet, and then to Dong Hene, a site on Route-9, fifteen miles east of Seno that housed a long-established Lao officer's school, a French fort, a smattering of French advisors, and a White Star team. There he accosted one of his men in an unmerciful dressing down for a perceived military infraction. However, his demeanor proved only a façade, for when he re-boarded the H-34 he winked at Sass and said, "*Sure chewed his ass out good.*" ²¹

Little always carried a kit with razor, comb, and cologne into the field. Before

²⁰ Former Customer Brian Mills Interview at the Montien Hotel located on Suriwongse Road Bangkok, Thailand 11/06/95.

²¹ Fred Sass Emails, 09/26/02, 10//03/02.

interviewing pilots or his men he insisted that they first clean up and shave, to look and smell better. The sodden helicopter crewmembers from Hotel Papa were no exception. ²²

Fosmire went to Vientiane, where Agency Chief of Station Gordon Jorgensen and Tom's fiancée met and took him to visit Ambassador Brown.

Not long afterward, mouthing hearty goodbyes, the snockered crew was poured into Campbell's H-34 for the ferry flight to Udorn which, since July pilots had been logging as Sierra Zero Eight (S-08).

During a debriefing, Air America management queried the crew as to the disposition of the survival pack. Of course, after taking the rations, they left the rest of the bulky item on Hotel Pop during the confused minutes following the landing. The crew, especially the PIC, took exception to the transparent trend the interrogation took, for it blatantly appeared that an inanimate object in the form of a survival kit, was more important to Company idiots than an aircraft loss or the crew's personnel welfare. Despite their entreaties to "let sleeping dogs lie," the Company subsequently billed each man seventy-five dollars for missing items. Naturally, the exceptional charge produced a considerable resentment and fervor within the crew and among temporary pilots. When Fosmire learned that Air America management had docked the crew for the lost kit, he had a few choice words with his boss at AB-1 regarding the incident. Within short order, the Customer informed the Company to lay off the crew, and the Taipei accounting department expunged the ridiculous charge. But the damage to crew morale lingered, and the incident was long remembered among the Udorn crowd. To them it seemed that headquarters Taipei management's overriding concern about material items, their private interests, and relative unconcern over hostile events occurring during field operations, took precedence over employee wellbeing. ²³

Because of his survival training expertise and perseverance under pressure, Tom Fosmire brought his people safely through the trying ordeal in top-notch shape. Understandably, in order to preserve his cover, official sources never accorded him the overt kudos he richly deserved. Because secrecy and political expediency continued paramount factors in "neutral" Laos, Captain Nagle fronted as the de facto hero and the group spokesman during Vientiane media sessions. Nagle never mentioned Fosmire or Macorn's participation to

²² Tom Moher Tapes.

²³ Tom Moher Tapes.

the press. In the end, the notoriety aided Nagle's military career, for he eventually advanced to the rank of general. ²⁴

Down in an unsecure area, Hotel Papa (Bureau Number 145730), the eighth 1961 H-34 strike, remained moldering in the jungle for many years. The helicopter's loss reduced the helicopter inventory to fifteen ships, which might negatively impact impending dry season operations. ²⁵

²⁴ Segment Sources: Incident reconstructed from several sources. Retired General Nagel lived in the Sanford, North Carolina area near Fort Rucker. When I visited my cousin Bob Anderson there, he suggested that we visit Nagel for an interview. The interview never occurred. Bill M. Leary, Professor of History at the University of Georgia Notes of Glutting Interview. Bill Leary Phone Call, 1/9/93. Boston Daily Record 14 August 1961. Steve Nichols Tape and Phone Call, 12/4/92. JJ McCauley Letter, 01/28/91. Andy Glutting Phone Call, 12/5/92. Glutting Letters, 1/11/93, 7/15/93. Andy Glutting Email, 6/4/93. Fred Sass Emails, 08/26/02, 08/27/02, 10/09/02. CJ Abadie Email, 01/30/99. Tom Ahern, 163-164.

²⁵ Abadie 15 September 1961 letter to an unspecified party regarding the loss of Hotel Papa. Later, when the Udorn Maintenance Department possessed sufficient jigs, talented personnel, blueprints, hangar space, and necessary expertise to completely rebuild a H-34, pilots were assigned to scour Laos for reparable wrecks, tubs, or Sikorsky data plates. The U.S. Navy stationed young Steve Nichols for a stint at Quonset Point, Rhode Island. While serving there during 1961-1964, Steve became acquainted with Andy Glutting and listened to his account of the action in Laos and the fate of Hotel Papa. Steve joined Air America as a Flight Mechanic in 1965 and over time was promoted to Maintenance Supervisor. Later, he gained possession of Hotel Papa's Sikorsky data plate. Maintenance never utilized this manufacture plate for an aircraft rebuild, so in the early 1970s, upon his termination with Air America, he took the plate home. Then in 1992, Nichols and Glutting reacquainted and Steve presented Glutting with the data plate. The act overwhelmed Glutting with memories, and he vividly recalled his four days in the weeds.

THE C-46F, B-136 DISASTER

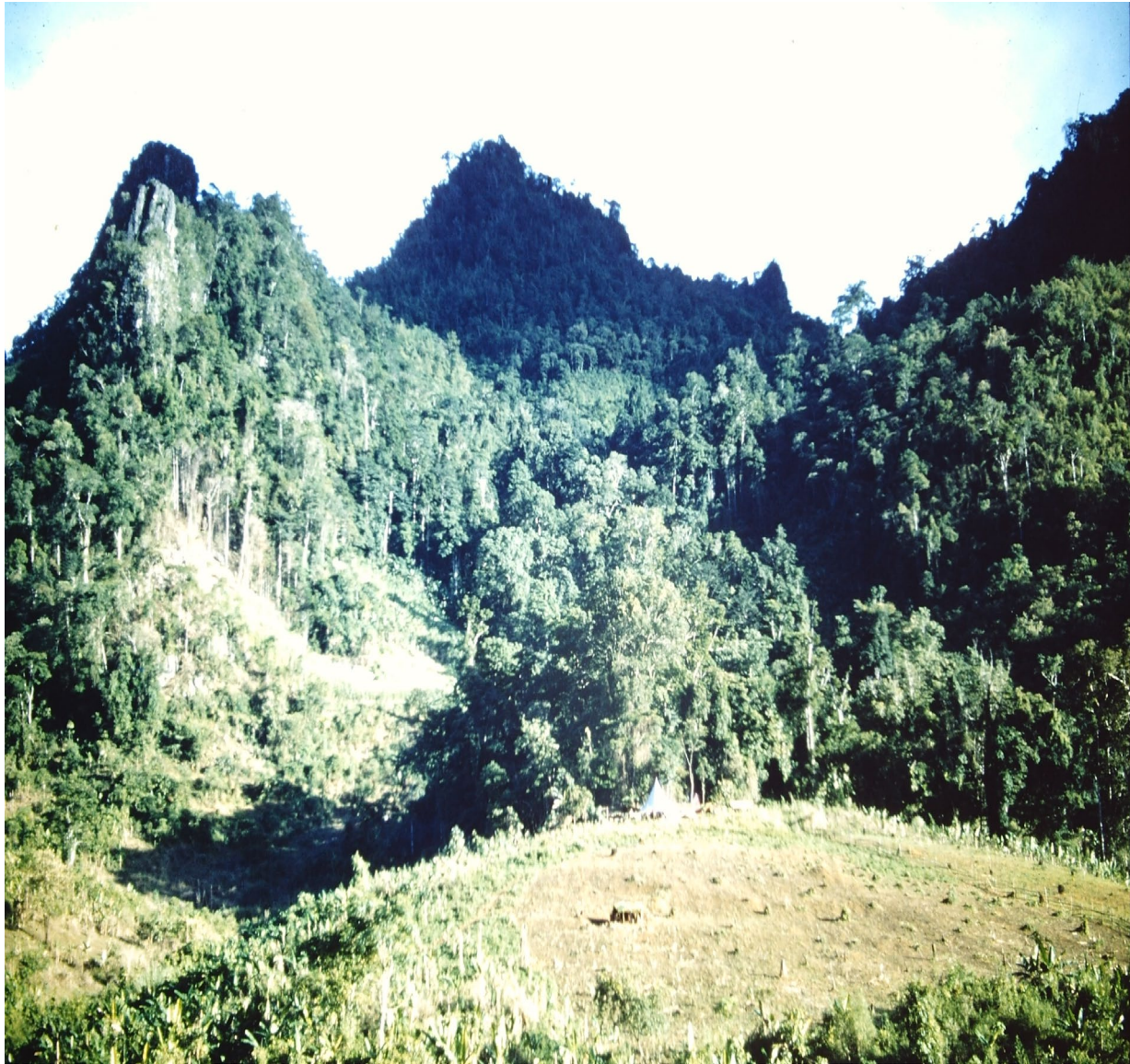
The Pha Khao hex continued tragically the day following the recovery of Hotel Papa's crew and passengers. C-46, B-136 crashed and burned at the site as it maneuvered in the confined bowl while air dropping combined loads to support Meo resistance fighters and helicopter operations. As usual, a low cloud cover persisted over the valley that fateful morning.

After receiving radio contact alerting the site of the impending drop, moments before the plane's arrival Dick Crafts, Tom Moher, and Jack McCauley hastily repositioned their H-34s off to the side of the strip, then watched as experienced Captain Norwood N. "Woody" Forte skillfully penetrated a small hole and entered the confined bowl.²⁶ Using a tight racetrack pattern, he initiated a dummy run to ascertain wind direction, velocity, and drop zone status, for even at a low altitude, palletized aviation gas drums dropped by parachute had a wide drift capability.

While crews on the ground watched fascinated, the first run resulted in a perfect drop on the runway. However, to avoid mountains and clouds, and to jockey B-136 into position for another drop, a steep 180-degree turn at the end of the valley was required. At the end of the downwind leg, while commencing a 180-degree turn toward final approach, it appeared to ground observers that the right engine on the C-46 over sped, causing the propeller to dramatically change pitch and thrust. The abrupt and resulting loss of control caused the plane to roll sufficiently for the left wing tip to clip the top of a karst.

Thus, began the costly catastrophe. Looking like tinfoil, parts of the shredded wing drifted to the valley floor as the large plane cartwheeled down the ridge in its final death throes. For an instant, witnesses thought the plunging bird might take out people on the ground, but momentum carried the machine behind a karst in the southern corner of the Pha Khao complex. Shocked by implications of the grisly spectacle, crews and Customers helicoptered to the crash site, but any rescue effort was fruitless. Enveloping fire, searing heat, and exploding ammunition prevented access to the ship. The impact had ejected the bodies of two kickers from the wreckage, but three other crewmembers perished within the C-46 inferno. Sadly, witnesses had to watch helplessly and shudder over the horrible spectacle of

²⁶ William Leary, *Perilous Missions* (University of Alabama Press, 1984), Appendix C, NN Forte flew forty-eight Squaw air drops over Dien Bien Phu between March 13 to May 7 1954.



A grassy knoll in the Pha Khao area surrounded by forested limestone karsts.
Ron Clarke Collection.

death by fire. No one would ever forget the sight, and one crewmember recorded the horror on film for posterity.

Ensuing attempts to retrieve crew remains proved difficult and hazardous, for 81mm mortar rounds continued to cook-off for two days. Those participating in the recovery phase considered it a miracle that the accident did not injure anyone else. Recovery teams eventually retrieved the badly burned bodies of pilot Norwood Forte, copilot Roger Sarno, and AFS "kickers" David W. Bevan, Darrell A. Eubanks, and John S. Lewis. Dick Crafts ferried the remains to Udorn, where, utilizing dental records, each charred corpse required extensive forensic science identification before final disposition.^{27 28}

²⁷ Bill Leary Notes of Dick Crafts C-46 Accident Recollection.
JJ McCauley Letter, 1/28/91.
Tom Moher Tape.
JJ McCauley Letter, 01/28/91.
Fred Sass Email, 10/09/02.

²⁸ Ron Clarke Email. Dick Crafts departed Southeast Asia during September. Originally from the party town of Darien, Connecticut, he attended the University of Connecticut for a time and then dropped out. He returned to Air America as a helicopter pilot in 1962.

During March 1961 Ban Na, located on the fringe of the southern Plain of Jars, became the second Military Region Two "Momentum" training camp, and assumed responsibility for recruiting and targeting areas to the north and west. Utilizing specialized PARU teams, Agency Case Officers Tom Fosmire and Tony Poe, recruitment attempts extended to the northwestern sites of Xieng Dat and Phou Fa. During the early training period after planners elected to arm additional Meo fighters, Case Officers often located to various areas that generally encircled the Plain of Jars. Hence, Fosmire went to Tha Lin Noi (VS-18), Poe to Phou Fa (VS-16), and Pat Landry assumed duties at Ban Na (VS-15) until Bill Lair tapped him to help administer the expanding Meo program from Vientiane. At that time, the Agency searched for a suitable replacement and eventually solicited Brian Mills for the duty. ¹

Mills, then in a stateside billet, had previously worked for several years in Thailand, mostly in the Chiang Mai region. Like Fosmire, Shirley, and the other Case Officers, because of Mill's knowledge of the Thai language and familiarity with PARU personnel, his superiors requested that he return to Southeast Asia for about six months. Agreeing to the short assignment, following Vang Pao's exodus from Padong, he spent five and a half months TDY at the Ban Na site. Largely remaining in the background, his job mainly revolved around supporting the onsite PARU team and ensuring that logistics ran smoothly.

Because of the runway's poor condition for fixed wing aircraft, Mills arrived at the site in a helicopter. Within two weeks the first Helio Courier landed. Initial fixed wing operations were a challenge requiring the pilot to develop unusual procedures. Situated at 4,600 feet, the lower portion of the sod and clay strip afforded a Helio pilot an acceptable landing area. Immediately after touchdown, the pilot then had to apply full power in order to continue the landing roll and taxi up the steep slope to the flattened hilltop to unload or load passengers or supplies. Failure to employ this technique, especially during very muddy

¹ While taking advantage of the World War Two GI educational bill, Brian Mills, Pat Landry, and Bill Lair had been classmates at Texas A&M College at Austin, Texas.

conditions, generally resulted in the pilot and his plane being stuck halfway up the hill. During takeoffs, discounting ruts and potholes caused by heavy rainstorms, the pilot clobbered the engine, bounced the machine down the incline, and upon reaching the level area, catapulted into the air. The more versatile helicopters had no problem and always landed at the apex. Helio Courier pilots Bob Smith and Gary Malmberg occasionally RON at the site, but because essential H-34 fuel, oil, and grease products (POL) were only stored at Pha Khao, helicopter crews overnighted there.

In order to service the site, Air America operations regularly allocated two Helio Couriers, four to five H-34s as required, and reserved cargo aircraft for airdrops at Ban Na. Bill Lair, like his subordinates, desired to run a successful operation, yet maintain a small operation and remain within his budget. He generally preferred working with Helio Couriers to helicopters. Scarce helicopter fuel, lower hourly operating expenses, and a longer range of the Helio were the primary considerations. The Helio possessed very good fuel endurance. In contrast, if topped off, after three hours H-34 pilots were always looking for fuel. Therefore, whenever assigned work at the site, to extend time at the station, H-34 crews often carried drummed fuel from Pha Khao. Later, cargo planes dropped helicopter aviation gasoline at sites considered critical work areas.

As the sole "round eye" in attendance (Special Forces teams only worked from Pha Khao, Jack Shirley did not remain in the area long, and Brian Mills never saw Tony Poe the entire time he was there), Mills lived and worked with the Thai in the valley camp north of and below the uncompleted elevated airstrip. With plenty of exercise generated from the forty-five-minute walk over very bad trails from the strip to the camp and good, clean Thai food provided, he remained healthy throughout the tour. With much to do and very little time off, essential communications were conducted with Vientiane over the PARU radio net. In case he required special instructions, rather than conduct a rare trip south to Vientiane, he generally journeyed to Pha Khao and met Lair or his representative.

Embassy personnel hardly ever journeyed to Ban Na. One unlucky U.S Information Service (USIS) man did arrive in a Helio Courier to snap publicity pictures. However, he failed to accomplish this goal for while disembarking, he slipped in the thick mud and fractured a leg.

Another of Mills' duties involved monitoring occasional rifts in Thai-Meo relations. Despite being ethnically disparate groups, he discovered that the Meo spoke enough Lao to communicate and smooth out occasional difficulties with the PARU. Part of the tension stemmed

from PARU contact with the tribal Tai Dam (Black Thai). Living at lower elevations in surrounding villages, and cultivating valley rice differently from the Meo technique, the Thai Dam were more culturally attuned to the PARU. Because the Meo and Tai Dam were historically mutually jealous and mistrustful of each other, and failed to interact well, American attempts to organize Tai Dam programs were generally unsuccessful, as the Meo leaders were reluctant to arm them.

Mills learned that, as highly stubborn individuals, superior minded Meo would not labor to develop and improve the Ban Na strip. Instead, they hired Tai Dam and other Lao Theung workers, and paid them in kind.

An important non-military role in Mills' area was oriented toward instituting government influence. The first attempt involved reestablishing village area organization and structure previously in effect before serious hostilities commenced. Therefore, Vientiane authorities deemed it important to inaugurate functioning Nai Bans (village chiefs), a governor, and local political or government groups who would once again feel comfortable with the system. A Lao government official arrived from Vientiane to implement the plan. A highly efficient and organized individual, he effectively created the program and, with Mills' help, ensured that the system worked properly. Indeed, for the first time in years, individuals were paid, and hard currency in the form of kip flowed through their hands.

Mills' sphere of influence normally encompassed the larger sites: Ban Na, Pha Khao, Phou Fa, and Pop Buell's refugee camp at Long Tieng. However, there were several often-contested positions around Moung Soui and Route-7 to the northwest that required reorganizing. One friendly Meo village at Houei Ki Nin (VS-38) was developed at this time. Within one day walking distance of Ban Na, he occasionally went there to investigate the current situation and gather intelligence. He also often flew over Moung Soui to evaluate the status of the Lao in that area.

Despite their failings, during his tour, Mills genuinely liked and felt comfortable working with the Meo. Over time, hundreds of ADC units were armed and trained to defend their villages. A few of the more promising men and youths were selected for special training in Thailand. However, from the beginning of his efforts it was obvious to Mills that they would not be the great saviors of Laos, for other than fighting they lacked a true concept of freedom. Furthermore, in his estimation, they could never ward off any serious and sustained

North Vietnamese advances. ²

² Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 63.
Brian Mills Bangkok, Thailand Interview at the Montien Hotel, 11/07/95.
Bill Lair Bangkok, Thailand Interview, 11/06/95.

Following the June relocation from Padong, no one seriously considered Pha Khao a suitable location for long-term operations. In fact, several pilots believed that they were simply marking time until returning to the Padong base. Sometime before the Forte accident, during the early development stage at Pha Khao, Bill Young received message traffic from Bill Lair's Vientiane headquarters requesting that, in addition to his normal training duties, he search the area for a replacement location more suitable for supply missions. From the Pha Khao site's inception, numerous pilots had complained about narrow escapes while landing or dropping supplies. Moreover, logical reasons to relocate ranged from a site too confined for safe airdrops, to a need for a longer, more pilot-friendly airstrip to accommodate larger aircraft with heavier loads, and to a preference for a more defensible position.

To meet these requirements, and help him conduct an area visual reconnaissance, Young selected senior Helio Courier pilot Captain Ron Sutphin. Before the flight, Young scrutinized local maps and contour lines for favorable locations. Knowledgeable Meo assistants, reasonably certain that the area was secure, recommended the Lao Theung sparsely inhabited valley of Long Tieng, located only seven miles northwest from the existing training camp, as one site to definitely investigate that day.

Sutphin, an old experienced China pilot, took off from the rutted strip and slowly ascended the sides of the karsts with lowered flaps to take advantage of existing thermals and updrafts. Young failed to appreciate the technique. Even on a good day, Young was not happy to take to the air in any aircraft, and Sutphin's method stimulated a queasy feeling. Then, adding to Young's discomfort, once he cleared a final mountain, the playful Sutphin, conscious of his passenger's nervous reluctance to fly, placed his plane in a dive, then flipped the machine on its back. The radical maneuver petrified Young, for he had never experienced such an erratic aerobatic gyration, and found it difficult to fathom.

After entering the long, wide Long Tieng valley, the men noted a few scattered Lao Theung houses interspersed with lush gardens and corn patches. For a time, they circled the bowl cautiously to determine the intentions of the few people visible on the ground. Finally, after detecting no hostile intentions, Sutphin landed on a flat, narrow trail between

cornfields. Then, after the two Americans had hiked throughout the valley for an hour, both concluded that the area seemed to fulfill most of Bill Lair's requirements as a promising location to create a new training camp.

Supthin reported these observations to Lair that evening. Although ensuing visits by Lair and Vang Pao confirmed their satisfaction with the site, ultimately a question arose as to the current and long-term defensibility of the valley. Ringed by high ridgelines, Long Tieng looked like it might duplicate a Dien Bien Phu scenario should enemy forces ever obtain possession of the surrounding and high terrain overlooking the valley. Therefore, weighing aspects of this negative potential situation, until well into 1962, when Vang Pao integrated additional territory under a friendly umbrella, Pha Khao continued as the primary training camp. Young believed that he had the distinction of being the first American to walk the ground at Long Tieng, months before it became established as the primary base for Meo expansion in Military Region Two. ¹

Over the ensuing months, occasional Helio Courier pilots, Customers, and Meo representatives landed at Long Tieng with the purpose of further assessing the site and parlaying with friendly Lao Theung farming people living there. Toward the end of October, Bill Andresevic made his first landing in the valley on a trail in front of an isolated farmhouse. The resident farmer, by then used to incursions by the silver birds, invited him inside and pleasantly surprised him with a steaming cup of Nescafe coffee laced with delicious condensed milk. ²

YOUNG'S RECONS

Ever restless, and often contentious with other Case Officer peers, Bill Young did not remain long at Pha Khao. Bill Lair recognized that his expertise with languages and knowledge of tribal cultures was too valuable to waste. He encouraged the young man to frequently journey into the field, scouting friendly people and likely places to recruit

¹ Bill Young Interview.

² Bill Leary Interview with Bill Andresevic.



Early operations in the Long Tieng Valley. Tail of the Customer-preferred Helio Courier at the right side of the photo.

Knight Collection.

and operate. Not requiring the use of regular forces and large teams of PARU in the course of his duties, he generally performed the deeds himself. Initially, he walked from Site-102 to areas east of Padong, west toward Vang Vieng, then farther west into Sayaboury Province.

The Thai government historically coveted the entire Mekong River as a logical fixed geographic boundary separating the two countries. Now, officials anticipated that the war would encroach to the west in a direction that would assist them in reviving claims to Sayaboury Province. During the Japanese World War Two occupation of Indochina, in turn for Thai cooperation, Japanese rulers ceded the province to Thailand. Following the cessation of hostilities in 1945, French forces returned Sayaboury to the Lao government. Reinforcing Royal Thai Government (RTG) geopolitical designs, one Thai official, General Sayad, pushed the retrenchment policy.

For many years, Young continued an excellent relationship with Thai army and police officers. In contrast to Jack Shirley, who spoke only rudimentary Thai, he conversed fluently with important dignitaries. More importantly, he possessed a unique and rare knowledge of Thai culture and, more importantly, the Thai thought process.

For entirely different reasons, Vang Pao also had interest in the Sayaboury region. He considered it a prospective fallback area for his people should all attempts fail in his vision of conquest and containment, and if enemy pressure forced him from Military Region Two. From the beginning of Meo involvement, Bill Lair wholeheartedly reinforced Vang Pao's relocation plan should it ever become necessary. Against this end, Lair accompanied Sayad to the northern base to parlay with the major and sow the seeds for a western rally point. During the meeting, the participants encouraged Young, as their point man, to continue his probes deeper into Sayaboury.

As the northwest section of Laos presented a distinct possibility for growth, expansion of friendly areas in the direction of Sayaboury rapidly advanced. While this developed, Young became increasingly concerned at what he considered USG's glaring lack of flexibility in enlisting all regional ethnic tribes for the Lao experiment. He long considered the Agency program much too narrow in scope, with recruiting efforts only focused on the Meo. Yes, expectations were high and already a good level of success had been achieved from one hilltop to another, but as he walked through valleys between mountain settlements, he discovered that wet rice paddy farmers appeared aloof, even unfriendly to western recruiting efforts. Perhaps one reason for the total emphasis on using the Meo as a surrogate

army stemmed from early Agency agents' failed attempts to work with Kha clans. Before long, field agents had deemed this particular category of native Lao too passive to forge into a viable army. Furthermore, because French and Vietnamese armies had utilized Kha people as corvee labor along lines of communication during the previous Indochina war, the natives appeared too subservient and demonstrated only a minor will to protect themselves. The question of sustained lowlander loyalty also arose. In 1962, at Xieng Dat (VS-26), a community that frequently changed sides with the ebb and flow of the war, a Pathet Lao patrol massacred a sleeping Thai PARU team.^{3 4}

From the beginning of American involvement in Laos, despite difficulties and frustrations working with lowland people, Young believed that Agency decision makers had failed miserably in their first attempts and assessments not to utilize all ethnic groups to fight the evils of communism. He thought USG had mistakenly limited its overall containment effort by employing only Meo people, thus restricting a broad range of possibilities. He disagreed with arguments that, because the communists had resided in areas there long before us, we should leave unfriendly people to their own designs. He believed that this philosophy had led to a flawed policy: that America did not have to sell its product, that as a superpower we represented the free world, and that many inhabitants understood this. He considered many individuals bright enough to recognize that they were falling under commie influence, and it was not the U.S attempting to colonize them. Nevertheless, considered only a youthful ground pounder by his peers and bosses, they ignored Young's early opinions. Like other Case Officers in Laos, his superiors assigned certain goals, and then afforded him a measure of autonomy to achieve these ends. Overall, he appreciated Lair's methods, as he considered them far superior to those used in the U.S. Army that constrained a person by often inane orders, and then crucified the individual if he failed to achieve total success.

Young helped establish several friendly Meo sites during the course of his outback travels, and then moved on when the Vientiane office assigned new people to develop them.

³ Ken Conboy, 92.

⁴ Brian Mills stated to the Author that a local problem had caused the Tai Dam to turn against the PARU and Meo. A more plausible explanation from Case Officer Arthur Elmore indicated that a local Lao Theung leader had defected to the Pathet Lao.

Ranging far to the west, he helped install a Meo base at Phou Sam Sao in the mountains northwest of Sayaboury Town. From there, expansion proceeded south toward the Thai border, then northeast and northwest in the direction of Ban Hong Sa. Eventually he moved north to the river town at Ban Houei Sai, but planners did not encourage operations there yet, as they considered the area too remote to support. Moreover, at the time, USG harbored reservations about the region's proximity to China. ⁵

ANTHONY POSHEPNY AKA "TONY POE"

During the early expansion phase, other Case Officers were equally hard at work in remote areas. One day Pha Khao air operations assigned Tom Moher and another pilot to a rare mission far north of the Plain of Jars, and deep into Houa Phan (Sam Neua) Province. The area included some of Vang Pao's most remote friendly Meo villages in upper Military Region Two. Generally, any work there necessitated carrying drummed fuel. Requiring over an hour flight along a circuitous route to avoid AAA weapons fire on the Plain of Jars, the trip entailed flying northwest, climbing to 8,000 feet overhead Xieng Dat, and crossing Route-7 with sufficient altitude to avoid enemy small arms fire. The flight path continued toward the friendly hills of Phou Fa, where Moher soared northeast past Meo held Phou So. At the Phou Vieng checkpoint, he maintained approximately the same heading for forty-five miles until arriving near a huge distinctive rock promontory known as Phu Pha Thi.

The historical site had boasted tactical significance while utilized as a French fortress during the First Indochina War. Deemed almost impregnable, the loftiest point jutted into the air over 5,000 feet above sea level. The isolated mountain also commanded a 360-degree view of an immense amount of territory, especially terrain close to the North Vietnamese border, and areas west of Pathet Lao-controlled Sam Neua Town. During the First Indochina War, French Special Forces utilized the site to good advantage for intelligence gathering, a secure supply drop base, and to conduct aggressive forays with regional Meo maquis units on enemy supply routes. Following hostilities, area Marquis participants demobilized and reverted to a less violent agrarian way of life. However, most clans still included men who retained military skills and vehemently resented communist domination and

⁵ Bill Young Interview.

ideology. Many still recalled Vang Pao's exalted reputation and legendary heroic deeds during the 1950s. Hence, it was time to reorganize and take advantage of their talents.

When Moher landed, black clad Meo dashed to the aircraft and began unloading the fuel drums, as a bulky, scraggly looking individual climbed the side of the ship and peered menacingly through the open window at Moher. Dressed in the characteristic black Meo garb, and stinking like several pig sties, the wild man bellowed in stilted, abbreviated, and ungrammatical English over the noise of the chugging engine and whining transmission, "Yo! Yo! You take mortar here. We have mortar here. OK? You take mortar over there that mountain. I tell you how to go. I show you."

Surprised by the individual's broken English, his appearance and demeanor, Moher glanced warily to his right and shouted, "I'm sorry but my instructions were to come up here and work for Tony Poe." When he then attempted to push the individual off the helicopter, the excited man abruptly grabbed his arm in a vise-like grip, nearly yanking him from the cockpit, as he shouted profanely, "Got damn you! I Tony Poe! Son-of-a-bitch! Now get this mortar onboard! We have to go. We have enemy down below. We shoot. Shit-OK?"

Moher had heard many obscure stories about the former Marine, but this encounter marked his first actual contact with the man. ⁶ Trained in 1953 at the Agency "Farm" at Camp Peary, Virginia, by Heine Aderholt and other instructors, Tony was an unusual Case Officer, who spent weeks in the field living and working with the natives. The tough individual, along with a crack PARU team, had no compunction about living in the mountains and enduring hardships, while organizing and operating with Meo fighters. Starting with Phou Fa (Agony, LS-16) that he initially established as a base camp, he and his men gradually ventured north to Phou Vieng and well beyond into Sam Neua Province.

After contemplating the hundred-year Meo history in Laos and their active participation in the First Indochina War, Tony regarded the tribals as probably the best fighting men available to implement USG policy. Already physically occupying much of the high

⁶ In deference to, and not attempting to demean Moher's colorful description of Poe's stilted language at their first meeting, Tony was a college graduate who actually spoke perfect English. To a large degree he was profane, but mostly while attempting to make a point or to elicit humor.

ground surrounding the Plain of Jars, they were eagerly preparing to assume control of the lower areas after receiving Vang Pao's word to advance. With most of the higher terrain under their control, and avoiding the few passable roads, the mountaineers were largely immune to attacks by enemy soldiers loath to undertake operations in the unfamiliar mountains. In contrast, used to walking long distances in difficult terrain all their lives, the Meo had few problems moving swiftly and silently about the area.

With Tony finally calmed down, firmly planted in the left seat, and pointing the way, Moher delivered the 81mm mortar tube and base plate to a hilltop, while a second H-34 crew carried ammunition. ⁷ During the next few hours, during a whirlwind of activity, they moved the gun to six separate mountain peaks. At each landing site, aggressive to a fault, Tony scurried about like a madman encouraging and exhorting his charges to hurry. He expertly set up the mortar, sighted it, and then, in rapid succession, dropped five to six rounds in the tube. Seemingly content with the splashes far below, the crew reloaded the helicopter and shifted to another location to repeat the drill. ⁸ Moher noted how happy the man appeared throughout the operation. Apparently, Tony flourished in this element.

Taking a rare break from arduous fieldwork that evening, Tony rode back to Pha Khao with Moher. There, those unfamiliar with his rough and tumble techniques soon acquired valuable insight into burly Mister Poe's personality. For example, jubilant over the day's good work, the husky man scared the crews half to death by "patting" them smartly on the back, or vigorously pumping their hands and nearly pulling their arms out of the sockets. After his euphoria waned, they all adjourned to Vang Pao's hooch. Once inside, he began shouting and gesturing wildly, *"Hey, Mekong! Mekong! Hey, you-you, got damn good. We have helicopter now. We kill the shit out of the PL."* Some uninitiated pilots not familiar with Tony's peculiarities wondered from which planet the wild man had emerged. After discovering that he had previously lived like an animal in the field for months, they began to understand and partially accepted his erratic behavior and truly wise individuals realized that they were likely to encounter further bizarre experiences from the larger-than-life and colorful former Marine. ⁹

⁷ 81mm mortar: This weapon was called a "Four Deuce" in the Marine Corps.

⁸ Splashes: Military terminology for explosions.

⁹ Tom Moher Tapes.

On another rare occasion with Tony present at Pha Khao, a fatigued crewmember begged off drinking after working hours and attempted to retire early. Highly incensed, Tony, a man built as strong as a bull, grabbed and tossed him into a large buffalo wallow so deep the larger animals could only move around with their heads showing. Gaggling, the unfortunate five-foot five-inch youngster clung to the bank with his head and chin barely above water. Stamping around the bank the still roiled Poe yelled, *"Got Damn you! You go home. You drink with Tony. I tell you to drink. You better drink with Tony, OK?"* The object lesson proved highly effective, for after that exhibition, the rest of the cowed crews present sat quietly and drank. Like a drowning water rat, the hapless soul spent an additional hour marinating in the filthy water until two sympathetic tribesmen happened by and pulled him out. ¹⁰

Bert Palmer, who knew "Tough Tony" casually from early resupply missions out of Padong, encountered him at the Udorn Mahpakdi Hotel late one afternoon. Allowed a rare exodus from the field for an embassy briefing in Bangkok and a short R&R, Tony elected to stay overnight at the hotel. To while away time, Palmer and the brawny man quaffed a couple Singa beers when Molly, the owner's daughter, arrived and sat down. Hoping to make a few points with the legend, Bert recommended some choice items on the dinner menu. However, much to his embarrassment, after the waiter arrived, Tony ordered food in what Palmer considered fluent Thai. Then Poe spent most of the evening conversing with Molly in Thai. ¹¹

A man of boundless energy, action, and unpredictable behavior, Tony's antics and many sides continued to amaze and confuse people for years. There were no neutral opinions regarding Mister Poe. They were either black or white. He was beloved by some, hated by others, but still the controversial figure became the stuff of legend.

¹⁰ Tom Moher Tapes.

¹¹ Burt Palmer Emails, 03/20/04, 05/15/04.
General Heine Aderholt Phone Call, 01/01/93.

USG

Responding to enemy escalation in Laos, Washington advisors quietly set in motion additional measures to counter the adversaries. Acting on previous MAGG recommendations, CINCPAC lobbied Secretary McNamara to add ten more White Star Mobile Training Teams to Laos.¹² Because the end of the rainy season was at hand, traditionally marking an increase in enemy activity, planning included proposed increases in both American and Thai military advisors (1,025 additional advisors) to strengthen the FAL.¹³ Accordingly, at the end of August President Kennedy approved National Security Action Memo-80 (NSAM-80) authorizing an "immediate increase" in Lao White Star personnel, including company level advisors. The instructions encouraged attempts for the RTG to supply an equal number of 500 advisors. Meo fighters would immediately be increased by 2,000 to a total of 11,000. Thai or other sanitized aircraft would conduct photo recce throughout the Kingdom of Laos. To better consolidate elements working from the important Udorn hub, Thai officers would assign Thai Border Patrol Police units to Headquarters 333, an organization functioning closely with the Agency's 4802 Joint Liaison Detachment (JLD).¹⁴

In the remote northern reaches of Laos, aided by air supply assets and the enemy's restricted mobility during the peak rainy season, RLG forces reoccupied Nam Tha Town and controlled territory to Moung Houn in the lower portion of the Beng River valley. Additionally, plans for expansion toward Moung Sai were in the mill by staff members of the Northern Area Command located at Luang Prabang.¹⁵

¹² Joint Chiefs of Staff, 139.

¹³ JSC, 146.

¹⁴ Memorandum, JCS 150-151.

Marek Thee, 366.

¹⁵ Oudone Sannikone, 102.

Hotel Papa's recent loss and the diminishing UH-34D helicopter inventory concerned CJ Abadie regarding the future of the Madriver Project. Without a full complement of H-34s, he foresaw serious deficiencies as the means to service and support future Customer requirements in the constantly evolving Udorn operation. Beside headaches involved in establishing a functional hangar for heavy maintenance, consolidating the growing operation in the new location across the taxiway, rotating Marine Corps mechanics, and the mounting operational or battle losses, the total inventory of H-34s had dwindled alarmingly to fifteen from the original twenty. Furthermore, no aircraft replacements had arrived after May.

Alerting higher authority in his chain of command to the reduced capability in providing future support should no additional helicopters be forthcoming, Abadie penned an information memorandum to headquarters. The missive plainly stated that maintenance's Herculean efforts toiling day and night barely satisfied current commitments, and that projected countrywide operations could not possibly continue at full strength in the future with the reduced number of helicopters. He noted that the rainy season would soon end, and with improved flying conditions, he envisioned increased requests for air support from all operational regions. He recalled that during the previous spring, Customers fully utilized all twenty helicopters, but this year he could not possibly meet identical requirements.

In summation, in lieu of additional machines, he recommended that future air operational planning allow for limited helicopter support. He cautioned that a concentrated helicopter effort in any particular region of Laos would result in a lack of support in others. Should further unforeseen accidents or unscheduled maintenance occur to one or two additional H-34s, the Udorn flight department would not even be able to satisfy requests for present operational requirements.¹

¹ CJ Abadie Draft; no recipient named, but VPFO Taipei is assumed.

AIR AMERICA TAKES OVER

Deeming the Madriver Program a resounding success, USG officials endorsed continuing the H-34 operation in the Lao Theater. After interested parties signed the fiscal year 1962 contract and allocated money for expansion, as previously planned by mid-September, final official transfer of all prior base functions from MABS-16 to Air America went forward giving the Company full responsibility for all supply and maintenance tasks.

A transition period ensued while members of MABS and H&MS detachments filtered back to Okinawa and the entire operation made preparations to move southeast across the taxiway. First to transition was the tool room, for which Air America assumed responsibility on 5 September. Unneeded supplies were prepared for return to Okinawa.

Additional mechanics continued to be hired. They attended Sikorsky representative Archie Roper's week-long training classes, and filled maintenance slots. During this period a few Marines left for Okinawa.

Not long after commencement of the Madriver Program, at considerable expense, the Company imported American, Taiwanese Chinese, and Filipino personnel to fill essential positions required to manage and implement MAAG Lao/USG helicopter contracts. Written reports referred to the Asian complement as Third Country Nationals. Negotiations for repair of the dilapidated side-by-side hangars and pair of RTAF barracks involved a substantial amount of money. Therefore, while Royal Thai Army and Royal Thai Air Force hierarchy dickered hotly over which service owned legal rights to the facilities, employees conducted cleanup, and renovation. Already partially utilized, the structures were desirable and necessary to the operation, as they constituted the only covered buildings in the area out of the elements that could provide adequate space for complicated heavy maintenance. Moreover, situated a substantial distance from the raised tent camp, transportation problems warranted urgency to relocate. ²

On 20 September, an Air America representative signed paperwork for all maintenance equipment and supplies left by MABS-16. Two days later Air America assumed responsibility for helicopter maintenance. This was to be accomplished by fifty-four personnel. Three Marines

² CJ Abadie Email, 04/30/98.

remained to monitor the avionics shop where the Company was still deficient and lacked competent people. This was rectified by early October and the last Marines departed in mid-October. ³

VPFO

Vice President of Flight Operations, Robert Rousselot, consistent with his particular management skills and methodology, visited Udorn, Vientiane, and Bangkok stations monthly during fact finding trips to Southeast Asia. Although based far from Thailand, Rousselot was a hands-on person, highly interested in the developing Madriver Project and his charges.

In a memorandum to CJ Abadie upon his return to Taipei, he indicated that his trip had been enjoyable and beneficial. He re-affirmed his confidence and appreciation in Ab's performance. He urged his CPH to address particular attention to new permanent pilot training, ongoing proficiency training, and all assigned pilot flight checks.

To nip a potential problem in the bud, he urged Ab:

"...to be particularly attentive to specialized flight operations, especially those related to the more peculiar and demanding Customer requirements, such as those in the Padong area."

Talks at Vientiane with a Customer normally located in the Pha Khao area indicated that helicopter pilots had recently refused to accept and perform urgent operational missions to service local Pha Khao areas. Rousselot admitted that the story was only one sided, but believed that Udorn personnel should provide improved service. Then, as a postscript, he mentioned that on the day he departed for Bangkok, a Helio Courier pilot provided him with a positive report concerning operations from Pha Khao. It stated that helicopter pilots had accomplished all missions in question, thus satisfying the Customer.

To avert future Customer conflicts, he asked Abadie to proceed to Pha Khao as soon as possible (ASAP) to confer with Captain Nagle and Bill Lair, who worked with Helio Courier pilots frequenting the site. He believed that an inclusive dialogue between these parties would foster mutual understanding concerning helicopter capabilities and a genuine respect for Customer needs. Furthermore, Rousselot wanted Nagle to understand that Abadie's consultation with him originated from the VPO's personal request. Following the up-country

³ George Hofmann, 31.

discussions, he desired that Abadie's report be forwarded to his office. ⁴

Abadie had previously experienced a fair share of tense Customer-pilot relations while flying the line, and believed that he had a general idea of the problem at Pha Khao. During early Thakhet operations, he had amicably resolved initial problems with Captain Jim Ipsen on a face-to-face basis. He knew very well that by exhibiting an "I'm in charge attitude" with pilots, White Star personnel preferred to have all orders followed without question or discussion. Confirming this premise, Abadie soon discovered that Nagle believed Air America pilots should simply charge out of Pha Khao and perform any assigned task. As Abadie attempted to reorient the commanding officer's thinking, without success, he briefed pilots going to the site on the man's attitude and the need to work with him to the extent that flight safety dictated. ^{5 6}

In spite of a lingering bias that the reluctance of the "Dirty Six" or other pilots' to perform questionable missions might have previously caused among Customers, many PICs rightfully believed that they understood considerably more regarding work areas and enemy situations than the aggressive Army Captain. ⁷

In the two-page memorandum, Rousselot went on to state that he held no objection to

⁴ Bob Rousselot Letter, VPO-61-1562-F/7 to CJ Abadie dated 09/27/61.

⁵ CJ Abadie Email, 01/29/99.

⁶ Author Note: The reader should understand that any desire or request by a senior officer in the military chain of command had the same connotation as a direct order; Air America definitely displayed this military flavor in the early days.

⁷ Despite Carl Nagel's hardheaded attitude and complaints that were eventually resolved, as additional senior pilots were assigned to work at Pha Khao, the general problem with Customers cropped up on a minor scale over the years. Disputes with individual pilots regarding missions occasionally arose later during the long war, when a few CIA types, mostly newly hired contract personnel, attempted to pull rank on pilots. But, as in all cases, differences were easier to settle through an accessible Bill Lair, Pat Landry, Jim Glerum, and other Agency superiors well acquainted with the limitations of pilots and machines in the field and Air America's history.

J.J. McCauley standing in for Abadie during his absences. However, he qualified the remark, saying that he predicated his acceptance on J.J. not becoming involved in any situation like the landing incident outside of Bangkok, which caused the VPO embarrassment and complications with Thai officials.

Finally, he informed Abadie that a search was underway to select and assign a more capable and competent Udorn Station Manager to replace the ineffective Tom Tucker. ⁸

CLARKE'S TRIP OUT OF TOWN

The friendly Mahpakdi "houseboy," actually not a boy, obtained an extra bicycle for Clarke to visit his family home five miles south of Udorn. With so little vehicle traffic occurring in those days, bicycle transportation was considered relatively safe. The prospect to obtain local color provided Clarke a choice opportunity to see and record some of the Thai countryside from the ground instead of the air. The short trip proved quite interesting, with a rest stop at a sawmill, and provided him with several photos for posterity. ⁹

THE FIRST FAMILY

Frustrated with the job's long absences in the field and the expense of maintaining a house in Bangkok, senior Captain Tom Moher became the first Air America pilot to situate his wife in Udorn. To implement this move, he rented a small, unpretentious stilt house on the east side of Thahon Thanon, the main north-south road adjacent to the airport. Roofed in galvanized tin and clad with hardwood clapboard, the place was sizzling in the summer heat and frigid during the cool season. Moher, a social extrovert, frequently invited favored guests to dinner. An oven fashioned from a metal box and placed on the stove, provided good food, while Moher, always an excellent storyteller, provided entertainment.

Several packing crates sat under the house, where a neighbor's noisy rooster claimed early morning perching rights. In the early hours, about 0500, while Moher drank coffee in the kitchen and awaited transportation to the field for a morning launch, the bird began crowing in front of the side bedroom door. Intent on committing murder, he retrieved his .45

⁸ Bob Rousselot 27 September.

⁹ Ron Clarke phone call to Author.
Ron Clarke Email.



Passing a bridge and a large Thai house sitting in a wet area south of Udorn.
Clarke Collection.



The water buffalo (Kwai) and young female handler employed to plough the rice fields prior to planting. With the Friendship Highway not yet completed from Bangkok, a macadam road extended only a short distance south of Udon. Canals or klongs were full during the rainy season.

Clarke Collection.



Taking advantage of generally abundant annual rainfall in the northeast, life sustaining rice was laboriously planted in rectangular plots and harvested during the dry season.

Clarke Collection.



Time honored seine, or net fishing, was enhanced during the monsoon season.
Clarke Collection.



A sawmill located south of Udorn.
Clarke Collection.



Inside the sawmill.
Clarke Collection.



The Mahpakdi "houseboy" and his extended family in front of their small general store in the local mall. It is easy to see why Thailand was called "the land of smiles."

Clarke Collection.



Ron Clarke posing with and towering over the "houseboy's" relatives.
Clarke Collection.

Thai families produced many children.
Clarke Collection.

caliber grease gun and tiptoed outside. Crouching behind a post, he spied the bird. Aiming and obtaining a decent sight picture, he unleashed a full magazine at and into the hapless animal. Bullets and rooster parts flew everywhere. In the excitement, he forgot about Kathy, who, awakened by the shots from a deep sleep, began screaming uncontrollably. Concerned, Moher dropped the weapon and hurried into the house, where, thoroughly shaken, she jumped into his arms for comfort. Feeling compassion for her, he mistakenly related what had transpired. Her demeanor instantly changed. Uptight, Kathy, who held a registered black belt in judo, proceeded to pummel her hubby about the head and shoulders. ¹⁰

Fred Sass enjoyed visiting the couple, particularly the hospitality, great food, their antics, and especially Moher's colorful stories. At the time, his favorite topic revolved around investing in the Japanese stock market and the amount of money he had already accumulated. Sass assumed that Moher, because of his Japanese wife, was privy to something the pilot group was not. ¹¹

SASS DEPARTS SEA

As permanent pilots began arriving in July and August, received area familiarizations, and were upgraded to Captain, it became inevitable that more Temporaries would be replaced and recycled to their respective military services. Fred Sass obtained a tentative release notification for early September, a date he intended to keep. After leaving the U.S. and his girlfriend hurriedly and mysteriously in March, he was eager to return and learn if she still loved him. Therefore, the standard offer of a permanent job with Air America seemed entirely out of the question, for he planned to marry, and despite Tom and Kathy Moher's overtly blissful relationship, he did not believe his future wife could easily tolerate life in rustic Udorn.

Close to his departure date, operations scheduled Sass to RON with Malcolm Bird at Pha Khao. When he questioned the scheduled flight as one being too close to his exit date, Abadie indicated that he would certainly return to Udorn in plenty of time. However, unpredictable factors almost squelched this prediction. During the second day of the RON, a heavy weather

¹⁰ Tom Moher Tapes.

¹¹ Fred Sass Emails, 09/03/02, 10/29/02.

pattern grounded all aircraft, and it appeared that an additional night in the field would be necessary. Scheduled to leave Udorn on the fifth, Sass searched for alternatives. Therefore, when a Helio Courier pilot squeezed into the bowl in the late afternoon, with Bird's concurrence, he solicited the pilot for a ride south. Returning to Udorn, he packed his meager belongings and departed the town on the correct date. He was unsure if Abadie objected to his premature departure from Pha Khao, but was not really concerned. Sass believed that all his comrades had attempted to perform a good job in the past months and, except for the actions of a few low characters, they never failed to accomplish their duty. Overall, he considered Abadie happy to see the Temps depart, as he could now exert more control over regular employees.

Sass departed Bangkok for Taiwan on the Civil Air Transport Convair 880 Mandarin Jet (B-1008). The beautiful plane, its interior grandeur, and equally stunning stewardesses, impressed him. Enroute to Taipei, the aircraft stopped in Hong Kong for a day. After embarkation, while passing through immigration, officials discovered his vaccination record incomplete. Health workers provided the necessary injection, but required him to remain in the colony a few days to satisfy quarantine regulations before proceeding to Taiwan. After living in grubby Udorn Town for months, the delay did not bother him and he enjoyed what one could only consider luxury accommodations.

At the Company office in Taipei, Bob Rousselot conducted an exit interview. During this period, Sass met other crewmembers also processing out. They revealed that Bob Campbell, recently diagnosed with hepatitis, had been admitted to the local hospital. Unaware of the disease's contagious features, a few men, including Sass, unwittingly visited him. Finally, armed with a termination letter postdated 2 October, Sass left the Far East on 18 September.

A mandatory Pentagon debriefing by intelligence types followed his arrival in the States. When completed, the officers admonished him never to divulge aspects of the Air America operation with anyone. Next, during the course of a thorough physical, a laboratory analysis revealed numerous systemic parasites. Once the medical staff eradicated the unwanted fellow travelers, and pronounced him fit, his handlers granted him three weeks leave at his parents' Florida home. Soon after returning to Fort Rucker to attend fixed wing transition, he became seriously ill. Blood tests subsequently diagnosed him with yellow jaundice, and

medical personnel quarantined him. A day later, additional pilots trundled into the same quarantine ward. Much to the doctors' bewilderment and consternation, by week's end, twenty men clogged the ward. Hospital regulations allowed visitation only if individuals wore masks and robes. However, believing he had contracted some kind of weird venereal disease overseas, Sass's friends never lingered long. Having acquired a mild case of hepatitis that required bed rest and decent food, he only remained hospitalized for about a month. Much improved by that time, anxious to spend Christmas and the holidays with his parents and girlfriend, he lobbied the hospital staff for release. As the disease mainly affects the liver, his doctor recommended that he totally abstain from alcohol intake so, except for his announced engagement, he spent a mild holiday season. After reflection, Sass believed he contracted the virus from Bob Campbell, or perhaps during his final days upcountry in Laos. By January, he returned to Rucker, to resume training and his military career.

Sass found no stigma attached to his temporary flying in Southeast Asia. Over time, he met several individuals who purported that they "flew with Air America." A few pertinent questions regarding their employment and tasks usually burst their bubbles. (Unfortunately, Air America wanabees still crop up to this day.)¹²

¹² Fred Sass Emails, 09/24/02, 10/09/02, 10/15/02, 10/17/02, 10/23/02, 11/30/02.

September proved an exceptionally difficult month for young Jim Haver. Flying constantly since April, he regularly flew over a hundred hours per month. By early August the stressful regime had taken a negative toll on both his mind and body. Drinking to excess, unable to sleep, eat properly, or sit still for more than a minute, the troubled youngster visited the Navy flight surgeon attached to the MABS contingent. After examination, the doctor grounded him for three weeks.

Returning to the schedule by the end of August, Haver's daily grind resumed throughout September. After stints at Pha Khao (now logged as V-102) and Paksane (V-35), on the fourteenth, Operations assigned him to work and RON at Savannakhet (V-39). He spent the night at the USAID house, where he enjoyed movies and decent food. Hence, the river town became his preferred place to work and RON.

Some Savannakhet assignments entailed covering enormous distances over the course of a day. On the second day of the RON, Haver flew south to the river town of Pakse (V-11), then further south to Attopeu, and unfamiliar territory beyond. On the lonely return trip to Victor-11 from Kong Island, located in the lower Mekong River, he experienced several stressful moments and doubts about making it safely to Pakse. The rapidly diminishing fuel load, attempts to navigate over a seemingly unending green sea of jungle that revealed no visible houses, roads, or rivers, and reliance on a weak radio beacon at Pakse, all contributed to his unease. Worn out by the end of the long day, he happily terminated at Savannakhet that night.

At times, his work entailed personally unsavory missions. The following day, while supporting RLA operations, the indigenous loader requested that he deliver a load of fresh meat to a firebase. Deemed a distasteful task, but part of the job, he taxied to a vertical post where a stout rope tethered a large water buffalo and he observed several soldiers pummeling the animal unmercifully with bamboo sticks. While the beast bellowed and kicked, he queried his interpreter as to the proceedings. The man informed him that most Lao were Buddhists, and tenets of the religion disapproved of slaughtering animals. He continued that Chinese, or those with no such compunction, normally butchered the animals in Asian



The water buffalo was utilized in Asia to plow the rice paddies and to provide protein for diets.
Unknown.

marketplaces. However, in the absence of a suitable market, the soldiers employed sticks. Deemed humane and more acceptable, the action did not directly kill the animal, and the beast could then decide when to die. To Jim Haver this rationalization appeared a prime example of Socratic wrong logic and a study in cultural inconsistency. Buddhist law forbade killing animals. However, the subject of killing men on the battlefield itself was open to interpretation and conjecture. Generally, troops expended an abundance of ammunition during firefights, but this actually resulted in few recorded casualties. Could it be that soldiers merely shot in the air to comply with their spiritual beliefs? Transfixed, in horror, he watched the brutal abuse for a few moments, and then, unable to tolerate further suffering, compassionately shot the creature from the cockpit. Troops butchered the buffalo on the spot. Afterward, they hacked and tossed bloody sections of meat into the cargo section and Haver delivered the smelly disgusting load to troops in the field.

With the dry season still weeks in the future, September monsoon rain and clouds proved a major factor in planning and implementing missions. A few pilots, while attempting to accomplish the job, at times pushed the weather envelope to great extremes. Following a recent RON at Paksane, Haver departed late in the day for Udorn under instrument flight rule (IFR) conditions. Driving blind for some time, he discovered a small break in the clouds, spiraled down to treetop level and then turned back toward Paksane. With darkness imminent, and low on fuel, he flew until intersecting the Mekong. Then, using an educated guess, he turned downriver until noting lights of the town. He considered this procedure routine.

THE SAGA OF HAVER'S LAKE

What transpired on the seventeenth to Jim Haver proved even more bizarre in a country fraught with peculiar occurrences. For about a year, the following episode gave rise to an in-house legend that was eventually coined "Haver's Lake." After a local flight, the Savannakhet Customer assigned Haver a mission to the northeast. Hotel Romeo, the ship he was flying, was recently out of the hangar following the Coble dunking incident east of Luang Prabang. Flight Mechanic Ron "Igy" Kimbler supervised cargo loading prior to launch.

Adverse weather beyond a chain of foothills forced the pilot steadily east. Pilots rarely encountered hostile ground fire in the Thakhet area at this time, and those that did found it generally inaccurate. Therefore, Haver kept driving forward at a moderate altitude, hoping to discover a way around the clouds and find his destination. Without benefit of maps,

he seemed unaware of his actual position, or proximity to the Vietnamese border, but unwilling to admit his predicament, he continued east. When he eventually spotted a distant body of water, he commented to Kimbler, "That looks like a large lake."

Kimble, who carried, and was able to read a map, sarcastically countered, "How about the South China Sea?"¹

Realizing that he had most certainly wandered somewhere into Vietnam, he had no idea whether he was north or south of the seventeenth parallel demarcation line. Finally, approaching a critical fuel state, he began searching for a suitable landing site. He spied a sizable town near what appeared to be a military base containing numerous red brick buildings. Calculating that the larger a town, the better his chances of survival, he descended and landed on a parade ground. Still unsure of his location, he kept the aircraft running should the situation warrant an immediate departure. Then he grabbed a .45 caliber "grease gun" from the top of the instrument console, pulled the slide back to the stop, placed it in his lap, and waited. Soon, two white men ran from a building. Not used to seeing an H-34 at their location, a former French garrison, the surprised Special Forces advisors asked what he wanted at Hue, South Vietnam (pronounced Hue Phu By).²

Very hospitable to their unannounced guests, the Americans provided steaks, beer, and beds. They also radioed their Saigon headquarters with news of Haver's surprise visit.

Meanwhile, crewmembers at the Udorn base had heard that Haver was overdue, and presumed him lost or dead.³

The following day, the "A" team scrounged sufficient fuel for the crew's return to Savannakhet, and requested that they conduct an interim stop at Ban Houei Sane, a camp just inside the Lao border.⁴

¹ Burt Palmer Emails, 03/18/04, 03/20/04.

² Author Note: During the course of Jim's weather circumnavigation, the total trip covered many miles, for a direct flight to Hue from V-39 was 150 nautical miles to the east.

³ JJ McCauley Letter, 1/28/91.

⁴ Jim Haver Emails, 06/08/02, 06/15/02, 06/27/02.
Jim Haver September 1961 Flight Time Records.
Jim Coble Email, 03/21/02.

When Haver arrived back in Udorn and related the reason for his absence, although Chief Pilot Abadie considered him a great storyteller, and harbored serious doubts about what had actually happened, he did not say much or pursue further details regarding the incident. Mumbling something about poor navigational skills, Abadie simply assumed that Haver became lost and was loath to admit this fact to his fellow pilots. Flight Mechanic Kimbler coined the name "Hue Haver," which the troops subsequently called Jim behind his back. ⁵

Bird resided in the same hotel as Haver. Malcolm believed that Haver would have mentioned the side trip and the "lake" incident, but chose to remain silent for his own reasons. He also never heard the humorous Flight Mechanic comments. Largely inaccurate, maps were scarce and scrounged from unlikely sources. During his tenure, Malcolm carried broad scale French maps, ones containing large white sections of uncharted territory lacking definitive border markings. He also carried a Michelin road map. ⁶

Meanwhile, the yarn quickly filtered through the small aviation community. As the Hue complex sat only five miles from the Tonkin Gulf, the story evolved as "Haver's Lake." Over time, as with any rehashed tale, especially those embellished and romanticized in bars, individuals distorted the genuine details, which ultimately disappeared into the dustbin of history.

Following the "Lake" episode, Haver's days with the Company were numbered. Toward the end of the month, a Customer assigned Haver the unsavory task of ferrying decaying human remains from a crashed Bird and Son aircraft to Vientiane.

Earlier in the year, Air America's Lao "competition," Bird and Son, had purchased a brace of Lockheed Ventura PV-2s to conduct airdrops in remote portions of Military Region Two. After retrofitting the World War Two vintage planes with cargo doors and deck roller devices, the twin engine, twin-tailed ships produced effective work re-supplying northern Lao sites and outposts. During one of these drop missions N7456C crashed and burned on the Phou

⁵ Haver Email, Decades later, in his defense, Jim stated that he had no one to call from the location. Moreover, he had returned the crew and the aircraft safely. He also maintained that the Flight Mechanic provided no solutions to the problem.

⁶ John Fonburg Letter, 06/02/91.
Burt Palmer, 03/18/04.
CJ Abadie Email, 02/06/99.
Malcomb Bird Emails, 05/07/14, 05/08/14.

Fa complex.

Landing on a treeless hill just large enough to accommodate the H-34, Haver and Carl Diggs waited as black clad Meo hauled parts of six bodies, including two American pilots, from below. The crash had been so devastating that the men appeared unrecognizable as any mammalian species. The stench of burned, decaying flesh proved almost intolerable to the olfactory senses, so bad that Haver flew south with all the windows and doors open. The distasteful episode represented the final straw for Haver. With numerous detrimental incidents cascading over him in the past few months, leading to apparently unsolvable mental distress, the recent taste of death and destruction traumatized him so much that, like many others, he wanted to pack in the job and return home to a calmer life. CJ Abadie, well acquainted with Haver's hairy experiences, and the cumulative psychological problems they caused him, was not surprised over his decision to leave Air America. Since Abadie considered Jim Haver a valued, bold, and courageous permanent pilot type, he afforded the troubled youngster time off the flight schedule to adjust and better contemplate his decision to leave. Abadie instructed him to take a week's rest in Hong Kong, to enjoy himself, and forget the bad things that happened.

However, ignoring all the distressing events transpiring in the previous six months proved impossible to rationalize. After spending a week in the cosmopolitan fleshpot, Haver journeyed to Tokyo, where he boarded a CAT aircraft bound for San Francisco.

Commissioned a second lieutenant in the Marine Corps when only twenty, Jim Haver had just reached the tender age of twenty-three when he departed Southeast Asia, and became one of the youngest pilots to ever serve with Air America.

After mustering out of the Corps at the Treasure Island Marine Corps base near San Francisco, he purchased an Alpha Romeo Volcoe Spider for cash, and drove home to Nebraska to commence a less adventurous life and attempt to forget what he had experienced during his tenure with Air America.

Haver matriculated at college and eventually entered the dental profession.⁷

⁷ Jim Haver Emails, 06/08/02, 06/15/02, 06/27/02.

Jim Haver had not thought about his Air America experiences until the Author contacted him in May 2002. By then much information had been lost to memory.
CJ Abadie Email, 06/16/02.

By late September, there had been no dramatic change in the Lao military situation since the May ceasefire, although there had been basic improvements in the communist faction's structure. During the period, the Pathet Lao Army achieved extensive reorganization and equipment augmentation. Through local recruitment and reinforcement from various tribes in the North Vietnamese-Lao border areas, troop strength increased substantially. Considerable progress was achieved in consolidating the military in north and central Laos, and military strength increased in the south. Estimates of total enemy forces opposing the RLA ranged upwards to 31,000. Pathet Lao numbers of 16,000 included 1,600 North Vietnamese cadre, and specialist personnel who controlled and operated the logistics and communications systems, manned the field and antiaircraft artillery, and provided technical and tactical assistance at all levels of the combined PL/Kong Le forces. Four North Vietnamese infantry battalions (1,600 men) served as special assault forces. There were 4,000 neutralist troops under Kong Le, mostly in the Plain of Jars area, and 8,000 men under still anti-communist Kham Ouan in Military Region One's northern Phong Saly Province.

At the same time, the Souvanna Phouma-Kong Le influence waned. The Prime Minister, by virtue of his government in exile at Khang Khay on the northeastern Plain, had retained no independent political measures, and his military support from the neutralist armed forces was relatively weak in relation to the Pathet Lao and Phoumi Nosavan's government forces. By siding with the communist faction, Kong Le was dependent on the Pathet Lao and the Soviets for most communications, transport, logistical, and financial support. Some of the more nationalistic Kong Le supporters, disenchanted with their communist allies, attempted to prevent them from achieving a dominant military position in the back country. However, lacking identical PL resources, their efforts were minimal.

Similar to what the communists were accomplishing, during the interim ceasefire, Prince Boun Oum and General Phoumi focused on rebuilding the Lao army, but chose to redeploy their forces to protect the Mekong River basin. American training efforts (in-country and in Thailand) and additional equipment and supplies improved the offensive and defensive capabilities of the army. Government troops in combat units numbered 29,200, with an

additional 13,800 Auto Defense Choc (ADC) village troops. Although units demonstrated some effectiveness during limited clearing actions, to the general improvement of troop morale, serious problems still existed. Logistical support of troops in the field continued to be inadequate and commanders generally displayed weak and indecisive tendencies. A ray of light did come from operational success from Van Pao's Meo guerrilla units, who harassed enemy lines of communications (LOC) in the PDJ area. Their actions forced the Pathet Lao to divert large numbers of troops in an effort to destroy Meo enclaves.

An intelligence estimate speculated that the present "ceasefire line," or any attempt to formalize or consolidate it, would not be acceptable to Chinese and North Vietnamese leaders unless it was honored by non-communist forces. A partition of Laos would require the assistance of outside forces, including U.S. troops, to defend the Mekong Valley. (Some maintained at the time that Laos was already partitioned.) Efforts by U.S. or SEATO forces to expand territory under enemy control would risk intervention by North Vietnamese Army troops or Chinese "volunteers" like the ones seen in the Korean conflict.

With the dry season approaching, if a political agreement was not attained in the next few weeks, the hard-fought ceasefire agreement would probably collapse and fighting resume by both sides. General Phoumi's political and military situation remained weak. Consequently, he likely believed that his only salvation remained in resuming offensives during which he would be able to entice U.S. forces into the conflict.

Although it was not envisioned that during the next two to three months the communists would undertake conventional operations to seize and hold key Mekong River Valley towns. They would also likely boost limited offenses to maintain pressure for a political settlement. They would probably increase efforts to eliminate Meo resistance in the PDJ area, and increase their own guerrilla activities in areas of little Royal Lao Government control. By doing this, the enemy would further consolidate control in northern Laos and prevent the RLA from preparing attacks on communist held areas.

In the final analysis, the RLA could not achieve a military solution or force a north-south partition without sizable and long-term outside military support. Should the RLA concentrate sufficient battalions for a major attack on any key communist position, it would probably initially be successful, but a sustainable offense or the ability to ward off a counterattack, or prevention of a communist march to the Mekong River was not considered

feasible. ¹

CIA predictions proved fairly accurate. General Phoumi, in response to Pathet Lao activity in the area, selected upper northwestern Military Region One to draw a proverbial line in the sand. Following Nam Tha's recapture, little action occurred from 24 August until 7 September, probably as a result of heavy rains and consolidation. Then, during the second week, stimulated by FAR offensive clearing actions, intended to force enemy withdrawal to positions north of the town toward the Chinese border, the Pathet Lao reacted strongly, causing some FAR units to retreat south. Consequently, because of increased enemy resistance, by month's end commanders reverted to defensive measures, and in October began reinforcing the valley with two companies from the Luang Prabang Northern Command, and relocating the 3rd Battalion's Moung Houn heavy weapons section from the lower Beng Valley. After regrouping and consolidating new and old units, limited recon operations again commenced.

Undeterred by the FAR push in the northwest, on 17 October, four Pathet Lao units dislodged a FAR company from remote outposts at Nam Ki, fifteen miles northeast of Nam Tha. Government losses continued the following day when Ban Can, a few miles closer to Nam Tha, fell. ²

Toward the end of September, the Lao King authorized a new French-inspired designation for the army from Forces Armees du Laos (FAL) to Forces Armees du Roamed (FAR). Concurrent with this name change, Luang Prabang military forces optimistically commenced an operation to reoccupy strategic Moung Sai (L-27), and then considered a largely abandoned road junction town located in the northern portion of the Beng Valley. ³

To accomplish this, Fred Sass, Jim Coble, and other H-34 crews had previously shuttled troops to the vicinity of Mekong River town, Pak Beng (literally the mouth of the Beng) on 22 through 23 July. Revealing crosscurrents of opinion and contradictions between branches of USG located in Vientiane, the State Department officially opposed any land-grabbing movements in Military Region One that constituted an overt violation of the May ceasefire. However, the

¹ SNIE 58-3-61, The Situation and Short-Run Outlook in Laos, 09/28/61.

² Joint Chiefs of Staff, 255.

³ JCS, 165.

Department of Defense and the Central Intelligence Agency enthusiastically backed such aggressive activities.

By October, Air America helicopter pilots positioned U.S. Army White Star Team Two to Moung Houn. The Special Forces team trained, supported, and honchoed the Lao Third FAR Battalion, six volunteer ADC companies, and units of the formidable 111th KMT that had previously expelled the PL from Moung Houn, and directed CIA air support. Two months of intensive tactics and weapons training followed before the offensive actually commenced.⁴

FAR probing and clearing operations began throughout Military Region One on 6 November, including movement northeast of Luang Prabang, northeast from Moung Houn toward Moung Sai, southeast from Nam Tha toward Moung Sai, and advances in the Mekong Valley of Sayaboury Province. There was little progress.⁵

During early October, in order to fill large gaps in intelligence gathering, limited RT-33 reconnaissance flights over Laos had resumed from Don Muang airport. With the aircraft unable to provide adequate coverage required in various high threat areas, intelligence leaders requested RF-101s be sent from Tan Son Nhut, South Vietnam, to Don Muang Airport in Thailand. Following both U.S. and Thai government approval, four RF-101 Voodoo aircraft and a photo processing unit relocated to Thailand, and by 11 November were conducting intelligence gathering missions along the Military Region Three border, the Plain of Jars, and Tchepone.⁶

When high altitude aerial photos revealed unsettling information about enemy presence, and use of infiltration routes within the country, General Phoumi ordered several battalions into the field in an attempt to interdict selected enemy supply routes.

Several days before this fresh information was gathered, assembled, and disseminated,

⁴ Fred Sass July Flight Time Record.
Oudone Sannikone, 102-103.
Shelby Stanton, *Green Berets at War: U.S Army Special Forces in Southeast Asia 1956-1975* (Novato, CA: Presido, 1985, 25.

⁵ Joint Chiefs of Staff, 299.

⁶ JSC, 247, 258, 259.

General Phoumi ordered increased FAR activities to:

"Consolidate present front-line areas; intensify guerrilla activity in the enemy rear; and attempt to harass and interdict Viet Cong routes into South Vietnam."

Most activity was programmed for Military Region Three, where irregular troops would conduct guerrilla efforts against the enemy near Lak So, Nhommarath, Mahaxay, and Tchepone. If successful, then regular battalions would enter the field to further reduce enemy capability.⁷

Government probes followed northward from Paksane, in the Moung Phalane (Savannakhet) area in Military Region Three, and around Attopeu (Pakse region) in Military Region Four. In Military Region Three, contact and clashes with the Pathet Lao occurred on Route-9. East of Thakhet, FAR attacks against enemy positions at Nhommarath and the newly established Route-8/12 road junction failed.

Further south, where the enemy employed lowland Kha tribesmen to harass the provincial towns of Saravane and Attopeu,⁸ FAR troops attacked southeast of Attopeu with support from South Vietnamese fighter planes. Mid-month clearing operations included destruction of a sizeable Pathet Lao training compound at Ban Hin Lat.⁹

Within the Military Region Two region, a concerned MAAG team reported that the enemy, *"since the ceasefire had improved and consolidated their supply system"* turning parts of Route-7 into an all-weather artery. This, plus ample supplies and logistical capability, enabled the Pathet Lao to initiate an offensive without adequate warning.¹⁰ However, Lieutenant Colonel Vang Pao's aggressive forces again advanced on Xieng Khouang Ville in the Route-4 Valley.

The 300-man White Star Lao workforce was stretched extremely thin throughout the country, especially with the ongoing expansion of Meo tribal forces and a newly envisioned Kha irregular forces program in the south. In a developing area requiring more assistance, a Special Forces team deployed to Nam Tha in the extreme north of Military Region One. There, Phoumi's troops were engaged in creating an annoying presence to a formidable enemy capable

⁷ Joint Chiefs of Staff, 266.

⁸ Oudone Sannikone

⁹ JCS, 300.

¹⁰ JCS, 193.

of provoking strong countermeasures. Therefore, in response to expanding Lao requirements, more than one hundred Special Forces personnel hurriedly trained at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, and Okinawa for deployment to Southeast Asia.

CLARKE'S CONCUSSION

Ron Clarke returned to the Mahpakdi after a long, hot day of flying, and had settled down in a small area in the hallway, where crews often gathered for conversation and adult libation. Pat Sullivan soon arrived saying, "Do you want a beer, Ron?" as he playfully clipped the top portion of Clarke's head with an open palm. Clarke declined the beer. The group sat and talked until Ron retired because of an early flight to Savannakhet.

Clarke awoke with a severe headache, but chose to fly the scheduled assignment. Upon arrival at the river town airfield and shutting down, he observed Lao soldiers preparing to slaughter an ox for meat and delivery to an outlying camp in the distant hills. A stake had been driven in the ground and a rope was wound around the ox's neck. Handlers then wrapped the rope around the stake. As the men pulled the rope tight, the ox's head was forced lower and lower toward the ground. Then, with the ox immobile in this position, natives brutally struck the animal with bamboo rods. (This age-old Asian process was also employed in the Philippines to tenderize the meat of live dogs the people considered a delicacy.) This cruel process continued for some time until a White Star soldier who was watching, left and soon returned with a sledge hammer. One well directed blow to the head mercifully killed the beast.

At the time the butchered meat was to be loaded, Ron noticed a sizeable oil leak under the clam shell doors. The leak would prevent any further flight that day. Udorn was contacted on the radio and a replacement helicopter dispatched. By the time the ship arrived, portions of the ox had begun to bloat from extended exposure to the hot sun.

After the ox was loaded, an Army captain, whom Clarke had previously flown with, climbed into the left cockpit seat and they departed with the smelly groceries. After leveling off four miles from the airfield, Clarke suddenly felt very ill. His field of vision blurred and he became nauseous. Fortunately, it was his practice to have an untrained left-seater operate one control at a time in order to keep the aircraft level should anything happen to him in an emergency situation. In this case he asked the captain to maintain the ship in level flight while he leaned out the window and vomited vigorously. Regaining a semblance of composure, he reassumed control of the ship and reversed course to return to



The ox constituted a valuable beast of burden and also provided protein for RIA soldiers.
Clarke Collection.



Soldiers at Savannakhet preparing slaughtered animal meat for delivery to an outlying camp.
Clarke Collection.



A U.S. Special Forces field training camp with team members located in a forest east of Savannakhet. A canvas Lister water bag is seen at the lower left side of the photo.
Clarke Collection.



Another view of the White Star training camp. A water Lister bag hangs in the forefront
Clarke Collection.

A woven thatched and tin roof field hospital complex in the Savannakhet area.
Clarke Collection.



Lao troops dispersing toward an objective after being discharged in a jungle clearing.
Clarke photo taken through the H-34 cockpit Plexiglas windscreen.

Savannakhet. After completing the 180-degree turn, he was sick again and asked the captain to help as he leaned out the window. While approaching the field, Ron again took partial control and established the aircraft in a gentle glide to the runway. The soldier helped maintain a "wings level" attitude until close to the ground, when Clarke flared, conducted a roll-on landing, applied the brakes, and was sick again. The helicopter was nearly stopped as they rolled off the side of the runway. It was the only mission Clarke would ever abort while flying for Air America.

Clarke was evacuated to Udorn where the MABS Navy doctor diagnosed a brain concussion had occurred from Sullivan's "simple" pat on his head. He had a few days off and then returned to line flying.

In retrospect, Ron believed that the thoroughly frightened Special Forces captain had performed a masterful job that day. He never saw the man again. ¹¹

BIRD

Following a long tenure and more than an adequate share of excitement working around Padong and Pha Khao, Malcolm Bird requested work assignments in less active areas.

Bird's job had been marshaling those pilots considered "weak sisters" through their paces toward Captain status. Because most new pilots were already well on the way to an upgraded status, or had already checked out, management seldom required his instructor pilot expertise. In addition, he did not fancy hogging the compressed and valuable experience other pilots could gain flying in Military Region Two.

Shortly after rare H-34 replacements arrived, Operations scheduled Bird to fly to a river town in Laos east of Udorn. During the day, he constantly received ground fire. The uncustomary activity in the normally quiet region puzzled him. The following morning, as his Flight Mechanic tended to other tasks, Bird crept under the belly in order to drain and check the fuel tank sumps for traces of water. There he discovered a large white star logo overlooked by painters during the ship's sanitizing. A little green paint solved the problem

¹¹ Ron Clarke Email, 06/03/15. Clarke wondered if the ox meat was ever delivered to the site that day.

and pacified the natives.^{12 13}

During a trip to Thakhet, Bird flew with Powell, one of three former U.S. Army Negro crew chiefs in the program. Malcolm considered the man knowledgeable, personable, and an enjoyable crewmember with whom to spend off duty time. Upon arrival at the small town, they discovered that few accommodations were available because of an impending visit by Prince Boun Oum. After considerable wrangling, they obtained a room at the local hotel and went about their daily business. At the close of the workday, they went to the hotel and discovered that the room contained only one king sized bed. Embarrassed over possible sexual and racial connotations given discovery of a white and black man sleeping together in the same bed, Powell offered to retire to the helicopter. Bird insisted that he stay. No more was said, except a Marine crewmember later mentioned that Powell had told him it was too bad Bird was not in the U.S. Army so they could serve together again.¹⁴

Bird was assigned a scheduled one-hour VIP sightseeing trip to the east with Boun Oum and his group. After Powell topped off the forward and center fuel cells, Bird launched. As the scheduled trip items were satisfied, he was directed further east and it was soon apparent there would be fuel issues on the return trip. The party wanted to view one more place, but Bird insisted to the embassy representative sitting in the left seat that there was insufficient fuel. The man replied that it was not acceptable to refuse Boun Oum's

¹² Malcomb Bird Emails, 10/28/02, 10/29/02.

¹³ Discovery of U.S. military identification on bailed helicopters happened at least twice. Crews found another military logo on the belly of an aircraft after it landed on a stump.

Burt Palmer Interview, 05/19/04.

Burt Palmer Email, 03/21/04.

¹⁴ Author Note: Because of the rampant racial prejudice prevalent in America during the early 1960s, few colored personnel served in Marine Corps aviation units. Those the Author observed assigned to HMM-261 served in menial jobs as stewards or cooks both on shore and at sea.

request, but Bird countered that it would be far more embarrassing to explain why the prince was in the jungle as a result of a crashed helicopter.

They eventually started back to Thakhet at 5,000 feet, and had to circumnavigate adverse weather. The thirty-minute low level fuel warning light had been illuminated for about twenty-eight minutes when they approached the airstrip. Therefore, judging fuel exhaustion imminent, Bird elected to conduct a full autorotation to ensure a safe landing, and eliminate an abrupt, last-minute transition during a normal approach. Moreover, he hoped the engine would still be running after landing so the process would appear normal. All worked out well. He touched down with forward momentum that allowed him to roll to the red-carpet area.¹⁵

On another occasion, while engaged in a two aircraft ferry flight returning to Udorn from Pakse, Bird experienced an engine malfunction. Although no chip detector illuminated, or other indication of a problem warned him of impending failure, the engine surged a few times. Flying an old series helicopter, he switched to the emergency fuel position enabling the engine to run a few more seconds, long enough to close on the only visible rice paddy for miles. He approached hot, pulling off turns to extend the autorotational glide and clear a final obstacle. At the bottom, an abrupt, hard flare restored most RPM, but the landing in the flooded rice paddy looked like a boat launching. Peering anxiously out the cabin door, the Flight Mechanic became thoroughly soaked. Spray also entered the cockpit, striking the rotor brake and cascading into Bird's lap. During the rapid descent, the PIC had radioed and received an acknowledgement from Charlie Bade, who indicated that he would land in the rice paddy behind him. However, after securing the aircraft, and removing his helmet, Bird barely heard Bade's H-34 in the distance as he plowed on toward Udorn.

Crouched on the main gear after exiting the cockpit, "Tweety" congratulated himself on his fine piece of airmanship when the angry Flight Mechanic stuck his head out the door inquiring why he had failed to ring the crew alarm. Surprised by the verbal attack, the pilot responded that a copilot normally handled that duty--of course no one occupied the left seat on this flight--his duty merely extended to saving their tender buttocks. After the brief heated exchange, they started the APU and attempted to call Bade, whose aircraft noise

¹⁵ Malcomb Bird Emails, 09/02/02, 05/21/14.

sounded louder. With the assistance of UHF-DF navigational gear, Bade homed in on the downed ship. While Bade orbited the small landing zone awaiting further instructions, the Flight Mechanic tapped the main fuel tank drain and discovered that fuel contamination had probably caused the engine problem. Then, while Bade continued to Udorn to procure a drum of fuel, the crew, lacking sufficient clearance to position a container under the belly, drained polluted fuel into the rice paddy.

As they awaited Bade's return, the angry owner of the field arrived and began demanding an explanation why the interloping "farangs" had ruined his new rice crop. Through a few halting Thai words and exploratory sign language, they convinced the irate man that Air America would compensate him for any crop damage. Relieved at his good fortune, the dark man smiled, and then hand rolled and lighted a pungent cigarette. Concerned that the paddy, then completely flooded with volatile aviation gasoline might explode and jeopardize their well-being, Bird and the Flight Mechanic attempted to persuade him to extinguish his smoke. Their entreaties failed. Puffing one smoke after another, the farmer casually threw lighted stubs into the oily rainbow sheen.

Bade returned to Bird's site, but finding it too confined for landing, dropped the fifty-five-gallon drum at a low hover. After chasing smoking man away and refueling, they all returned to Udorn without further incident. Later, Bird asked Bade why he left after acknowledging the forced landing call. Bade replied that Bird had sounded so matter of fact, the message failed to register. Moreover, if his Flight Mechanic had not queried him about the distress call, he would have continued to Udorn.

Nearly the entire time he was with Air America Bird was concerned about pilots abusing aircraft, particularly unreported engine overboosts. He regarded them as contributing to his second engine failure.

Bird was planning an approach to a RLA outpost near a characteristic star-shaped French fort during a rare trip in the flat lands. The Flight Mechanic wanted to photograph the fort, so Bird remained at 500 feet. Suddenly the engine chip detector light illuminated, followed soon afterward by an engine failure. At sufficient altitude, in perfect position to commence the forced landing, Bird autorotated into the center of the fort, where security was considered superior to an outside pad.

As they had done so many times before, Burt Palmer and ID Maze arrived in another helicopter to effect the engine change. After an engine was slung into the fort, again using

Marine Corps ingenuity and field expediency, the mechanics cut stout wood poles from the nearby forest and assembled a tripod. Then they attached a chain hoist to lift and hold the engine. All hands then pushed the aircraft to the tripod to conduct the engine swap. ¹⁶

COBLE DEPARTS LUANG PRABANG

Following several months of living at Luang Prabang and working in Military Region One, Jim Coble returned to Udorn to begin flight assignments in Military Regions Two, Three, and Four. A rude awakening awaited him. Compared to Luang Prabang's relative luxury, overnight accommodations in less "sophisticated" areas were definitely subpar. At the end of a long, fatiguing day, crews generally fended for themselves and often were presented with dismal and limited choices for an adequate place for restful sleep. Coble spent his first night in Pakse at the recommended "French" Hotel (The generic French term did not always seem authentic). Buried within a forest of huge trees, overgrown with vines, decaying with mold and algae-spotted plaster, the inn's exterior evoked an ancient medieval appearance. The dark lobby inside the building appeared no better. Besides lacking ambiance, the interior exuded a disagreeable musty odor. Questionable conditions only got worse. He found tariffs high, fans absent in the rooms, hot water from shower stall taps nonexistent, and no ice available to build a cool drink. Furthermore, it was evident that room service personnel rarely changed the dingy bed sheets, which he estimated the proprietor probably washed only once a year.

Unable to tolerate another miserable night in the "Gallic" surroundings, Coble looked for more amenable and cheaper digs. The next evening, he obtained lodging at the Blue Bird, a two-story frame building closer to the airport. Located on the west side of the bridge that spanned the Se Kong, where the river surged into the Mekong, the sporting house primarily catered to satisfying sexual demands of its customers in relatively short time intervals. Despite what some might consider questionable accommodations, he happily discovered the overnight charge only a fraction of the "Frenchman's." Individual cooling fans hung on long poles from the ceilings of the five rooms, and fifty-five-gallon drums provided sufficient hot water to bathe. Best of all, both the house interior and the bed sheets always appeared spotless. Even the spacious downstairs lounge, where the proprietor maintained a liberal supply of ice, beer, and soda at a reasonably cool temperature, contained a large pedestal

¹⁶ Malcomb Bird Emails, 06/24/02, 05/15/14 (2), 05/22/14.

fan. Outside, street vendors provided delicious oriental food. As additional lagniappe, the tariff included female companionship for a receptive patron.¹⁷

A memorable few days in Military Region Two followed, when Coble spent a night at Pha Khao in a four by seven foot lean-to. Compared to the Blue Bird, the rustic site afforded few creature comforts. A parachute covered his rough bunk, one constructed of three-inch bamboo, small woven limbs, and broad leaves. He found the bed uncomfortable and sleep was only possible on his back. Sometime during the night, a leech attached a sucker above his nose between his eyebrows and secreted an anticoagulant. Since victims rarely sense leech wounds, the nasty creature gorged unimpeded on the pilot's blood, expanding to many times its normal size. At some point, without knowing how or when, Coble squashed the animal. The gushing flow of gore completely filled both his eye sockets. The blood coagulated, effectively matting and welding his eyelids shut by the time he awoke. Technically blind, frightened, and extremely agitated, he yelled for assistance. It required the White Star medic fifteen minutes to soften the clotted mess sufficiently with warm water applications to allow him proper vision. Fortunately, a foul weather day followed the incident, enabling him to completely regain total eyesight and equilibrium.

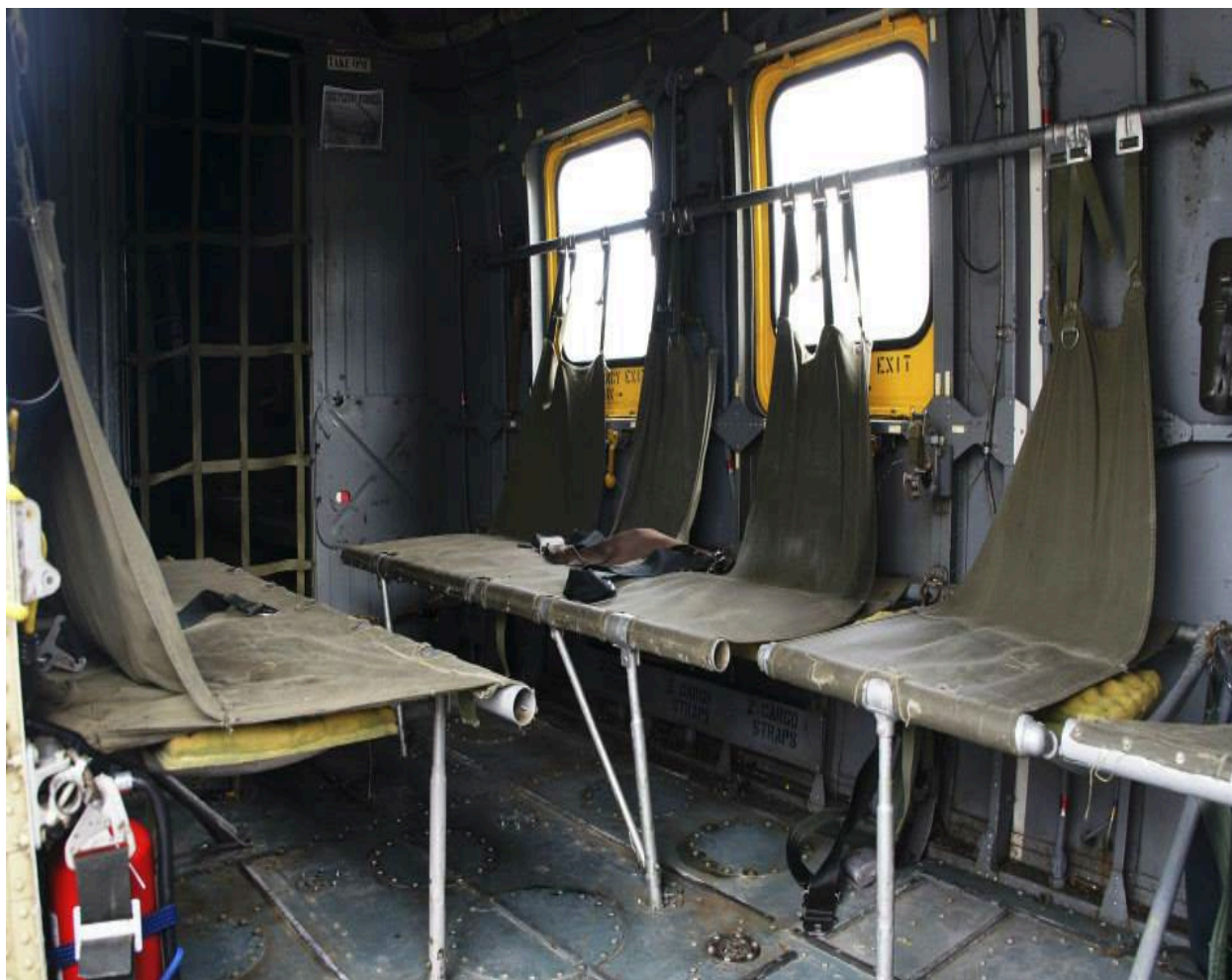
A couple of wet days of low flight time at Phou Vieng, an old site located in the mountains above the northeast corner of the Plain of Jars, followed. Sleeping in the "Sikorsky Hotel" eliminated further leech incidents. Thereafter, he spent more than a week supporting operations out of Paksane. Accommodations existed there in seedy hotels.¹⁸

ATTOPEU

On the twentieth, during a five-day RON period, a potentially serious incident occurred that further demonstrated the inherent weakness and tenuous nature of Lao officer relationships with Western counterparts. On the third working day from Savannakhet (Victor-39) and Thakhet (V-40), the White Star team Coble supported received urgent message traffic

¹⁷ Jim Coble Emails, 02/08/02, 02/09/02, 03/11/02.
EW Knight Emails, 05/03/02, 05/04/02.

¹⁸ Jim Coble Email, 03/29/02.



Part of the aft "Sikorsky Hotel" cabin section showing bucket seats before plywood sheeting was installed to prevent damage to the deck from heavy metal objects and corrosive liquids. Windows are of the emergency pop-out type. A Nylon electronics barrier in the rear covers the entrance to the tail cone. This section also contained radios and other electronic equipment. The barrier was installed to prevent personnel entry to the section during flight and disrupting the center of gravity.

Author Collection.

from Pakse (V-11) requesting immediate assistance. Engaged in an intelligence gathering operation to the east, part of a team based at Attopeu (V-10) reported encountering a firefight and suffering a seriously wounded man. Responding to the call for help, Jim unloaded a captain and sergeant, and launched south.

Following an interim landing at Victor-11 for fuel, and obtaining the latest information regarding the Attopeu area, the crew arrived at the remote provincial capital. Moung May, a relatively small town located close to the south-southeastern foot of the Bolovens Plateau's soaring, vertical walls, Attopeu (Moung May) was nestled neatly into a large protective loop of the Kong River. Mainly a fertile rice growing area, outlying hamlets dotted the flat countryside as far as one could see. Expecting to meet the local commander to discuss the mission, and then immediately proceed to the team site, the crew and passengers instead received a nasty surprise. The commanding officer arrived shortly after Coble landed on the long airstrip.

Curiously, Lao troops surrounded Hotel Foxtrot and placed machine guns on both sides of the aircraft. Soon afterward, the Americans learned that the officer, mentally conflicted regarding a rumored termination of the Ban Namone peace talks and other unsettling events unfolding in his area, presently undertook a cautious wait and see approach while considering a possible defection to the Pathet Lao.¹⁹ Like many scattered government positions in the factional and dysfunctional country, except for occasional air support remoteness completely isolated Attopeu. Its existence largely depended on local populace good will, and enemy laissez-faire. As a result, an accommodation between antagonists had long been established in this region. Similar to Luang Prabang, following the May ceasefire and continuing peace talks, the town assumed the status as a valuable trading post for acquiring supplies, weapons, and a Pathet Lao R&R center that provided welcome relief from field rigors. However, the de facto understanding always depended on enemy strategy, intentions, and a tacit agreement that RLA forces not aggressively patrol far from the confines of the town. Perhaps the White Star incursion into the eastern reaches of Pathet Lao control had violated this shaky unwritten pact.

¹⁹ Joint Chiefs of Staff, 189. During mid-September both Ambassador Harriman and Souvanna Phouma, discouraged over Phoumi's intransigence over common items and the lack of progress at Ban Namone, deemed the peace talks a waste of time.

Despite the reasons, the situation effectively grounded the American rescue crew until the cagey commander decided which side to align himself and his men. The wait proved relatively innocuous. Never treated like prisoners, the experience appeared more like a loose house arrest to the Americans. They never contemplated escape, for, surrounded by rivers, wet rice paddies, and territory occupied by hostiles, remaining in place appeared the only logical option. Over the next three days, they lodged at the Filipino staffed Operation Brotherhood field hospital, established there in 1957, and in other parts of the country.²⁰

Operation Brotherhood consisted of a medical organization first sponsored by the Lao Junior Chamber of Commerce and other groups in the U.S. and, as previously mentioned, the CIA through the auspices of USAID. In 1957, Filipino Operation Brotherhood teams consisted of a doctor, a dentist, several mixed gender nurses, and at times attached social and agricultural workers. Units fanned out throughout Laos to improve health in a country lacking medical facilities. Generally, the medical teams established a clinic in a district town or traveled to remote villages on horseback to serve the sick. Those based in Vientiane boated on the Mekong to villages. There personnel treated the sick, and taught first aid, hygiene, and sanitation. Over time, teams erected surgical field hospitals at Phong Saly, Sam Neua, Ban Ban, Paksong, Attopeu, and at That Luang Vientiane. However, because of either inadequate funding or the bitter civil war, only the latter three units survived. Additionally, teams ran small clinics at Sayaboury and Thakhet towns.²¹

Coble sorely needed the rest, for months of stressful flying, lack of nutritious food, and abundant southeastern Asian parasites--courtesy of Madam Lynne's salads at Luang Prabang--caused him to shed forty pounds, with frequent bouts of debilitating drizzles. He learned to cope with the latter condition through practice, developing a strong anal sphincter and learning to live with constant gut cramps.

By afternoon of the third day, after finally resolving his imagined demons, the commanding officer allowed the Americans access to the helicopter. Continuing with the original rescue mission, they flew east to the projected ambush site located on a flat, largely

²⁰ Operation Brotherhood (OB) at Attopeu remained a viable entity until the site fell to the enemy in 1968.

²¹ Joel Halpern, *Laotian Health Problems* (Amherst: University of Mass., 1990) 26.

treeless, rush-covered area. There they recovered one deceased and three living individuals.

After stops at Pakse and Thakhet, Coble returned to Udorn, where he discovered little concern over his absence or the incident. Unknown to him at the time, the team radio operator had continuously forwarded situation reports to Pakse during the house arrest, which others in turn relayed to Udorn.

During future years, allegiance to the RLG was very shaky, and "friendlies" at Attopeu constantly posed a source of concern for Air America pilots assigned to work the area. ²²

RELOCATING

Marking inception of the future Air America compound, during October all aspects and assets relating to the Madriver Project were systematically moved southwest across the laterite taxiway to a rough, largely undeveloped area adjoining the Royal Thai Army camp. Experiencing unforeseen growing pains, over the next thirteen years of almost continuous building and expansion, this site eventually contained a world-class multi-aircraft maintenance facility and helicopter operation. At first, except for operational consolidation, the move was deemed hardly an improvement from both previous tent cities until 1962 funding sparked major improvements. Besides providing critical hangar space, initial projects consisted of renovating the old Royal Thai Air Force barracks, installation of perimeter security fencing, and development of sanitation facilities. Located east of the hangars, the barracks housed limited administration offices and a communication center.

The paraphrased words of Jack Forney, a key maintenance supervisor assigned to the Madriver Project, reveal problems of the day:

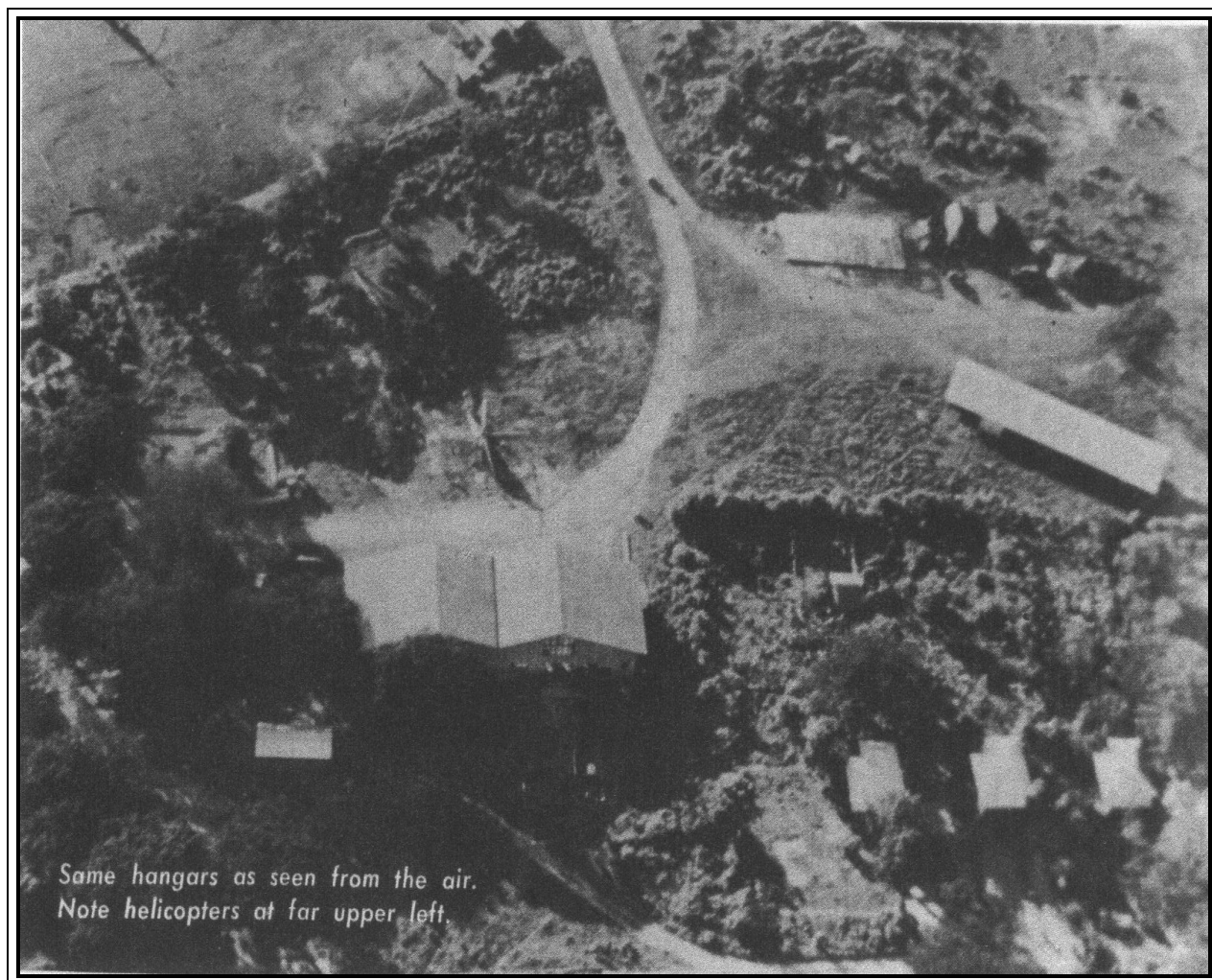
"Observing the Air America operation from only a maintenance aspect, the inadequate manning levels, high flying rates-unheard of in the annals of H-34 fleet operations, parts shortages, oppressive heat, omnipresent laterite dust created by taxiing aircraft, and similar or worse conditions upcountry, it was a marvel to everyone the operation functioned

²² Jim Coble Emails, 02/08/02, 02/09/02, 02/11/02, 03/04/02.
Jim Coble September 1961 Flight Time Records.
EW Knight Emails, 02/27/02, 03/03/02.



Former Royal Thai Air Force double hangars, where the Air America Maintenance department transferred in October 1961. Courtesy of the departing USMC MABS unit, rolling stock, helicopters, and tools were left for Air America's use.

Air America Log, Volume 6, #5, 1971.



*Same hangars as seen from the air.
Note helicopters at far upper left.*

Early overhead view of the Air America facility from the fringe of the adjacent Royal Thai Army compound shortly following the fall transfer. Double hangars in foreground. Upper right, tents were utilized until the barracks in the center right were renovated for offices. A helicopter can be seen moving along the rough access road toward the parking/taxi ramp.

Air America Log, Volume 6, #5, 1971.



Early rainy season photo showing the rutted, potholed, and partially flooded Air America parking-taxi ramp with five parked HUS-1 helicopters, double maintenance hangars, and administration building. A portion of the Royal Thai Army (RTA) base perimeter is seen in the background.

Abadie Collection.



Miserable conditions which Air America personnel had to contend with during the 1961 monsoon season. Fire truck positioned to assist in emergencies. Motor scooters replaced bicycles as a mode of employee transportation.

Abadie Collection.

at all.

"Inadequate lighting constituted an overriding problem. Because all H-34 flight activity occurred during daylight hours, nighttime maintenance tasks required sufficient illumination beyond using flashlights. The ancient hangars possessed few fluorescent light fixtures, and the local electric company provided inadequate service, with frequent power failures. Nominally providing a 220-volt, fifty-cycle system, rated town power rarely attained 200 volts during the day and this amount measurably decreased after dark. Thus, to ensure operation of the starter units, it became necessary to turn on light switches well before the evening power draw down.

When MABS-16 and H&MS detachments rotated back to Okinawa, in addition to leaving critical tools and rolling stock, Air America maintenance acquired two high-speed field generators. Maintenance utilized both units outside the hangars, but, never designed for twenty-four hour, seven-day operations, they proved inadequate to sustain long periods of night work. Personnel staged one low wattage generator at the decrepit line shack alongside the taxiway. Capable of illuminating only a few hundred-watt bulbs, the unit could not even light a single spotlight.

Night shift personnel suffered in the harsh environment. Attempting sound sleep during high humidity ninety-degree days, while coping with the din from the town's constant people noises, taxed even the heartiest personnel. Arriving at work at 1600 hours, they appeared haggard and drained, often not capable of quality work. For this reason, day shift supervisors frequently remained at the base to lend a hand until 2000 to 2100 hours.

Despite these and other growing pains, Air America maintained a hundred-hour monthly average per helicopter over the first year and a half operation. The record-breaking flight time only significantly diminished when aircraft requirements for the war appreciably lessened. The feat appeared even more impressive considering that over this period, Air America did not recover ten crashed UH-34 aircraft, and two to three others sustained substantial damage requiring major repair. ²³

²³ Jack Forney Email, 3/11/99.

BEN MOORE, JR.

Taipei headquarters hired Ben Moore, a retired U.S. Navy Captain, to replace Tom Tucker as Project Manager of the Madriver Operation. At first glance to those in the field, Moore appeared a most curious mixture of a crusty, recently retired U.S. Navy Captain and a liberal arts major. Others considered him aloof, a loner in the beginning, who warmed up later to personnel. ²⁴

Bob Rousselot liked Ben Moore. In a 14 October personal memorandum to Abadie regarding him, Rousselot wrote:

"...I have observed and talked with him during his familiarization tour in Taipei, and have certainly been impressed so far... He is sort of a quiet fellow, but I believe that after he gets his feet solidly on the ground, he will loosen up a bit...I am confident that he will give you the best in cooperation and assistance and you likewise, will work with him as you have done with Doc Lewis and the others."

While briefing Moore, the VPO mentioned that CJ Abadie possessed the experience and capability of concurrently performing both Chief Pilot and Operations Manager assignments, and that he fulfilled all the job requirements of integrity, honesty, and fairness. He expected that Moore and Abadie would work well together. He also conveyed that Ben would head a good management unit and employee force at Udorn. This included Jack Forney, new maintenance supervisor Ray Wall, mechanics, radio operators, clerks, aircrews, and others. ²⁵

Thus, began an excellent working relationship among the Udorn management team that endured for many years.

Before long it became obvious that Ben Moore's hiring was fortuitous, providing just the right person at the right time to fill the Udorn Base Manager slot. There were practically no rules, procedures, or regulations established for crew conduct when Ben came onboard, and the former Navy captain was initially disliked by many pilots who regarded him as a stern disciplinarian. Over time, Ben added a lot of professionalism to crew appearance and was unwavering in punishment on those who broke the rules. Taking his job seriously, he

²⁴ JJ McCauley Letter, 1/28/91.

²⁵ Bob Rousselot VPO-61-1647-P/1, 10/14/61.

lived on the base throughout his long tenure, and hence was always available for any eventuality. At first perceived by some individuals as unfriendly, he warmed up later and many pilots sincerely liked him.

One maintenance supervisor indicated that Moore performed the best job of all the early Base Managers (BM). However, taking exception to the VPOs initial characterization of the man, he opined:

"I would not describe Ben as quiet or a particularly introspective person. He appeared a practical guy, impatient with bureaucratic niceties, and therefore frequently at odds with Taipei, Tainan, and Bangkok. [He was] a personable, mostly good humored, and adaptable person, but given sufficient cause, capable of righteous anger. If beered up, he could deliver flights of literary oration, and was hell on wheels at eventually getting things done if he considered they needed doing. Well thought of in all quarters, including the Customer, he interfaced well with the Bangkok USAF Capitol Hotel MAAG contract group and became the primary instigator in obtaining USAF funding for major base facilities." ²⁶

SPARES

Because inordinate upcountry flight time necessitated a frequent change of H-34s moving parts and engines, major trouble inevitably arose for the expanding Madriver Operation. Spare parts initially warehoused at the Red Hat facility located on the military side of Don Muang Airport were not adequate to keep the HUS-1 fleet flying. All helicopter components were stamped with identification numbers in order to prevent counterfeiting and effect correct ordering. This process was seriously muddled when it was discovered that U.S. Navy and U.S. Air Force numbers were separately marked, causing confusion among workers at the Naval Supply Depot at Yokosuka, Japan. Hoping to ameliorate the problem, a noncommissioned officer in charge of the Udon Naval supply section, effected a change that dramatically improved ordering and receiving spare parts at Don Muang. Despite the more efficient system, the influx of parts never equaled the continuing need in the field.

In order to maintain operational helicopter readiness, a temporary, but quick solution

²⁶ Jack Forney Email, 3/11/99.
Wayne Knight Email, 01/20/01.

to the problem of grounded aircraft (AGP) was to cannibalize or swap parts from one aircraft to another, although this costly and labor-intensive method elicited diminishing returns and eventually one had to "pay the piper."

"The parts supply chain for company owned aircraft and equipment ran from North Hollywood direct to us or through the main base at Tainan, [Taiwan], usually via commercial and company transport...The bailed military aircraft that were still in active U.S. military inventory were supported by the MILSTRIP ordering system by the respective service with shipment via government channels and transport. The same was true for aircraft we supported [over the years] but didn't necessarily operate (e.g., RLAf T-28s USAF O-1/U-17/U-6 fleets, the Cambodian T-28/T-41 operation at Phnom Penh, and the [early] short lived UH-34D IRAN [inspect and repair as necessary] operation conducted at Saigon).²⁷

A few months after the Madriver Operation commenced, important helicopter components began reaching absolute time limits at the same time that critical H-34 parts supply deliveries from the Far East Naval supply depot at Yokosuka, Japan, dwindled to a minimum.

Rear echelon military types never fully comprehended the unique nature of the Air America helicopter operation, especially the related maintenance requirements. They were more attuned to previous fixed wing functions like "flying the Burma/China hump," and the Berlin airlift. This deficiency became painfully evident when Ben Moore, substantiating his urgent request to replace a diminishing supply of sorely needed parts and components to maintain the H-34 fleet, reported monthly flight time to Company management in Taipei. Subsequently relayed to Okinawa, where few parts remained in stock, local procurement officers bounced the Air America requirements to the Japan office, from where they eventually reached military channels in Washington. Incredulous, evoking disbelief at the monthly flight hours reported, first responses seriously questioned the Air America statistics. Air America claimed more hours in a week than any military squadron ever flew in a month. Blistering messages stressed that no unit that size could possibly fly as much as indicated. Furthermore, bureaucrats seriously questioned the statement that one helicopter flew 200 hours in a single month. This was impossible, for no military aviation branch had ever achieved such a feat. Of course, because of the highly classified nature of the operation and restricted need-to-know attached to it, few in Washington even realized that the Madriver Project existed. Consequently, the

²⁷ Jack Forney Email, 09/11/02.

"powers-who-be" failed to realize that Air America helicopters operating ten to thirteen hours a day, seven days a week, constituted an established norm. Having tightly programmed mindsets, they only considered that most H-34 spare parts allocated for shipment from the U.S. Naval supply depot at Yokosuka, Japan, to USMC units on Okinawa, and lately diverted to Bangkok and Udorn, were now mostly depleted. Because such vast component usage had never occurred before in the Fleet, budgetary provisions to purchase additional parts simply did not exist. Moreover, obtaining supplementary congressional funding before the fiscal year budgeting process evolved would constitute a precedent. This would cause pain akin to having a root canal operation, as it would necessitate a dreaded trip to Capitol Hill. As a result, to protect jobs, careers, and territory, the procurement movers and shakers were loath to act.

Following the initial shock to the parts request, military officials demanded that Taipei verify Air America Udorn's claimed H-34 flying records. Eventually word of the flap filtered down to Ben Moore's office. He was not happy, although, following a long and prestigious military career, he understood the intricacies of the system. Therefore, he attempted to maintain a modicum of equilibrium in the matter, but deemed it the last straw after receiving troubling rumors that some within the chain of command suspected Air America personnel of selling helicopter parts. Moore, a proud Texan normally slow to ire, exploded, and considered the issue a personal attack on his character. Realizing that the "Doubting Thomas" military supply brass questioned his meticulous reports and carefully documented maintenance records, and quite possibly were impugning his character, he acted. Armed with plentiful statistics to substantiate his case, he conducted hurried trips to Taipei, to Okinawa, and then to Washington. Having many friends still active in the military, he ultimately achieved success, creating believers out of the uninitiated backroom boys as to the H-34 helicopter's potential and proper utilization by motivated civilians. As a consequence, Udorn soon began receiving necessary parts. Furthermore, despite the continuous heavy volume of flying, no subsequent problem supporting the program with military parts developed during the near term. ²⁸

²⁸ Ben Moore April 1967 Monthly Report to Taipei.
CJ Abadie Emails, 04/30/98, 07/16/98, 01/22/99, 02/21/00, 02/22/00.
George Hofmann, 29.

HOTEL CHARLIE

On 21 October, adding to its dwindling inventory, Hotel Charlie (Bureau Number 145975) became the ninth strike in the Air America helicopter program. While conducting operations under the 1674 contract, triggered by a sticky air-oil main gear oleo strut, Army temporary Neal E. Early experienced severe ground resonance after landing at a landing zone in the Pha Khao-Padong area.²⁹

Perhaps because the helicopter was too heavy to raise to a hover, Early opted to shut down. During the process, he applied the rotor brake too vigorously, shearing tail rotor shafting tubes. Overwhelmed by the combination of flailing shafts and ground resonance, the wounded helicopter caught fire and rapidly burned to ashes. The incident slightly injured Flight Mechanic Louie J. Jones and two Special Forces personnel. Adding to the pain of the accident, Flight Mechanic C.P. Wyatt had lent his flight jacket to Jones that day and it was consumed in the ensuing fire.

The episode did not constitute Early's first "Moment of Truth," for while piloting Hotel Sierra on 6 October under contract number 1674, he experienced an in-flight engine failure. He walked away from a successful autorotation, but Flight Mechanic K. Dyer received minor injuries.

After Early eagerly departed Air America, he met Fred Sass again at a military base. While reliving the old Air America days, he related that he had dinged a helicopter. Sass, no stranger to destroying Air America helicopters, replied that it appeared that Army types had

²⁹ Author Note: First series H-34s equipped with "bent leg" main landing gear, as opposed to the retrofitted "V" leg gear designed for safer carrier operations, were particularly susceptible to ground resonance. Rolling into even a small hole, or landing on uneven ground, could induce harmonic resonance (something akin to a struck tuning fork) between the ground, main gear, and the rotor head that would induce a severe lateral bouncing movement. If not immediately recognized and countered, this condition could set in motion catastrophic vibrations that could destroy the helicopter within seconds. Relatively simple emergency procedures rectified the condition if immediately implemented. Should sufficient RPM be available, one simply lifted the helicopter off the ground to a hover. If weight constrained such action, the pilot operational manual recommended immediate shutdown and application of the rotor brake.

batted almost one hundred percent damaging Marine Corps property. ³⁰

³⁰ EW Knight Email, 01/09/02.
Fred Sass Email, 09/24/02.
Malcomb Bird Emails, 10/28/02, 06/21/03.
CIA, Operational Casualties in Southeast Asia, 12/01/62.

Pat Sullivan's erratic behavior and paranoia increased measurably after his questionable and ill-advised elevation to Captain status. For example, while on R&R in Bangkok, he informed his wife and others that the lesions and infected sores on his arms derived from constant nervous scratching of skin blemishes and mosquito bites, had actually originated from cigarette burns administered by Pathet Lao guards during his imprisonment and interrogation. One afternoon while on R&R, Captain Hal Clark spied Sullivan on a Bangkok sidewalk and noticed that he wore a large Bowie type knife on his hip. Blatantly out of the ordinary in the quiet city, Clark asked him about the weapon. The highly paranoid Sullivan characteristically answered, *"They are trying to get me. One cannot be too careful in Bangkok."*¹

Consistent with his problematic military aircraft accident record, Pat Sullivan inevitably crashed and destroyed an H-34, joining the ranks of U.S. Naval aviation's Black Aces.²

On 3 October, a few weeks after upgrading to Captain, operations assigned Sullivan to conduct a zero-time engine break-in on Hotel Uniform. Outlining the procedure, Sikorsky maintenance manual guidelines recommended specific elapsed times at varying RPM cycles and power settings after installation of a new or recently overhauled engine. To satisfy these parameters, pilots performed an initial ground run-in, but executed the majority of the

¹ EW Knight Letter, 07/27/91.
EW Knight Email, 05/13/02.

² Black Ace: As opposed to bona fide combat aces with a minimum of five kills to their credit, the term relates to an individual who crashed five aircraft. In the late 1960s, while working on the staff of the Chief of Naval Air Training, Malcolm Bird discovered Pat Sullivan's military record and confirmed that he was involved in four accidents while in the service.

The Author enjoyed an entertaining engine instructor during a pre-flight engine course at NAS Pensacola who proudly claimed to be a black ace.

procedures while flying. A dull and boring process, pilots referred to it as "slow time flight."³

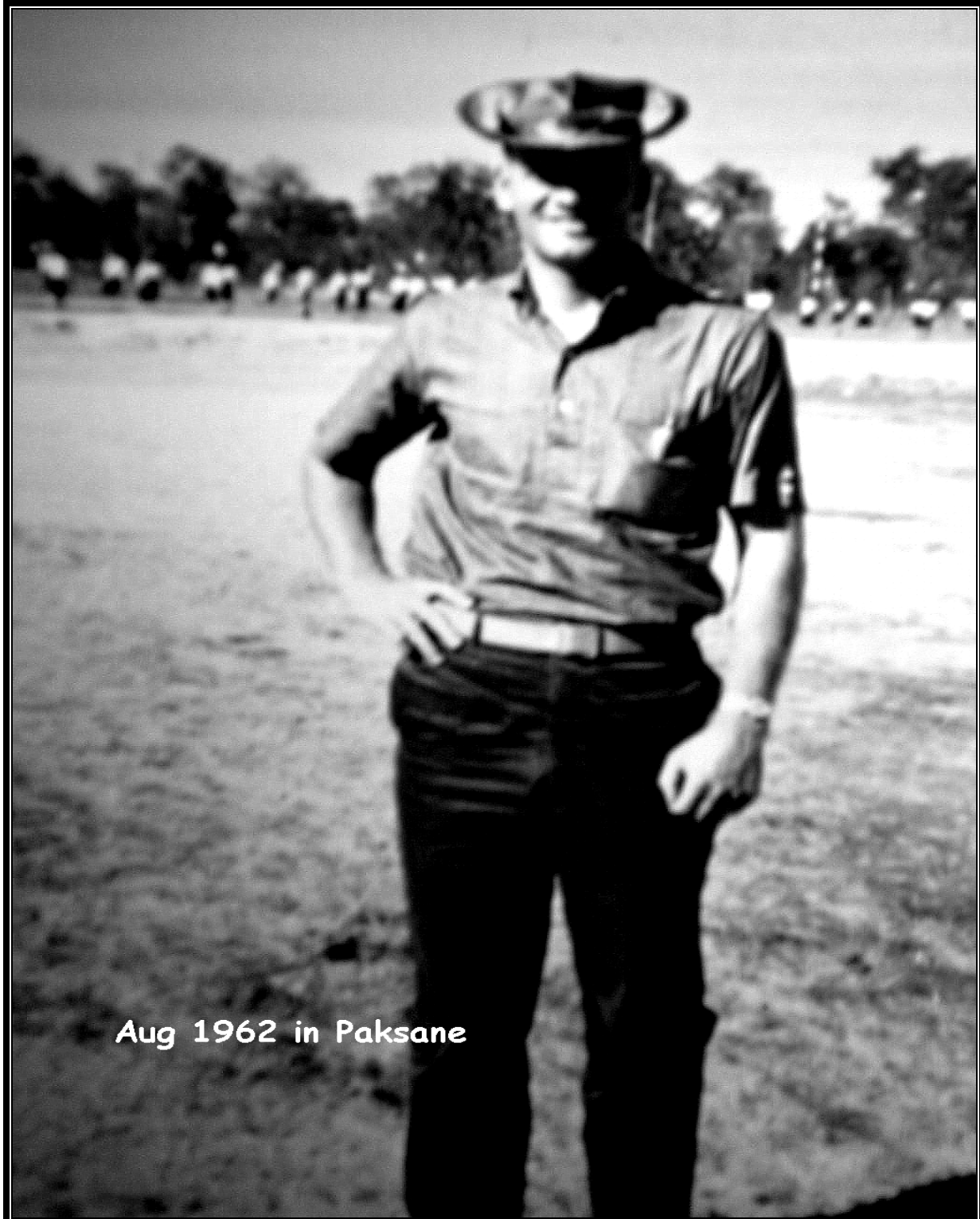
Operations and maintenance personnel carefully and thoroughly explained all aspects for the break-in to Sullivan before takeoff. As Company policy required the pilot to remain in a racetrack pattern within autorotational distance of the airfield during the initial hours, Flight Mechanic Powell remained on the ground to perform other duties. For some inexplicable reason, Sullivan apparently misunderstood the phrase "around the field," for after departure, ground personnel noted Hotel Uniform heading north.^{4 5}

Following the dirt road north for thirty minutes, Sullivan arrived at Nong Khai, adjacent to the Mekong River, and began looking for the Catholic Church. While he circled, the local priest, whom he and other pilots had previously befriended and had occasionally provided helicopter rides, motioned him to land. After a roll-on landing in an open soccer field adjoining a school, the priest requested that he ferry several of his parishioners to another Catholic mission fifty miles east at Nakkon Phanom. After the padre promised to help with navigation, people scrambled onboard and they departed. At 300 feet, the engine chip detector illuminated and the engine failed. With little time to react, Sullivan established an autorotation into a rice paddy and might have landed safely except for part of a dead tree. Contact with the obstacle ripped both the belly and fuel tank open, spilling gallons of aviation gasoline on the ground. In the process of evacuating the

³ Jim Coble Email, 07/27/03.
Malcomb Bird Email, 05/13/14.

⁴ Pat Sullivan's action, although deviating from established procedures, did not constitute a precedent. On 26 June Tom Moher and Fred Sass, after assigned an engine break-in, flew Hotel Echo to Thakhet for the express purpose of purchasing Australian style bush hats. Initially adopted by White Star teams in lieu of more formal green berets, the distinctive and utilitarian covers with one side pinned up quickly became popular with Air America crews. After an initial break-in period on the ground, and within the confines of the traffic pattern, they departed on the trip. Of course--wink-wink--they failed to log the unauthorized flight.

⁵ Fred Sass June Flight Time Record.
Fred Sass Email, 10/03/02.



Wayne Knight wearing the Australian type bush hat first adopted by Special Forces White Star personnel and then Air America crews.
Knight Collection.

machine, the flustered pilot neglected to turn off the magneto and electrical switches to properly secure the engine. Consequently, hot sparks and pieces of hot engine metal set the fuel on fire. The intense inferno subsequently consumed the H-34. Mainly constructed of weight-reducing, but highly combustible magnesium, once ignited, the machine was rapidly consumed. Other than rotor blades, struts and larger components, except for the ash outline on the ground, little remained to identify a helicopter.

Malcolm "Tweety" Bird flew to Nong Khai to investigate the crash on CJ Abadie's behalf. There he observed Sullivan, perched on a stump and gazing at a lump of melted engine and a large pile of magnesium white ash, while composing his version of the accident, *Ode to a Burning Helicopter*. Seemingly proud of his experience, upon his return to Udorn, pilots recall him reading the prose to a less than enthralled Abadie. As a souvenir, he displayed a portion of fused magnesium on his living room wall.

Sullivan was grounded pending a decision by the accident board. In the interim he was allowed to go to Bangkok and stay with his family. While there he began teaching at the American International School. Bird visited him at the family apartment.⁶

Sullivan's accident investigation board assembled and convened on the 31st. During the course of questioning, Sullivan again claimed that no one had ever provided him with a HUS-1/UH-34D pilot handbook, or aircraft flight manual. This statement surprised Rousselot, for in September, after receiving Sullivan's earlier complaint, he had forwarded twenty H-34 NATOPS manuals to the facility. He later discovered that only three books were ever distributed to pilots. When asked why he had failed to activate his Westponder survival beacon, Sullivan complained that he had never received instruction on its use, and that when a Customer type escape and evasion expert conducted the Westponder class, Coble and he were flying. He further declared that Udorn supervisory and flight crew staff often established and adopted instructions and procedures after verbal discussions among themselves, and then passed them to the line pilots by word of mouth.

Sullivan's statements, especially those pertaining to the omissions of training and availability of publications, troubled Rousselot. He insisted that Abadie institute

⁶ Malcomb Bird Emails, 06/22/02, 05/15/14 (2).
JJ McCauley Letter, 1/25/94.

additional paperwork to substantiate pilot ground training. Moreover, he wanted copies of any future memorandums and publications sent to Taipei headquarters for his examination, and to enhance coordination between stations. The Hotel Uniform accident investigation concluded on 1 November. Before leaving for the head office, the VPO pledged to forward a final report to Abadie in a few days. ⁷

Speculation regarding certain aspects of the accident circulated around the facility for some time. The issue of the aircraft flown on a cross-country was somewhat mitigated because of the route he took along a road where a forced landing could be effected. However, the matter of a priest and passengers allowed on a maintenance flight remained unresolved. Also, subject to conjecture, in the official version of the episode, the priest hailing Sullivan appeared to have been pre-arranged.

Sullivan's venture into iambic pentameter eventually sealed his fate, for after Rousselot heard about the Ode, he flew into a violent rage. After Abadie's numerous efforts to terminate Sullivan, Rousselot finally concluded that for the good of the program, the man needed to leave Air America. Finally, some believed that if Sullivan had merely omitted a few self-incriminating items in his painfully complete accident report, he quite possibly might have survived the investigation. Mercifully, for all involved, Sullivan's days with Air America ended before anyone was injured or killed. ⁸ Hotel Uniform (Bureau Number 145746) became the tenth H-34 strike in 1961.

Harsh conditions inherent in Lao upcountry work: seasonal weather, winds, adverse terrain, enemy situation, and various other factors proved instrumental in continuing H-34 losses throughout the Air America helicopter multi-year operation. Although management and investigators deemed the numerous accidents official operational losses, more often than not the crashes resulted from pilot error. Other less evident accidents stemmed from maintenance problems or enemy fire.

⁷ Bob Rousselot Personal Letter to Abadie, 11/01/61.

⁸ Jim Coble Emails, 05/08/02, 05/09/02, 05/13/02.
Malcomb Bird Email, 06/22/02.
EW Knight Letter, 07/27/91.
EW Knight Email, 05/13/02.
CJ Abadie Email, 06/11/02.

Consistent with an operation established as inexpensively as possible--an oxymoron, for because of the high cost of parts and maintenance, helicopter operations are never inexpensive), maintenance repaired crashed aircraft when feasible. Reconstruction by talented third world country artisans was almost total and truly miraculous. Helicopter strikes were not always promptly replaced, but only when possible. Before overt hostilities began in South Vietnam, and the Sikorsky factory reopened the H-34 manufacturing line in Bridgeport Connecticut, replacement aircraft dribbled in from reluctant Seventh Fleet squadrons. Over time, capable maintenance personnel rebuilt Hotel Foxtrot several times, although, except for the serial number (148054) stamped on the manufacture's data plate, not one original part existed on the ship. When Air America transferred a handful of H-34s to the Vientiane-based International Control Commission in late 1962, original lettered or numbered call signs lost identity except for a serial number. Years later, after a third designation, one ship eventually returned to the Udon inventory as 803.

CLARKE GOES DOWN

A nasty weather front moved in to Military Region Two during early November when Ron Clarke and another pilot of a two-ship contingent RON at Pha Khao. Heavy rain persisted for several days, preventing air drops of food and other supplies to the site. As a result, personnel ran out of food, leading the two pilots to consider departing and following the river systems south. They rejected this option when they realized that there was no other way out of the surrounded area for the White Star team.

Within a week skies cleared, supply drops were renewed, and two fresh helicopter crews arrived to relieve Clarke et. al.

After enjoying two days off the schedule, Clarke returned upcountry. He was dispatched to a remote village to retrieve a man and woman with a sick baby, and deliver the trio to a Vientiane hospital. As the couple disembarked the helicopter, Ron looked down from the cockpit and observed a flushed, bright red, obviously very ill child.

Within two days Clarke became quite ill and consulted the MABS Navy doctor at the Marine airfield platform complex for a diagnosis. Lacking equipment necessary for thorough testing, the doctor arranged for him to go to the Seventh Day Adventist Hospital in



A bamboo, thatch, and tarpaulin type "hooch" pilots were obligated to sleep in at the Pha Khao site. Empty ammunition boxes are arranged like raised sidewalks to keep an individual out of the mud.
Clarke Collection.

Bangkok, as he had contracted a serious case of mumps-meningoencephalitis.⁹

Following two weeks in bed, two fellow pilots arrived at the hospital and Clarke was released, believing that he was returning to Udorn. Instead, he was handed airline tickets home. This was quite a shock, as he was happy with his job, believing upcountry operations were benefiting the Lao effort, and that Air America pilots were the sole contact and safety net for others.

Clarke's condition was far more serious than he realized, and he became an inpatient and then an outpatient in the U.S. Bethesda Naval Hospital from November through May 1962. During this period, he was allowed to perform light duty at the Bureau of Naval Personnel in Arlington, Virginia, and continued receiving medical tests as doctors dictated. He had previously applied for regular U.S. Navy status, which was granted. Once released from the hospital, he returned to flight duty.

In 1967 Clarke resigned his Navy commission and joined the FAA FAR-135-regulated Los Angeles Airways helicopter operation where he functioned as the chief pilot. During October 1971 LAA filed for bankruptcy. Three days later he received a telegram saying, *"If you are interested in flying in Southeast Asia [implying Air America], please call this number."* Recently out of a job, the offer sounded good, but when he consulted his wife, she replied that he could do better things. When he asked, "What better things," her answer was "Draw unemployment." That ended any idea of his return to Southeast Asia.¹⁰

COBLE

H-34 field repair and recovery operations continued unabated when Jim Coble, then a

⁹ Clarke wondered if his illness was contracted from the sick baby, but this is not likely, for the mumps virus incubation period is twelve to eighteen days. Moreover, RON for Americans in the mountains of Laos was unhealthy from the aspect of poor food, water, unhygienic living conditions, and many indigenous diseases. All these variables tended to coalesce and compromise even the healthiest immune system.

¹⁰ Ron Clarke Emails, 05/22/15, 06/05/15, 06/06/15 (2), 06/07/15, 07/16/15. Clarke departed Air America with more than 10,000 dollars in the bank.

rising star in Abadie's management planning, slung a heavy and cumbersome R-1820 Curtis Wright engine to disabled Hotel Victor on 30 October.

As a matter of course, crews found field recoveries rarely easy and often hazardous. After losing an engine, Hotel Victor's driver had executed a successful forced landing in a small valley just to the west and below a portion of Padong Ridge. Not long afterward, a plane delivered the 2,200-pound engine, a mixed ethnic engine change team, and ancillary equipment to Pha Khao. Then, following a ten-minute flight and with a light fuel load, Coble deposited the engine close to Hotel Victor, while another H-34 ferried the maintenance team to the site. Since a small Pathet Lao unit had moved into an advantageous position along the ridgeline and fired a few shots down at the landing zone, both crews temporarily returned to Pha Khao. Highly motivated to "get out of Dodge" because of the light, sporadic small arms fire, the engine change team installed the component in record time. Shortly before the team completed the task, Coble returned to the site, where he shut down and waited impatiently in the cockpit for clearance to crank up. Receiving a green light, he performed a record-breaking engine and rotor system run up, and within a couple minutes he lifted off bound for Pha Khao. The crew of the sister ship retrieved the remaining maintenance team and equipment. The following day, after the Pathet Lao patrol had moved on, Coble salvaged the faulty engine.

As a reward for his contribution in averting another H-34 loss, and participation in a helicopter recovery under fire, Ben Moore penned a letter of commendation, initialed by C.J. Abadie, and Bob Rousselot awarded Coble a week off in Hong Kong.¹¹ This distinct honor constituted a first for line helicopter pilots, as pilots previously were restricted to Bangkok during time off. By this time, the plush Civil Air Transport Convair 880--later referred to by those awed by its beautiful appointments as the "Golden Worm"--was flying coveted routes and provided reliable transportation between the two locations and many of the larger Far Eastern cities. The trip proved momentous, for during the kudos period, Coble met and fell in love with a young Chinese lady who soon became his wife.¹²

¹¹ Letter of Commendation: The Base Manager, Ben Moore, was generous with these missives if he believed the individual and situation warranted one. This form of kudo for good work continued over the years.

¹² Jim Coble Emails, 01/27/02, 01/29/02, 01/30/02, 07/14/03, 07/16/03 (2), 07/17/0

At the end of October, a rotor blade incident involving Hotel Sierra, flown by Captain Charlie Weitz (DOH 4/9/61) and trainee Billy Pearson (DOH 9/29/61), prompted a VPO memorandum to CJ Abadie. In it, Bob Rousselot stressed a need for his Chief Pilot to closely supervise new pilot training, and to preferably perform this task himself. Toward this end, Rousselot planned to assign a competent Operations Manager so Abadie could more readily concentrate on management duties, and participate in the flight crew-training program. ¹³

Former Fleet Marine men working with Air America were well acquainted with Charlie Weitz's legendary exploits in the Corps. Several amusing stories circulated in the Fleet detailing the man's prodigious appetites and most Marine helicopter pilots could readily recite a version of them. ¹⁴

Many tales originated during the 1959 Oppama, Japan, deployment, considered the finest Marine Corps duty station in the Far East. During World War Two, Oppama served as a Japanese seaplane base, with ramps leading into Tokyo Bay. At the time, HMR-261 and 362 squadrons co-located at Oppama. The squadrons conducted all field maneuvers around Mount Fujiyama, Numazu Beach, or from Oppama. The one exception, a trip to Borneo, required four officers to remain behind and oversee the base and equipment. While away, the commanding officer assigned senior officers Major Jerry Armstrong and Captain J.J. McCauley custody of the two squadron Jeeps. One Friday evening Lieutenant Weitz asked McCauley to lend him his Jeep. The following morning, during a late morning brunch, Weitz charged into the officer's mess with a message of bad news. McCauley blanched, fearing that he would relate details of a serious accident. Instead, Weitz hastily explained that, after drinking the previous night, he had driven a girl to her house. The next morning, forgetting that he had the borrowed Jeep, he

¹³ Bob Rousselot Reference: VPO-61-659, 15 November 61.

¹⁴ I was party to several accounts of Charlie Weitz's antics from HMR-261 squadron mates Hal Yanofsky, Bill Connor, and others while stationed at the New River helicopter facility in North Carolina.



Captain Charlie Weitz



Captain Bill Pearson

returned to the base by cab. A hunt immediately commenced. Fortunately, Japanese cultural honesty prevailed that day, and after substantial searching, they discovered the parked Jeep, with the key still in the ignition.

In order to conserve energy costs, the rooms of the old three-story Oppama Bachelor Officers Quarters (BOQ) featured low ceilings, prompting a habit of Weitz or his roommate tacking another empty Chianti bottle, "dead soldier" to the ceiling. One weekend, following an afternoon wine-imbibing marathon at the O'Club that continued in his room, Weitz managed to soak his skivvy shirt red after spilling several drinks. Early that Saturday evening, a few party friends half carried, half dragged the shirtless Weitz down the marble stairs clad only in a sport jacket and trousers.

Once outside, the well-oiled group hired a "Skoshi Cab" (a small taxi) for the run into Yokosuka. Government regulations required Japanese drivers for hire to attend rigorous driving courses. After a lengthy certification period, the men reputedly provided excellent public service, although, while threading a needle through traffic, they drove fast and were seemingly reckless. To the uninitiated passenger, such a ride was terrifying. The Marines, long beyond their initial fear stage, recognized the taxi drivers' extraordinary ability and played games with them. On this particular night, as the cabbie surged along at high speed and entered a tunnel, McCauley reached over the driver's seat and covered the man's eyes shouting, "*Boy San, you have an emergency.*" The dangerous challenge helped pass the time.¹⁵

Yokosuka, located southeast of Oppama, overlooked the expansive Tokyo Bay, and presented an impressive view of the water. Housing the Japanese equivalent of Annapolis and the U.S. 7th Fleet headquarters, military personnel described the area as an outstanding liberty town. American military men equally cherished a row of bars (known in the vernacular as, "Skivvy Alley") that catered to leisure time prurient interests. Long the established pecking order, enlisted bars sat at ground level, with officer territory relegated to second floors. One establishment, Sisters, became the preferred watering hole for Oppama helicopter pilots.

At 0100 hours, Weitz, whose recuperative powers and amazing constitution often shamed lesser mortals, conversed with McCauley at the bar. Another drunken friend slept with his

¹⁵ Burt Palmer Email, 03/14/04.

head resting on the bar top. At that point, a USMC captain on evening shore patrol duty entered with his sidekicks and asked the trio to present their identification cards. After checking identification cards and noting their sodden condition, the captain stated that they should be ashamed to call themselves Marine officers. To emphasize his point, he glanced at the sleeping beauty saying, *"Look at that man. He cannot even talk."*

Unhappy with the intimidation, the quick-witted Weitz rose to the occasion slurring, *"Tha's OK Cap, I will order for him."* Then, noticing that the sleeper was jacketless, the Captain directed another snide remark toward him.

Weitz, inspired, and by then thoroughly enjoying the banter, unbuttoned his sport jacket, revealed bare skin and yelled, *"Shucks Captain, "Look, I don't even have a shirt on."* This outburst proved enough for the gendarmes. Wanting no more of the crazies, the military policemen immediately cleared the bar. ^{16 17}

PALMER

Early in November, Burt Palmer rotated back to Udorn from Luang Prabang, but generally spent his off time and evenings in Vientiane cohabiting with Madam Lynne, who had accepted employment at a local bank. In order to continue the relationship, the couple rented an apartment about a half mile from the airfield and set up housekeeping. Still working as a Flight Mechanic and technically based in Udorn, pilots dropped Palmer at Wattay Airport in the evening, and retrieved him the following morning.

Improvements to Wattay Airport continued to evolve over the months. Palmer recalls Marston Matting pierced steel planking (PSP) surrounding the tower area, with a bar and restaurant co-located there. Also present were the Air America fixed wing line shack and Operations Department, where personnel assigned missions, and passengers staged. Helio

¹⁶ JJ McCauley Letter, 1/25/94.

¹⁷ Author Note: After he left the service, tales of Weitz's antics and excesses continued to abound and escalate. As a source of enjoyment over a drink, crews related the folklore throughout the Air America years. Considered a folk hero, Weitz never changed. A confident individual, he became one of the strongmen and an acclaimed leader in the Air America helicopter program.



Looking south at the Wattay Airfield control tower and rudimentary airport complex outside Vientiane, Laos, during the early period. The French-built tower stands next to a Quonset type hangar, adjoining shed, and buildings.
EW Knight Collection.

Couriers landed on PSP away from the larger planes and taxied to the parking area. A twin Beech, owned by a French criminal, and conducting intermittent flights, sat on the ramp. Lynne referred to the operation as "Air Opium."¹⁸

DRUGS

During the 1950s, Thai leaders became increasingly concerned about world opinion relating to the country's uncontrolled and open use of the illegal opium narcotic. Thereafter, the Royal Thai Government passed a comprehensive law overtly banning the production and sale of the drug in 1959, and the opium trade, a long-time problem in Southeast Asia, moved underground and continued to flourish under the aegis of international criminals.

Corsican criminal, Paul Louis Levet, a former gold smuggler, was a major supplier to the European heroin market. Levet normally conducted business between Saigon and Marseille, but in 1955, switching to more easily accessible opium, he relocated to Bangkok to form a front company, Pacific Industrial. In order to expedite movement of the product from the Golden Triangle to ports in Thailand, Cambodia, and South Vietnam, Levet employed an airline managed by fellow Corsican, Roger Zoile. Zoile was one of three major employees in Air Laos Commerciale, an operation also known by locals as "Air Opium." Others involved were Gerard Labenski and Rene Enjabal, a black man of Algerian ancestry. The entire operation was overseen from Saigon by another Corsican named Bonaventure Francisci.

The operation unraveled in the fall of 1962 when Enjabal, a former French air force officer, fell asleep while returning from a drop into the Gulf of Siam via Vientiane and Cambodia, and drifted into Thai airspace. Forced to land by Royal Thai Air Force jets, he was arrested and accused of spying. Pleading to a lesser charge, one that did not include execution by firing squad, he confessed that he had been smuggling opium. After a short stint in prison, Rene returned to Laos, but negative international publicity resulted in failure of his airline. Levet's comeuppance occurred less than a year later, when he and an accomplice were apprehended at Don Muang Airport in possession of eighteen kilos of Burmese opium.

Following elimination of the Corsican band, with the enormous amount of money involved, the Golden Triangle opium trade continued operations. Controlled by former Chinese

¹⁸ Burt Palmer Emails, 03/18/04, 03/31/04, 05/15/04.

KMT troops living in proximity to and patrolling the borders, the KMT acted as a de facto customs agency to finance their lucrative operations. In Laos, greedy, high ranking military leaders continued sponsoring the trade by authorizing RIAF planes to transport the product from the northwest regions.¹⁹

When Palmer first returned to the Udon scene, he noted a few changes along the route to the Air America facility from town. In contrast to before he left for Luang Prabang, Thai guards now stood duty at the gate. Many bars, raised on stilts, adorned rice fields directly across the street from the junction of the airfield access road entrance and the airport road.²⁰

On the tenth, "Old Timer" Charlie Bade arranged for Udon-based Marines to attend the yearly Vientiane Marine Corps Anniversary Ball, one arranged by Marine Corps Embassy guards. An H-34 pilot shuttled the men, many of them already well lubricated, to Vientiane. As the party progressed and Marines did what Marines in true tradition do best, U.S. Embassy round-eye females recoiled in horror. Non-commissioned officers, privates, and Private First-Class types proceeded to quietly pass out. When Lee Despeaux fainted, Palmer and other playful gyrenes placed the man on the hors d'oeuvres table, crossed his arms, and deposited black olives on his closed eyelids. Before succumbing to drink, Palmer spied Sam Jordon, a tall,

¹⁹ Mac Thompson Email, From the *Pattaya Mail Newspaper*, Volume 10 no 7, 15-21 February 2002, *A Slice of Thai History: The Opium Trade*, Part Seven 1959-1966.

Author Note: Accusations of Air America pilots hauling drugs on Company aircraft became an issue raised by a few muckraking authors in later years. This subject was thoroughly investigated by aviation writer, Professor Bill Leary, who found no merit in the claims. Although bundles, carried by passengers or loaded on our planes or helicopters, might have occasionally contained opium, they were never inspected. We did not have time or personnel to perform such inspections. The poppy derivative was abundantly grown in the country by the hill tribes to obtain cash for barter. Over a twelve-year period, the Author never saw evidence of any illicit drugs on the aircraft he flew. Still, there remains an undeserved cloud over our organization, overshadowing the well-deserved appreciation for years of excellent service performed at great hazard to the participants.

²⁰ Burt Palmer Interview, 05/19/04.

courtly pilot, making time with a female British subject. Former Udorn Marines never again received an invitation to attend the Ball. ²¹

GLUTTING PACKS IT IN

Nineteen November marked Andy Glutting's next to last helicopter flight as an Air America Captain. In his short, but muddied experience with the Company, like Jay Erickson, he achieved the dubious honor of being one of the few employees to incur a wound from hostile action in 1961.

Following several inglorious and stressful nights in the weeds around Pha Khao during August, he worked around the Paksane (V-35) area four days with fellow Navy pilot Jim Alkire, and then spent five additional days with Fred Sass at Pakse. Having satisfied regional area familiarization requirements, Glutting was upgraded to Captain by Abadie on the 25th. After ten solo flights in early September, he volunteered for a permanent assignment at Luang Prabang to satisfy a void created by Jim Coble's departure, and to contribute to the expanding operations at Nam Tha (V-100) and in the Beng Valley. When not on R&R, he briefly shared the load as station lead pilot, ensuring proper assignment of the three helicopters and crews.

Loaded for a 1674 contractual supply mission to a Royal Lao Army outpost on the 18th, Glutting flew Hotel Mike north-northeast with Flight Mechanic "Butch" Butcher along the Nam Ou, a sizable Mekong River tributary. Lingering monsoon conditions forced him to cruise at 300 feet to remain underneath the solid 500-foot overcast. After thirty minutes flight over unfamiliar territory, he suddenly and unexpectedly heard a rapid burst of automatic weapons fire from the left riverbank. Slugs tore through the fuselage's thin skin. One breached the floor between his feet, entering the rear portion of the instrument console, severing the Pitot tube flex line, and rendering the airspeed indicator inoperative. A second projectile sounding "like a hard slap" struck his hollow seat pan. Exiting the right side, shards of metal burst upward, superficially scratching his right cheek. At the same time, passenger Sokolski received a slight wound to his shoulder. After announcing his plight over the intercom, Butcher, probably concerned that his pilot might lose consciousness, instantly

²¹ Burt Palmer Email, 04/11/04.

sprang into the cockpit via the copilot's side. Like most other seasoned Flight Mechanics, encouraged by pilots over the course of his career, the big man had learned how to maintain the H-34 in straight and level cruise flight. Encouraged by pilots, some talented Flight Mechanics were even able to manage a rolling landing on a runway. The challenging and more difficult hovering process remained another matter.

Simultaneously diving and pulling pitch to increase speed and vacate the danger area, Glutting continued on a northerly direction along the river, as firing continued unabated from the "duck hunters" below. Unwilling to decelerate and reverse course, and risk exposure while running the same gauntlet down the narrow river valley, he chose the least hazardous option, that of punching through the overcast, using the remaining instruments. After breaking out on top at 1,500 feet, he turned 180 degrees to the south and sought refuge on a friendly mountaintop where he had Butcher check the helicopter's status. Finding no critical battle damage, he impatiently waited for the clouds to dissipate. After several nervous hours on the rough pad, the cloud cover lifted sufficiently to launch, and allow his return to Luang Prabang.

In the evening before supper, he discovered that ground fire from the identical area had caused Bob Hitchman to abort the same supply mission the previous day. Oddly, the apparently unconcerned Hitchman had neglected to inform either the Customer or his fellow pilots of the enemy's presence. Glutting considered the omission possibly related to a Navy-Marine rivalry.

That night, Glutting, shaken to the core by his second hairy experience, resolved to terminate his Air America flying. Not relishing any future excitement, he returned Hotel Lima to Udorn the following day, and promptly resigned from the Company. ²²

As pilots terminated their employment, Washington hired replacements. In a 23 November memorandum to Taipei, CJ Abadie informed Rousselot that Glutting was out and leaving, Charlie Bade was thinking about leaving, and he was unsure about Tom Moher's plans.

²² Bill Leary 1961 Notes.
Andy Glutting Phone Calls, 12/5/92, 1/11/93.
Andy Glutting Email, 6/4/03.
Andy Glutting Letters, 6/6/03.
Andy Glutting August 1961 Flight Time Record.
CIA, Operational Casualties: Southeast Asia, 12/01/62.

Following MABS-16 departure from the Udorn scene, and his subsequent rotation to Okinawa in October, Lieutenant Wayne Knight (DOH 11/21/61) spent a month awaiting release from his military obligation. ¹ Jim Glerum interviewed Knight while he processed into the Air America system at Taipei headquarters. Glerum, the VPO's assistant and a former Naval officer, provided interested Agency types with eyes and ears into the Air America operation. He also coordinated many clandestine "Black Missions" to various places from the area. During a pleasant interview and indoctrination, Knight formed a positive opinion of the man. He considered Glerum a true gentleman, and the meeting fostered a long-lasting, pleasant relationship. Absent from headquarters during another monthly visit to Southeast Asia stations, Bob Rousselot did not interview Knight at this time. However, he had previously conducted lengthy conversations with him more than once while he served with MABS in Udorn. ²

Knight traveled with fixed wing pilot George Poske to Bangkok, where they shared a room in the upscale Erawan Hotel. Regional Chief Pilot Fred Walker knew Poske well, and contributed to Knight's sleep deprivation while the two men sat up all night reliving the old days. The following day, Walker drove the men in a Company plane to Vientiane, where Knight obtained a helicopter ride south to Udorn.

Once established in Udorn, Knight noticed few changes in the bricks and mortar infrastructure. Most traces of MABS had vanished, but the largely unused, more solidly built Air America offices were located in the same location. The still functioning AB-1 office displayed a large Lao map on a wall. A small recreation hall-shopping center appeared to be the only recent addition to the area. Knight enjoyed considerably more freedom as a civilian, and, best of all, he did not have to deal with Colonel Johnson's absurd daily outbursts. He noted that he numbered eleven on the permanent helicopter line pilot seniority list. Those currently assigned to the base included: CPH, C.J. Abadie (not listed as a line pilot), his assistant Jim Coble, line Captains Barry Cox, George "Pinky" Eaton, Dan Gardner, Bob Hitchman, Sam Jordon, Tom Moher, Billy Pearson, Bud Walcott, and Charlie Weitz. Moreover, he

¹ I first met Wayne Knight at the Futema, Okinawa "O" Club while he was preparing to transition to Air America.

² EW Knight Emails, 05/10/00, 05/29/00. Jim Glerum later worked with AB-1 in Udorn.

was apprised that additional personnel would shortly arrive at the base.

When Knight arrived in Udorn, nightly bar talk still centered on a serious incident and infraction of Company regulations involving Captains J.J. McCauley and Tom Moher. Currently in Bangkok, suspended from flying, the two men awaited the VPO's final judgment.³

MOHER AND MCCAULEY GO ROGUE

Earlier in the month, CJ Abadie went to Bangkok for much-deserved time off. As customary, he left JJ McCauley in charge of the Udorn operation. In addition to other minor duties, this task normally entailed producing and distributing a daily flight schedule. Earlier in the week, McCauley had applied for home leave, hoping to spend Christmas in the States with his family. On Saturday 4 November, upon entering the operations office, McCauley discovered a message from Taipei denying his leave request. Disgusted and angry with what he considered an uncaring system, he countered the rejection by forwarding his resignation. Highly agitated, he was primed and more than ready for extensive relaxation.

That day, Tom Moher, planned a trip to Bangkok for monthly scheduled time off with his wife Kathy. While awaiting the afternoon bus, Moher invited McCauley and new hire Salvatore "Bud" Walcott to his house to enjoy a few beers and convivial conversation. The younger men considered Walcott, the sole civilian in the helicopter group, ancient at age forty-five. Deemed quite a character, Walcott alleged that he had worked as the Commander in Chief of the Afghanistan Air Force. He also claimed to possess an expert magician's license, and was considered so talented that he once appeared on Ed Sullivan's television show. While the friends quaffed beers and swapped jokes, Walcott amused them by performing numerous card and rope tricks. Like the famous entertainer Ehrich Weiss, also known by his stage name of Houdini, despite several attempts, no one seemed capable of tying him securely for any prolonged period. Then finally, to the delight of all present, he hypnotized each person in turn.

Time passed rapidly. Late in the afternoon, Moher finally realized that the Bangkok bus had surged south past the house long before. Faced with the dilemma of transportation to Bangkok, he boozily proposed that McCauley fly Kathy and him down in a Company H-34. The

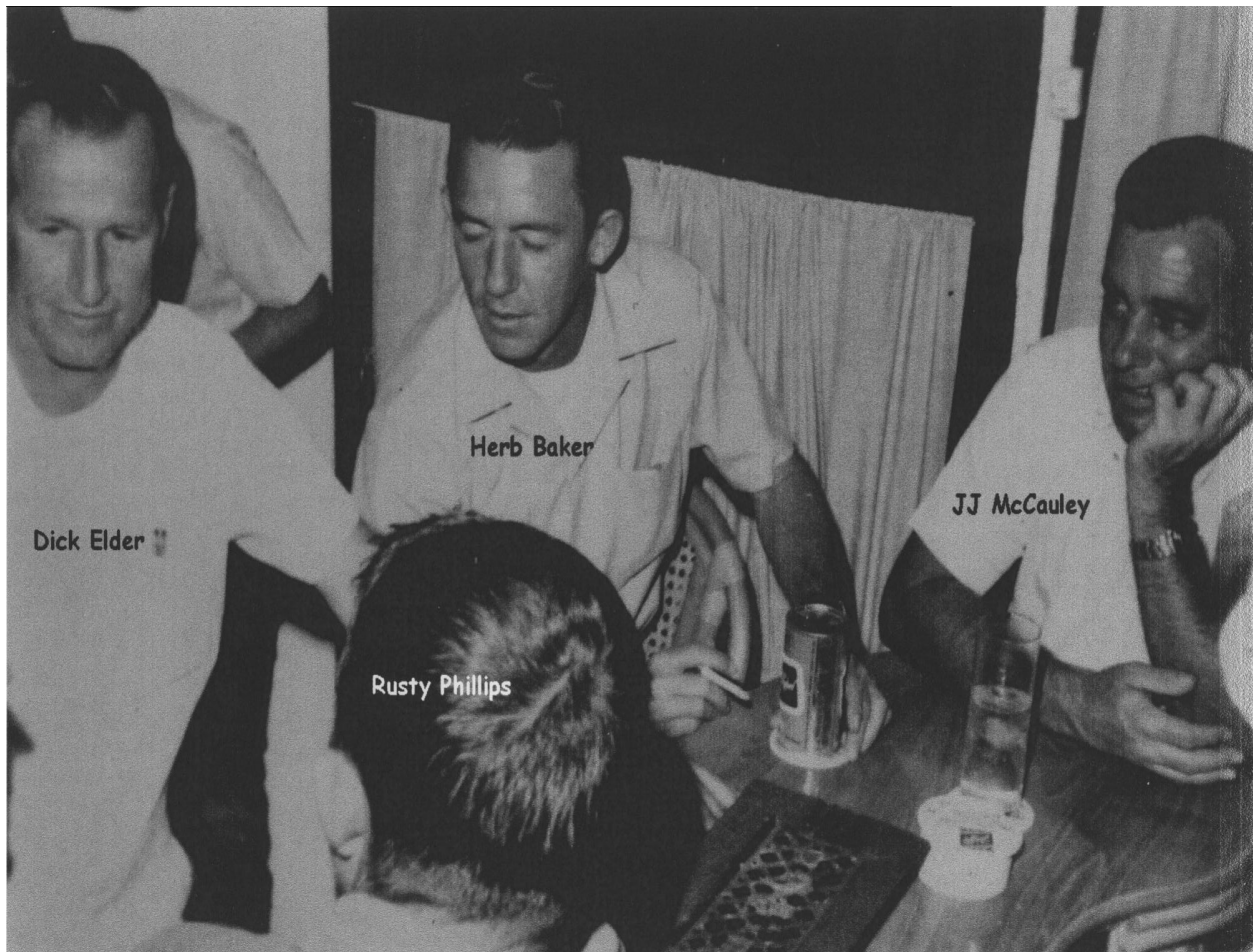
³ EW Knight Letter, 07/27/91.
EW Knight Emails, 05/10/00, 05/29/00, 02/23/01.

suggestion seemed both logical and sensible, so the sodden group decamped from the house for the flight line. Selecting a latest series helicopter, without hesitation, they struggled into the cockpit. Somehow, they managed to fire up the engine, engage the rotors, and began taxiing slowly toward the runway.

Maintenance Chief Jack Forney was in the line shack that afternoon. Checking the flight schedule, he saw no aircraft scheduled to leave the facility that late, so the dust clouds trailing the aircraft aroused his suspicion. Racing ahead of the helicopter in his line Jeep, the tall, imposing Forney blocked the helicopter's progress, frantically waving for the crew to stop. Then, scaling the fuselage on the pilot's side, and using his olfactory senses, he quickly assessed the situation, reached into the cockpit, and flipped off the magneto switch. That shut the engine down, thwarted a projected drunken trip, and quite possibly averted a major disaster. Their folly exposed, and quite possibly more than a little relieved at the discovery, the two men humbly offered no resistance.

When Abadie returned the following day and inquired about the incident, McCauley looked sheepishly at his boss and offered, *"I'm sorry partner, I messed up."*

Despite the involvement of two senior and well-respected men, local management could not overlook such a gross breach of Company discipline and policy, nor allow the act to go unpunished. Therefore, Abadie bucked word of the incident to the top echelon. Taipei management, and VPFO Rousselot, allowed the two pilots to remain in limbo in Bangkok for about a month, while investigating the case and deciding an appropriate course of action. Citing a weak defense to justify his part in the theft, Moher unbelievably claimed to have still been under the effects of hypnosis, although most of his peers alleged that a great number of beers probably influenced Moher's choice more than Walcott's hypnosis. McCauley's case proved a little more difficult, for as acting Chief Pilot, Taipei management considered him responsible, and the prime instigator. Moreover, McCauley had also previously incurred some black marks with the VPFO. Finally, to set an example and discourage future incidents, the VPO offered the transgressors the option of a two-month suspension without pay, reduction to First Officer status, or termination. Moher accepted the former. McCauley, still miffed at



Early Air America UH-34D Captains. Left to right Captains Dick Elder, Herb Baker, and J.J. McCauley. Fixed wing Captain "Rusty" Phillips in foreground.

Wayne Knight Collection.

management's refusal to grant him Christmas leave, opted for termination. ⁴

At the time that Knight arrived in Udorn, Customers conducted generalized Military Region two briefings at Wattay Airport. Additionally, just west of the old Air America tents at Udorn, hanging on the AB-1 office wall, a large Lao situation map depicted the most current information. Customers also conducted Military Region Two field briefings at Pha Khao. When working the Military Region Three areas from Thakhet or Savannakhet, the local Customer handled situational briefings. They employed the same procedure at Pakse in Military Region Four.

KNIGHT'S FEET WET

There being no designated instructor pilot (IP), or firm policy assigning a new hire to a competent pilot, area familiarizations flown with a "seasoned" pilot continued on a hit and miss basis. Knight considered himself quite fortunate to have previously flown with JJ McCauley. His first legal flight into Laos commenced on 26 November while flying on a day trip to Savannakhet with Dan Gardner and Flight Mechanic C.P. Wyatt. Soon after launching east, Knight realized that "Dangerous Dan" displayed very unusual characteristics for an aviator. Fifteen minutes into the flight, after establishing a cruise altitude, heading, and level flight trim, Gardner informed Knight that he could monitor the instruments and maintain the current heading if he wished, for he planned to engage in a short nap. Without consulting a map, he indicated that he had just placed the aircraft on a straight-line course for Savannakhet. He mentioned that the ASE worked fine, and if Knight spotted a large river before he awakened, to shake him. The declaration stunned Wayne. He had never slept while flying, nor had anyone else with whom he ever shared a cockpit. After about an hour flight over flat rice paddies, just before reaching the Mekong, Gardner awoke. The absence of a sprawling river town ahead confused and concerned him. Unsure of which direction to fly next,

⁴ JJ McCauley Letter, 01/15/91.

J.J. later admitted to the Author that his choice to leave Air America represented the worst decision of his life.

Jack Forney statement, 02/05/99.

EW Knight Emails, 05/21/00, 05/24/00.

he turned north. Then, after some discussion with Knight, he flew both north and south a few times while attempting to establish a position. Eventually they discovered that a combination of an incorrect heading and a strong right crosswind had caused the ship to drift 30 miles north of the proposed track. At that point, Knight realized that his carefree Captain was ignorant of a basic flight principal--that of cross wind error correction. As a result, Gardner impressed neither Knight nor Wyatt with his piloting skills.

Marking his first RON in Laos, the following morning Knight returned to Savannakhet with Gardner and Flight Mechanic Louie Jones. Gardner allowed Knight to perform most of the flying from the left seat. After supper, Gardner ushered the "newbie" to a house of ill repute. The establishment featured a Thai girl designated "The Tiger" as the star performer. Suspecting that he was being set up as the night's target, Knight resisted partaking of the flesh, and another individual escorted Tiger into a crib. Like most building interiors, the rooms were constructed with high ceilings and three-quarter walls open at the top to promote maximum air circulation. By utilizing a chair, one could easily peer over the wall into a room. Hence, shortly after the unsuspecting guy squired Tiger into the room, six voyeurs stood on chairs peering into the love nest. ^{5 6}

MILITARY REGION-1

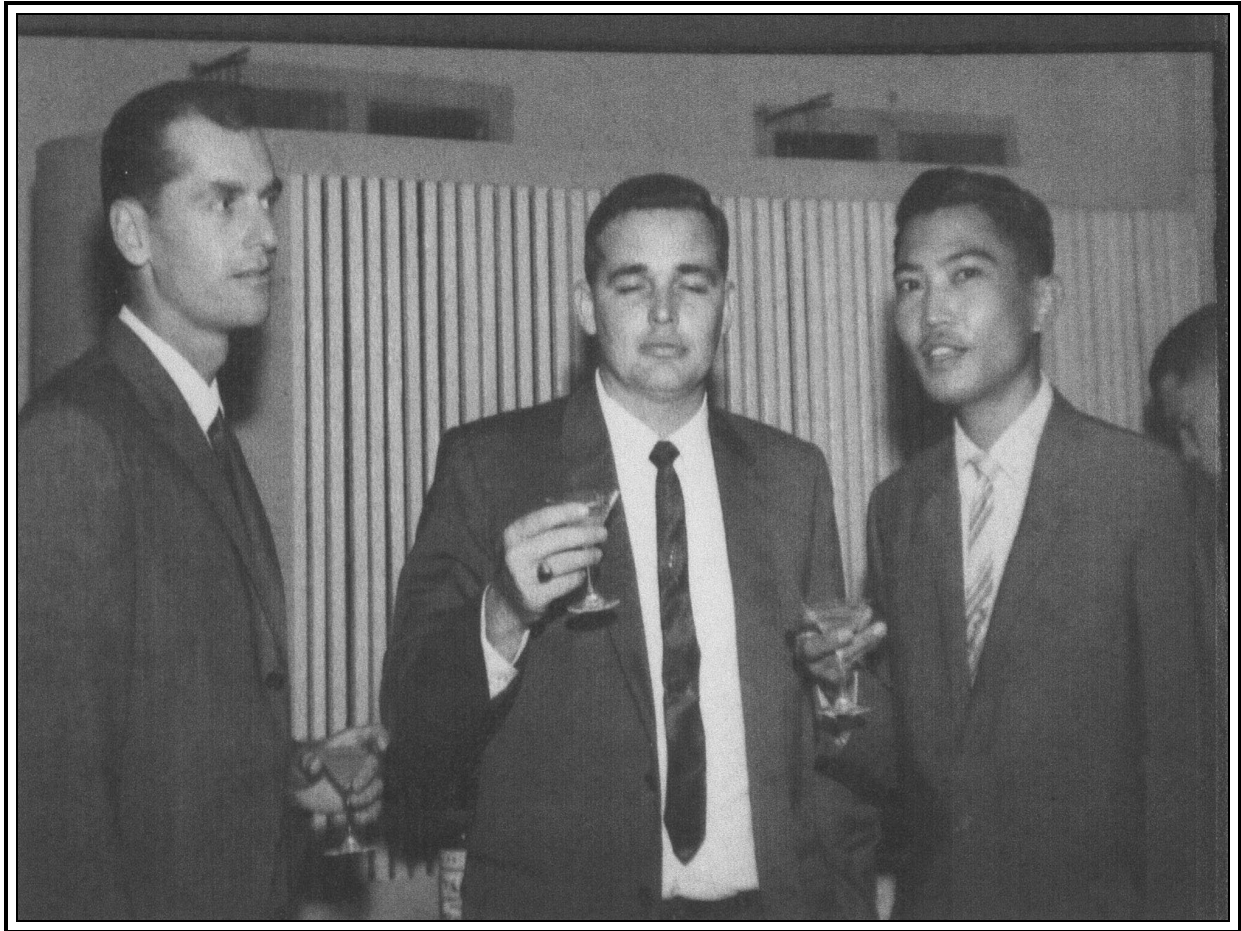
During early November, General Phoumi ordered a countrywide increase in military activities. In Military Region One, operations would concentrate on expanding control around LP and probes toward the Moung Sai area. ⁷

With the annual dry season well underway, Royal Lao Government efforts to recapture territory in northwestern Laos escalated toward the end of November. Vientiane staff ordered one FAR infantry battalion based at Nam Tha to capture the crossroads town of Ban Na Mo twenty-miles to the east.

⁵ EW Knight Emails, 05/17/00, 05/29/00, 05/19/00, 06/01/00, 01/07/02.

⁶ Years later, an article appeared in the *Bangkok Post* concerning a U.S. Army Major who died of a heart attack in a local hotel. The paper reported no suspicious circumstances, but the girl in the room was identified as "The Tiger."

⁷ Joint Chiefs of Staff, 266.



Air America Captains "Dangerous" Dan Gardner, Tom Moher, and C.J. Abadie's Thai clerk, Supol attending Wayne Knight and Lai's wedding reception at a Bangkok hotel.

Knight Collection.

Without the benefit of an overall supreme field commander, the movement optimistically envisioned mounting a generalized double envelopment against the enemy stronghold and supply depot at Moung Sai. One arm would thrust east from Nam Tha, and the other pincer movement north from Moung Houn in the lower Beng Valley. Initial objectives would establish forward positions close to the target, and then further drives would optimistically retake the town by the end of December. After marching tentatively for three days and sustaining only one setback, the Nam Tha unit, stiffened by Special Forces WSMTT-2, successfully achieved the first phase of the operation by seizing its objective on 2 December.^{8 9}

CONTINUING CHECKOUT

Following a day flight with George "Pinky" Eaton to the Military Region Two Vang Vieng area, Knight's accelerated checkout continued at Luang Prabang with Captain John Fonburg and Flight Mechanic John Wilson in Hotel Echo.

Knight knew Fonburg very well from Marine Corps days, where Fonburg stories abounded and flourished. When Knight joined the squadron in 1960, HMR-163 was just forming. Only Lieutenant Colonel Smith and the administration officer were onboard. On Okinawa, the commanding officer later appointed Knight, a very green Second Lieutenant Adjutant, with a desk alongside Fonburg, who, as a senior captain, did not much consider privileges of rank. At the time, no helicopters had arrived to fly, so with an excess of free time Knight watched fascinated as Fonburg spent hours each day planning stock market strategies. Later, he gave Knight an assortment of primary instruction in the HUS-1, and, much to Knight's surprise and

⁸ Shelby Stanton, 27.
Ouane Sannikone, 103.

⁹ Generally, confronted with superior forces, after initial resistance smaller enemy units withdrew from the field.

delight, Fonburg proved highly proficient in the machine.

Fonburg was generally unpopular with other men in the squadron until he bought an old Oldsmobile, while the others drove motorcycles. One evening Knight and four mates offered to guarantee Fonburg the tender services of a woman if he would use his car for pub-crawling in the Ryukan "Ville." They stopped at several bars, ending up at a favorite haunt near Kadena AFB's back gate. They procured a girl for big John and he spent the remainder of the evening more mauling than dancing with her. Sporting an enormous erection, he whispered in Knight's ear, "Say, do you have any condoms?" Knight answered in the negative, but quickly asked around and discovered that Harry Gast possessed a few.

Intending to create a scene, Gast rose, threw several latex prophylactics onto John's table, and shouted, "Hey John, are these enough?" That upset the girl, who promptly ran away. Characteristically, Fonburg did not say much, but the incident made him supremely unhappy.

On another occasion Asahi Beer representatives appeared at the Sukiran Club to dispense promotional items consisting of mostly extra-extra-large T-shirts with Asahi bottles emblazoned on them. Besides being huge and especially ugly, the shirts sagged in all the wrong places. Most of the recipients considered the shirts awful and refused to wear them. Fonburg was the exception. When his mates observed him wearing the advertisement, many offered him theirs. Never turning down a free item, he accepted the offers and soon amassed about fifty beer shirts. During the rest of their time on Okinawa, he never wore any other garment above his waist, and soon the local bar girls began referring to him as "Asahi Beer San."¹⁰

While flying together, Fonburg related a humorous story to Knight about hauling refugees while working out of Luang Prabang. During panic situations in which the enemy appeared likely to overrun a village or area, pilots considered it an established norm and some source of pride to haul as many friendlies out of harm's way as possible. During one such situation, Fonburg struggled into the cockpit and asked his Filipino Flight Mechanic how many souls were onboard (SOB). The mechanic, who spoke and comprehended English poorly, indicated that he could not tell exactly, but estimated eight. Although Fonburg did not really believe this number, he was used to carrying large loads, and said he would attempt to raise the machine off the ground. However, when he increased the collective pitch to check

¹⁰ John Fonburg Phone Conversations, 6/1/91, 11/16/91.

hover power, the nose pivoted five feet skyward while the tail remained on the ground. Muttering, "A-ha. *Something is wrong here,*" he slammed the aircraft back on the ground. Shaken and quite curious, he secured the aircraft, hastily climbed down from the cockpit (always a monumental feat, for the very large man), and peered into the passenger compartment. What he witnessed shocked him, for the cabin was packed with humanity. He counted twenty people with two rows of men, women, children, and babies sitting between each other's legs on both sides of the fuselage. Then he glanced aft toward the electronics compartment that was normally an empty space except for essential radio components because of critical center of gravity (CG) limitations. To his horror, black clad people stuffed the tail cone cavity as far back as he could see. With the center of gravity shifted so far out to the rear, no wonder the helicopter almost flipped over.

Unfortunately, no interpreters or handlers were present to help translate or monitor the situation, so for two hours, the crew worked feverishly, ejecting enough people to create a manageable load. This was extremely difficult, for once onboard a helicopter, frightened people always believed they were saved and generally refused to disembark. Furthermore, who knew when another H-34 would arrive? Frustrated, Fonburg and the Flight Mechanic initially employed relatively innocuous methods to remove them by pounding on the sides of the fuselage and spraying disinfectant. Then, when all else failed, they ejected them bodily. Finally, they departed the site with fifteen adults.

On 30 November, the crew worked in the Nam Tha-Moung Sing area. As FAR units were still consolidating recent gains, they flew only two hours and twenty-five minutes hours. Except for minor action in the northeast hills, which required T-6 bombing runs, nothing else noteworthy seemed to be occurring. During a lull in T-6 strike activity, a high-ranking Lao officer walked around a parked plane congratulating the pilots on their good work. For some reason, he placed a hand on a .50 caliber machine gun barrel and discovered it cold. Incensed at what he perceived a serious dereliction of duty, he grabbed the pilot by the scruff of the neck and booted him firmly in the rear end.

Day two of the RON continued equally slow, with Fonburg highly displeased over the low flight time. However, familiar with Knight's HUS-1 proficiency from numerous flights together in HMR-163, during additional T-6 strikes he permitted Knight to conduct all the flying. Knight believed Fonburg would have allowed him to fly the machine solo had he not been concerned about management recrimination should something out of the ordinary happen.

The following day, the commanding officer arranged a luncheon party at Moung Sing to celebrate the Ban Nam Mo victory. He curtailed all flight operations and obliged the unhappy pilots to join in the festivities. Forty Lao officers, the White Star team, and the Air America crew sat down at a long table. At these events, hospitality always reigned supreme with booze flowing abundantly. Enlisted men, conscripted as waiters, provided each diner with a water glass filled to the brim with warm, unadulterated Johnny Walker Black Label scotch. After every sip, six FAL troopers, acting as waiters advantageously positioned around the table, rushed forward with an open bottle to top off the glass. While consuming soup, Knight struggled to retain his composure and not toss his cookies after spooning a tiny bird's head from the revolting mixture. According to Lao custom, between each new dish senior Lao Army officers spouted long, unintelligible speeches. As the meal progressed, each succeeding orator obviously became more inebriated and verbose. Standing and holding a glass of whiskey, an obligatory toast signaled the end of each speech. During the numerous courses of food and speeches, Knight attempted to nurse his potent drink, but with all the free scotch he could possibly imbibe, Fonburg appeared to be in "hog heaven." After quaffing several glasses, he became a completely wiped-out sodden mess. Knight wondered how his partner managed to stumble to his quarters.

The following day they returned to the royal capital.

At this time, Fonburg was counting down his final days as a temporary Air America pilot. One of the last members remaining from the March pilot influx, by 19 December, he returned to military ranks and did not return to Udorn and Air America until June 1965. Before leaving Bangkok, he met Joe Strange again, the same assumed spook who had recruited and accompanied the Marine pilots from the USS *Bennington* to Don Muang Airport.

Fonburg's departure, and others in December, marked the completion of a sizable and ambitious USG experiment to legally circumvent foreign military intervention in a hairy situation, and to foster an illusion of aid and preservation of Lao neutrality to the world, and particularly to the American public. For the first time in history, the Department of Defense had hurriedly recruited active duty military helicopter pilots and crew chiefs, hurriedly transformed them into "civilians" with a stroke of a pen, and utilized the men as a paramilitary force in what was considered a low intensity combat situation. The nine-month experiment proved bittersweet and costly. Although generally successful in helping to thwart possible communist advances toward major Lao river towns, the operation was not without

casualties. Several pilots had crashed and abandoned H-34s. Furthermore, two pilots had lost their lives at Padong, at least two were wounded, and the Pathet Lao had incarcerated two other crewmembers.

Knight's abbreviated checkout period continued with senior pilot Tom Moher and Flight Mechanic Conrad Daigle at Savannakhet in Military Region Three. Soon after McCauley's departure, primarily because of an operational need, Rousselot shortened Moher's time in purgatory, imposed a small fine, and returned the wayward pilot to flight status.

Knight flew with Moher for several days. During that period Knight noted that Moher would not fly above 1,000 feet. He thought this reluctance unusual but, still a First Officer, kept quiet. It was only later, when Moher found reasons to abort missions requiring higher altitudes, that Knight realized Moher's abnormal fear of altitude. Apparently, this stemmed from the loss of a close friend whose aircraft caught fire at altitude and burned to a cinder before reaching the ground. This phobia continued to plague him throughout his Air America career, and quite possibly contributed to his later demise.

Area familiarization continued in Military Region Four with recently elevated Captain Billy Pearson and crewmember Gene Lloyd. They spent the night in the Pakse Blue House, where Knight noted that the owner proffered light, fruity tasting "French" Burgundy Beaujolais wine in twelve-ounce steel cans. Since no self-respecting Frenchman would ever store wine in a metal container, Algerian nationals manufactured and canned the product. The containers were the exact shape and appearance as beer cans. Therefore, at the end of a long, dehydrating day, naive individuals who tossed down a few Beaujolais, attempting to match the beer guzzlers drink for drink, were quite surprised by the effects and severe hangovers.

Next, Knight journeyed to Paksane to work the forested flatlands with Tom Moher and Carl Gable. Completing countrywide familiarizations on 8 December, he again rode with Moher and Delaurentis at Pha Khao.

While upgrading to Captain with Captain Abadie, Knight's only local Udorn flight followed on the ninth, and in a relatively short time, Abadie released the newest helicopter

pilot as a vetted line Captain.^{11 12}

MANAGEMENT

The long-term consequences of overwhelming managerial duties on Abadie's health and job performance weighed heavily on Vice President of Operations Bob Rousselot's mind. Additionally, he continued to profess interest in hiring and assigning a competent Operations Manager to Udon. He believed this addition to the management team would place him *"in a better position to more fully and properly concentrate on the management, direction and participation in the flight crew training."*

Following an early December fact-finding visit to the Udon facility, Bob Rousselot reiterated his desire to assign an experienced Operations Manager to relieve Abadie of his dual positions. Then he envisioned his Chief Pilot Helicopters in a position to conduct and supervise training anywhere. He also desired more Customer liaison at Vientiane, Luang Prabang, Pha Khao, and other regional sites where Customers resided. He also wanted Abadie to periodically travel to the Taipei office, where the two could converse, and he could learn the working mechanisms and organizational structures of the Company. In this way, he hoped to develop his protégé into one of the *"key supervisory and management staff [in the organization]."*

In closing, the 5 December memorandum acknowledged Abadie's long hours on the job and praised the good work he performed amid *"trying and difficult circumstances."*¹³

¹¹ EW Knight Letter, 07/27/91.

EW Knight Emails, 05/13/00, 05/19/00, 05/24/00, 07/13/00, 01/03/02, 01/07/02/, 01/09/02, 05/03/02, 02/07/02, 06/25/03; 08/03/03.

¹² During the 1961-62 period Wayne flew with Flight Mechanics Carl Gable, Gene Lloyd, John Wilson, Ron Daigle, Bob DeLaurentis, John Timmons, "Nookie" Hagins, CP Wayatt, Bill Ellingsworth, Steinmetz, Christie, Joe Marlin, Bill Wilmot, Pete Mayor, John Elben, Moon Centeno, Stan Wilson, "Bulldog" Butcher, Ben Naval, "Blacky" Mondello, Johnny Sibal, and Reyes.

¹³ Bob Rousselot Notes to the CPH.

Located on high ground east of Pakse in southern Laos, one of three sizeable and distinct plateaus in Laos, the spacious Bolovens Plateau jutted out of the lowlands. Rising to an average height of 3,500 feet, the expansive area formed a southern finger of an ancient lava extrusion emanating from the eastern Annamite Cordillera that delineated an uncharted border between Laos and Vietnam. The abundantly fertile region supported brush, tall grass flowing over rolling hills, numerous streams, and varied animal species. Partially shielded from potential adversaries by inhospitable terrain, and presenting difficult mobility, primitive Lao-Theung (Kha) Loven, Nha Huen Sovei, and Sou tribal groups sparsely populated the remote area. During previous years, within eastern Military Region Three and Saravane Provinces, enterprising Pathet Lao politicians had selectively groomed Lao Theung people for election to the National Assembly. Although this caused more than the usual Lao corruption problems for White Star personnel in working with some tribes, it proved less a problem with the Bolovens Kha clans.¹

With only bare bones volunteer defense forces remaining in the Pakse region to fend off enemy movement after Phoumi relocated several FAR units to northern areas, a requirement for additional troops was paramount. Only indigenous Kha tribesmen, left on the Bolovens Plateau and not corrupted by enemy ideology and promises, seemed likely candidates.

During October, Special Forces Colonel Bull Simons returned from Fort Bragg, North Carolina, to reassume command of White Star personnel and commence his third Lao tour.

Disregarding the RLA General Staff and Royal Lao Government's traditional apathy and bias regarding arming and employing tribal forces to help stem communist advances in Laos, Simons, fortified by previous White Star intelligence reports, realized the anti-Pathet Lao Stone Age Kha potential. Resourceful survivors throughout the years, they were familiar with the southern reaches of the country. If properly trained, those in the Plateau and Saravane

¹ Author Note: Like Meo people to whom French expatriates assigned the pejorative nomenclature Meo during the colonial period, many rural Lao clans were held in equal contempt by the river plain population. Countrywide they were generically referred to as Kha, or savage. Some also used a less innocuous name, Lao Theung to describe the tribes. Much later, Meo tribes claimed their hereditary name, Hmoung, but the term never surfaced until the 1970s and was never exclusively used by Westerners until USG departed Laos.

areas might prove instrumental in future intelligence gathering, and even interdiction of vulnerable enemy supply routes into South Vietnam. Against this scenario, and utilizing the successful joint agency-White Star-Meo training program as a template, Special Forces "A" teams, consistent with their training mission, and fortified with Agency assets (money, helicopters, and planes), quietly began to accelerate fledgling Kha training.

By early December, after RLA conventional forces partially cleared pockets of Pathet Lao tribal areas in the region, a White Star team established a small camp east of Ban Houei Kong on the Bolovens Plateau, and began seriously recruiting souls for a second Lao unconventional guerrilla warfare program. A pair of Agency-sponsored men, French civilian Jean Cadeaux and PEO/MAAG Roy Moffit (previously mentioned at Luang Prabang), both possessing years of expertise in tribal languages and culture, supplemented the Department of Defense's indigenous program. These men contacted tribal leaders and culled individuals judged ripe for recruiting.² Having fended off past enemy probes, the task proved easier than expected, for local tribes were already loosely organized. Using a French expression, they proudly called themselves "The Maquis." Promised USG aid for themselves and dependents, motivated tribals willingly cooperated with White Star personnel.

Disparate languages constituted a major obstacle. Although White Star employed Thai interpreters, few highlanders understood them as they conversed in Lao, or versions of Mon or Khmer. Consequently, French, which a few team members spoke haltingly, became an alternate source of communication. Despite initial language difficulties, instruction eventually proceeded slowly through a circuitous route of American to Thai, Thai to a tribal interpreter, who then relayed his rendition to the trainees. One could only imagine the ultimate result.

Special Forces specialist Sergeant Ernest Tabata entered Laos in October. Sent to the Bolovens during the dry season, he participated in Kha basic training. Starting with small arms weapons assembly and disassembly, first units advanced to minor unit tactics. Later, deployment and usage of heavy weapon--60mm mortars, 57mm recoilless rifles, and demolitions--

² Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 85-86.

were taught in preparation for installation of booby traps and ambushes. First trainees completing the program formed a civilian irregular defense guard (like Meo village ADC) and assumed hamlet protection units. As the program expanded, company sized components were broken down into platoon and squad elements.

Leaving Southeast Asia early because of serious medical issues, Tabata stated that during the first months of the Kha program, the new warriors incurred only minimal contact with the enemy and that this happened only on the outskirts of the training area.³

The Special Force unit assembled and began training the First one hundred-man Kha Company on 13 December.⁴ MAAG proudly twixed CINCPAC "*that White Star was organizing, equipping and training a Kha guerrilla unit for operations in the eastern Plateau des Bolovens.*" The drafter of the message optimistically opined that more guerrilla units could be formed and additional men possibly organized both north and east. Having little awareness of ethnic identity or nationality, despite a reputation as a peaceful people, many Kha on the Bolovens proved to be aggressive types, who earnestly cared about their homeland and culture.⁵ The following month, in a more specific follow up twix, MAAG confidentially estimated WSMITT teams could form a total of six ADC units on the Bolovens, and more to the north and east. Beside 300 Kha under training, the request sought approval to recruit and train 900 additional men for possible eastern trail interdiction, adding that "*a Kha force of 1,200 could have a significant impact upon Viet Cong lines of communication in eastern Laos.*" This plan was endorsed by CINCPAC Hawaii during February.⁶

In February, with yet another successful guerrilla program underway, the USOM Lao Country Team's focus centered on immediately beginning a Bolovens Plateau civic action self-help program to ensure Kha loyalty through "*economic development projects.*" Mirroring MAAG thinking, the Country Team believed that the Kha could possibly prevent North Vietnamese Army

³ Ernest Tabata Interview by Joe Fischer, USASOC Historian, Fort Bragg, North Carolina, 08/29/93.

⁴ Shelby Stanton, *The Green Berets At War*, 24.

⁵ JCS, 311.

⁶ Joint Chiefs of Staff, Chronological Summary of Significant Events Concerning the Laotian Crisis, Fifth Installment, 1 January 1962 to 30 April 1962, Historical Division, Joint Secretariat, 66.

infiltration through Laos into South Vietnam. ⁷

By early March, lack of CIA funding appeared to delay an enlarged Kha program. Reacting to perceived foot dragging, one undercover official called the program "*vital to recapturing the initiative in southern Laos and establishing armed assets to the east.*" He alluded to the fact that the program had achieved considerable success in restoring much of the Plateau to the government, or at least denying portions to the enemy. Opportunities for interdicting the enemy to the east could be lost without further introduction of weapons and money assets. ⁸ Within a few days, message traffic transmitted the approval to arm twelve one hundred-man Kha ADC units. WSMMT would utilize U.S. assets stored in Thailand for this purpose. ⁹

With assurances of the means to expand, the program kicked into high gear. Word of the first hundred-man unit's creation spread fast among indigenous villagers. Additional six-to twelve-man Special Forces teams entered the area to train Kha volunteers for aggressive operations. Within a few months, initial successes led to accelerated expansion, with two additional training camps added, one between road's end at Houie Kong (V-56) toward the Plateau's eastern rim, the other at Paksong (V-05) on the Route-23 road leading north to Saravane. Other training camps became operational to the north in Saravane Province. Supported with CIA resources, the Kha training program continued full bore until disbanded following the signing of the July 1962 Lao Geneva Accords. Because of sensitive RLG politics and lack of support by MAAG Lao for continued Kha training, the program never attained Colonel Simon's envisioned potential. ¹⁰

Nevertheless, by the program's termination toward the fall of 1962, during the program named Pincushion, ten White Star teams trained and armed twelve Auto Defense de Choc (ADC)

⁷ JCS, 117-118.

⁸ Joint Chiefs of Staff, 128-129.

⁹ JSC, 141, highly redacted.

¹⁰ As with Meo clans in Military Region Two, Lao government leaders were always concerned that any large indigenous military force might eventually attempt to carve out autonomous regions in the country.

companies, each containing several hundred troops throughout the region. ¹¹

In later years, when called upon again, the same men formed a nucleus for the then-sanctioned and highly effective Special Guerrilla Units, called SGU.

11 Shelby Stanton, 24.

Oudone Sannikone, 102.

JCS, 1 January-31 April 1962, 33-34.

John Prados, *The Blood Road* (New York: Wiley and Sons, 1999).

Malcolm Bird departed Air America in December with the last group of Temporary helicopter pilots. Leaving just after Jerry Buffington, John Fonburg, and a few Flight Mechanics, his exodus marked the final transition of helicopter pilots and crewmembers to a purely civilian organization. Previously offered permanent Company status, Bird wanted to remain with Air America, but experienced difficulty obtaining a work visa extension. A Border Patrol police major, also living at the Mapakdi Hotel, informed him that the primary cause of his problem most likely stemmed from the following incident: One morning, about ten o'clock, several Air America employees were enjoying a late breakfast in the Chinese-operated ground floor restaurant, when they heard the unmistakable report of a .45 caliber pistol from the upper floor. They discovered a Flight Mechanic, a confirmed social drinker who imbibed only when awake, was attempting in vain to dispatch a cockroach walking across the King's picture on the wall. In the process, the perpetrator drilled a neat hole in the monarch's portrait. Such defacing constituted supreme disrespect to the revered Thai King, and violated all the nation's customs and mores. Realizing that major trouble for the young man would quickly follow, Malcolm Bird packed the offender into Gunner Lane's Jeep and hustled him to the airfield. There he boarded a Bangkok bound C-47 and caught the first CAT flight out of Thailand. Hotel staff immediately replaced the King's picture, but word of the incident quickly spread throughout the community, and became a source of friction between local citizens and the American "Foreign Devils." ¹

Bird traveled to the States with former HMR-162 crew chiefs Bert Palmer, Ron Kimbler, John Michael, IW Mayes, and others. After first learning about the proposed rotation of personnel to the U.S., Palmer talked to "Doc" Lewis about being in one of the last groups to leave Thailand. Lewis was the go-to-guy for problems with pay, mail, or other problems Palmer occasionally consulted "Doc," who he learned had cut his teeth as a former Civil Air Transport mechanic, and then moved up the chain to a management position. Their rapport had formed a good relationship, and Palmer found himself one of the last Temporary Flight

¹ Malcomb Bird Emails, 06/24/02; 05/15/14.

Mechanics to depart the "Air America Detail."

During the trip to CONUS, Captain Stewart Dew, a senior Civil Air Transport pilot, flew the Convair 880-22M Bangkok-to-Taipei segment. By chance, Palmer and Dew both originated from Hamburg, Arkansas. Even more unlikely, Dew's British wife and Palmer's mother were good friends. Unaware of her son's Air America affiliation, only that he worked in Southeast Asia, Mrs. Palmer had previously advised her son about Dew's presence in Southeast Asia. Hoping to become acquainted, Palmer sent a note to the cockpit suggesting that they meet after the trip. As a result, Dew invited both Palmer and Kimbler to dinner. The next day, while continuing the checkout process at the Air America offices, a cursory medical examination revealed that Palmer's intestinal system contained numerous parasites, and he was advised to deworm after arriving in CONUS.

The group continued to Japan, where they boarded a commercial Northwest Orient flight to Anchorage, Alaska. The bored Marines, while arranging seating for a massive poker game, decided that passengers in the coach section looked uncomfortable. Therefore, while the stewardesses ate, they walked the length of the plane removing all the center armrests so passengers could recline. Eventually the stews noticed the armrests missing, but failed to locate them, for the playful boys had secreted them in the first-class storage compartment. After the girls complained about the horseplay, the Captain summoned Bird to the cockpit. There, he spent a pleasant two hours discussing Air America and the PIC's son who flew fixed wing aircraft for Air America. Since the Captain failed to help with the situation, the stewardesses eventually gave up attempting to find the missing items, abandoned the drink cart in the first-class aisle, and went to sleep.

The well-lubricated men arrived in Anchorage, Alaska, dressed in unsuitable lightweight clothing. As the location constituted the United States customs entry point, officials directed passengers to the appropriate line in an unheated Butler building. Checking only random bags, the inspector expedited people through the process until Bert Palmer stood in front of him. He ordered Palmer to open one of several nylon parachute sacks on the inspection table. With great flourish, Palmer unzipped the sack and threw back the flaps, exposing a .45 caliber, Model 1911 pistol, and a pair of loaded magazines. Even during the early 707 travel period, customs officials did not regard carrying weapons on international flights acceptable behavior. Bird,

who was standing directly behind Palmer, cringed, and envisioned himself as Palmer's cellmate, or, at the very least, standing tall in front of a superior officer while attempting to explain the infraction to important individuals at Headquarters Marine Corps. However, the silver-tongued Palmer presented a historic sob story about their efforts to aid poor undeveloped countries. Following the extraordinary spiel, the customs official never blinked or changed expression. He merely closed the bag flaps quickly, and advised Palmer that relocating the items several layers down in the bag would offer superior protection for his valuables. Then he wished them a pleasant day. ²

While in Washington, Bird enjoyed considerable time talking with Colonel Keith B. McKutcheon, Director of Marine Aviation at Headquarters Marine Corps (HQMC), and the author of the doctrine that ultimately became **the** vertical envelopment concept. During the course of the debriefing, McKutcheon asked Bird to critique current Marine Corps helicopter policy as it related to his recent Air America combat experience. Without compunction, Bird described to the rising officer what he truly and frankly believed to be very problematic. ³

Despite a possibility of termination from the Corps for his somewhat negative input on the subject, Bird offered for discussion the concept that low, swift H-34 flight would never prove feasible in high threat areas. Also, from his Lao experience, he considered service-trained pilots totally deficient in conducting high altitude operations and marginal weather navigation. Apparently, McKutcheon appreciated Bird's candor, for he encouraged Bird to remain on active duty. Malcolm took the advice, retiring in April 1975 as a senior major. ⁴

² Malcom Bird Emails, 06/24/02, 05/23/14.

Burt Palmer Emails, 03/11/04, 03/15/04, 03/16/04, 05/10/04, 05/24/04.

Palmer later volunteered for duty in South Vietnam, where he attained the rank of captain. He retired from the Marine Corps as a master gunnery sergeant.

³ McCutcheon advanced rapidly through the ranks. President Nixon appointed him Assistant Commandant of the Marine Corps in 1970, but because of ill health, he retired before assuming the position. After his retirement, Congress promoted him to a full general.

The "Contact Man" met the returning Flight Mechanics at the Washington airport. On the way to Fort Leslie J. McNair for debriefing, the man explained that a former Air America group returning in November had included Corporal I.W. Maze, who left on liberty and neglected to report for the debriefing. It took authorities three days to uncover the fun-loving guy in one of the numerous Washington gin mills. He cautioned his charges sternly that harsh penalties awaited similar behavior, and none should attempt to duplicate the corporal's example.

The enlisted men reacted to the debriefing in horror. The questions varied like: What did you think of the operation and maintenance? Not accepting a short, concise answer, the debriefer insisted on a detailed written opinion of each item listed. By the second day, guys clammed up, only mentioning what they considered most important. They discovered that the first group of pilots to rotate (the Dirty Six), in typical CYA fashion, had cited shoddy maintenance as a reason for leaving. Considering this a slap in the face to mechanics, who labored long and diligently to keep the aircraft flying, the men, particularly Palmer, took exception to the "Sixes'" reference to maintenance, duly noting this on the debrief.

The highlight of the debriefing, and what the men considered an ultimate honor, was a final stop in the process that took place in Colonel McKutcheon's office. They stood before a man of small stature, but each instantly recognized that the leader represented an individual of enormous presence. The colonel thanked the men for their efforts and dedication. He continued that, if possible, he would honor their choice of duty stations.

When released, Palmer flew to California to retrieve his automobile. He arrived in Tennessee on Christmas Eve. While serving at their new duty stations, most Flight Mechanics (again officially called crew chiefs) received an additional bonus, in the form of an air medal for exceptional airmanship, and a meritorious promotion to a higher pay grade. ⁵

⁴ Malcom Bird Emails, 06/24/02, 05/23/14. Malcolm was on the same advancement list for Lieutenant Colonel as Hal Clark. However, his wife was not keen on him remaining in the Corps and he did not want to spend the required two years at Headquarters Marine Corps.

⁵ Malcom Bird.

During the month of December, General Phoumi's marching orders for November's increased countrywide activity proceeded at a typically slow Lao pace. The sluggish Royal Lao Government offensive planned to retake Moung Sai in Military Region One gathered steam in the lower Nam Beng Valley. FAR movement continued steadily north until the third week when the main force, still only halfway to the primary objective, temporarily stalled to consolidate gains. At that time large numbers of enemy units, traversing rough trails and destroying bridges along the western route from Dien Bien Phu, arrived in the area and, supplied by Soviet air, moved against government troops. By late December, enemy pressure forced Lao and KMT Chinese companies, surrounded on a hill near Moung Sai, into a fighting retreat.

Toward the end of the first week in January, strong resistance fifteen miles south of Moung Sai and counterattacks by an estimated three enemy battalions, resulted in a FAR rout and a sixty-mile chase down the road toward the Mekong. By the middle of January, the 3rd Infantry and 15th Volunteer Battalions moved across the Mekong River into Sayaboury Province. During the course of the retreat, FAR troops concealed their weapons, changed clothing, and disappeared. One abandoned White Star team eventually requested an emergency evacuation by Air America helicopter crews. Although Lao troops had previously fled scenes of fighting, this shameful action marked a prelude to the impending debacle at Nam Tha the following spring. With the southern FAR thrust no longer considered a problem, the enemy directed its attention toward the Nam Tha sector.

Despite the humiliating bug out, Luang Prabang leaders mandated further action and pressure in the Beng Valley. For more than a week, the Special Forces team searched for and rounded up deserters to rebuild and refit the Luang Prabang battalion for reinsertion into the Beng Valley. However, they would not return to the field until February. ¹

¹ Shelby Stanton, 26.
Oudone Sannikone, 103.
Joint Chiefs of Staff, 1 Jan.-30 Apr. 62 34.

On the political front, the Lao King selected Souvanna Phouma to head a coalition government. Proposals for the princes to meet and discuss allocation of ministerial posts continued throughout November. Following wrangling over safe meeting places, delegates conferred on the Plain of Jars.² However, they could not agree on Vientiane as a meeting place until mid-December, when Boun Oum visited Souvanna and Souphanouvong on the Plain. During the talks, they reiterated the need to establish a coalition government.³

Compared to the poor negotiation power of RLG at the time of the May ceasefire, American diplomats and military honchos in Vientiane were now optimistic about the approaching princes' meeting. Through the benefit of Thai training, they judged that the combat potential of the FAR had increased measurably. In general, MAAG, CIA, USARMA, and State officials perceived an improved military logistical system within the country and, through the auspices of WSMITT, better FAR performance during actual combat.

In the field, FAR troops moved against the enemy in areas the ceasefire agreement did not cover (or where ICC investigators had little access). Successful guerrilla operations continued. Significantly, in Military Region Two, home guard ADC and Meo guerrilla fighters had the Plain of Jars almost completely ringed, and primary enemy supply lines squeezed. This required an increasing number of enemy troops to keep their LOCs open. If ordered, the irregular units could expand operations into Sam Neua Province, or even further north into and beyond the border areas of northwestern North Vietnam. Throughout other areas of the country, such as the mountainous portion of Sayaboury Province, north and east of Thakhet, and on the Bolovens, efforts continued to recruit and train volunteer guerrillas to retain territory and prevent Pathet Lao intrusion.

Within the enemy camp, dissention and friction festered between the Pathet Lao and Kong Le's group. After interrogation, increasing numbers of Neutralist defectors complained

² Joint Chiefs of Staff, 284.

³ JCS, 306.

about deficient pay, unequal distribution of food supplies and weapons, Meo harassment, impatience for a political settlement, jealousy between commanders, and attempted brainwashing with communist ideology. In addition, many civilians, perhaps tired of ruthless and rigid treatment under communist rule, were opting to side with the RLG. ⁴

During early December, after preliminary reconnaissance missions, FAR and Meo units moved toward the Route-4 Tha Thom and Tha Vieng areas to commence a large offensive slated for 16 December. When Ambassador Brown learned of the planned assault, he conferred with Phoumi and pointed out the negative political ramifications of such an action. He stressed that an attack might thwart continuing negotiations between contesting factions. After Brown threatened to withhold White Star Training Team and air support should the operation begin, Phoumi agreed--at least temporarily--to cancel the operation. However, to keep the enemy honest, within two weeks RLAF T-6 pilots conducted strikes in the area. ⁵

Brown's efforts to quell further FAR offensive plans in Military Region Four succeeded when an operation against the Route-8 Mahaxay-Nhommarath salient was also postponed pending conclusion of the princes' meeting. ⁶

With Brown's efforts appearing to save the day, the three princes met in Vientiane toward the end of the month. Over a four-day period of somewhat contentious meetings, they failed to agree on which faction would assume the important Defense and Interior Ministry portfolios. ⁷ Frustrated over the ability to reach an agreement, Souphanouvong departed early for the Plain of Jars. ⁸

⁴ Joint Chiefs of Staff, 309-311. 1 Jan.-30 Apr. 26. 31.

⁵ JCS, 305-306, 324.

⁶ JCS, 325.

⁷ Boun Oum, along with General Phoumi, was highly suspicious of Souvanna's actual allegiance and allegedly neutral declaration.

⁸ JCS, 318, 319.

COBLE

Air America crewmembers sometimes attempted to generate humor in the early days to alleviate boredom and stress, but the result did not always achieve intended success. Jim Coble worked out of Pha Khao in the region south of the Plain of Jars a few days before Christmas. He flew passenger trips east of Luang Prabang and north of the Plain of Jars. He also journeyed to Long Tieng, a few miles west of Pha Khao, where initial efforts to separate Pop Buell's humanitarian refugee operations from military undertakings commenced.

Slated to participate in a special search mission from Pha Khao, Coble departed Udorn well before dawn on Christmas morning. Instead of wearing normal jeans and shirt, to make a splash with the natives and White Star team as the well-dressed helicopter pilot, in honor of the holiday, he donned a Hong Kong-tailored blue Italian silk suit, hoping to display the most stylish uniform of the day. After landing and securing the helicopter, he climbed from the cockpit, straightened his tie, and slipped into his shiny coat. Then he moved toward a congregation of hill tribe folks and Special Forces men surrounding a plane that had just taxied to the parking area. Much to the crowd's delight, when the propellers ceased wind milling, a white bearded, large bellied Santa Claus leaped from the rear ramp. The jolly man carried a huge bag of candy, toys, and adult gifts, which he immediately distributed. No one even noticed Jim. When the uproar and novelty waned over the appearance of the never-previously-seen red suited apparition, he discovered his mission scrubbed, and returned to Udorn.⁹

⁹ Jim Coble Emails, 03/08/02, 07/10/03, 07/14/03.

With confident and motivated RLA troops jockeying into positions and taking the offensive against the enemy, the New Year opened with minor countrywide skirmishes around Moung Sai, Tha Thom, Mahaxay, and Ban Hin Lap. ¹

Recognizing the growing capability of indigenous tribes to wage successful guerrilla war, increasing FAR ability to protect river towns from existing in-country elements, and an apparent shifting balance of power toward the RLG, visionaries offered non-political plans for expansion into enemy territory to enhance the possibility of a neutral and independent Laos. Centering on a successful Meo operation, additional armed clans could increase resistance and harassment in Xieng Khouang and Sam Neua provinces. A crash program to develop rudimentary airfields in Meo-controlled territory for larger short takeoff and landing (STOL) airplanes like the C-7 Caribou, and landing zones to accommodate more helicopters, would enhance RLA (Meo) mobility and take advantage of interdicting enemy supply routes in the rainy season. ²

For many of the same reasons cited, but to thwart further Pathet Lao encroachments into the northern and central areas and control of the populations there, recommendations were issued for clandestine expansion of local resistance and defense capabilities without knowledge of the RLG. Thinking was that this could be quickly implemented without compromising security of the operation or unduly provoking the enemy, for assumptions in Agency quarters centered on the fact that minority tribes strongly opposed the Pathet Lao and their Viet Minh handlers. ³

This would all eventually come to fruition, but in some instances not until later

¹ Joint Chiefs of Staff, Chronology Lao Crisis, 1 January-30 April. 3, 1962.

² JCS, 4-5, 15.

³ JCS, 37.

years. Despite FAR movement, aspirations for the invigorated FAR to conduct inroads into enemy territory were premature. In spite of substantial efforts to improve training, equipment, morale, and FAR deployment since the May ceasefire, January actions against antigovernment forces largely resulted in failure. It was clear, despite perceived manpower superiority over the enemy, that morale and leadership still constituted major problems for government forces. Also, an increase in Pathet Lao capability and sizeable additions of the dreaded highly mobile North Vietnamese combat troops most likely influenced the outcome of the fighting. ⁴

NAM THA OPERATIONS AND AIR AMERICA HELICOPTER PARTICIPATION

North Vietnamese History:

"...The enemy built the Nam Tha area into a strong military complex in order to hold Nam Tha and protect northern Laos to serve as the springboard for attacks to occupy the liberated zone and to threaten Vietnam's borders on our Northwestern Region.

Meanwhile, the U.S. and their puppets used many devious tricks to sabotage the talks, stalemating and causing the suspension of both conferences, the one at [Ban Namone south of Vang Vieng] in Laos, and the other in Geneva, Switzerland. They forced Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma to flee to France, causing dismay in the ranks of the neutralist forces, some of whom wanted to reach an accommodation with the enemy. Faced with this situation, it was vital for us to help our allies win an important victory to force the enemy to return to the conference table. Group 959 requested guidance from the Politburo and submitted a number of plans for new military operations to the Lao Military Party Committee, the main such operation being the liberation of the enemy military complex at Nam Tha.

Because of the importance and complexity of the situation, after assessing every aspect of the situation, including the possibility of American intervention, the Lao and Vietnamese [communist] Politburos decided to launch a campaign to liberate Nam Tha.

⁴ CIA SNIE 58/1-62, Relative Military Capabilities of Opposing Forces in Laos, 01/31/62.

To secure the initiative from the very start of the campaign, the 2nd and 701st Battalions, two regular units of the Pathet Lao army, were assigned to the campaign. They would be joined in the campaign by Vietnamese volunteer units from our Northwest Military Region: six infantry battalions from the 205th, 316th, and 338th Brigades, one air force transport regiment, and a number of military technical specialty branch units.”⁵

Whenever political crises occurred in Laos, adamant Francophile Souvanna Phouma had a tendency to depart the country:

“Souvanna Phouma, despairing of an early agreement on a coalition government, left Xieng Khouang for Europe on 2 January. Souvanna had set a deadline of 1 January for Vientiane to respond favorably to a compromise approach to negotiations. Prior to leaving Laos, Souvanna declared his willingness to return immediately should the ‘national task’ demand it. He probably hopes his departure will crystalize the situation and stimulate increased diplomatic pressure on Phoumi by the West. Souvanna also may be contemplating a direct approach to the Geneva conference to help resolve the impasse.

Phoumi has taken this obdurate stand with the knowledge that it jeopardizes continued U.S. support. He has threatened to ‘abandon Laos to its fate’ should this support be withdrawn, but probably has other plans of action which he would try first. He may attempt to provoke renewed hostilities by attacking sensitive areas held by the enemy in the hope that the U.S. would become embroiled on Vientiane’s side. He may also withdraw his forces to southern Laos in a secessionist move. While Kong Le/Pathet Lao forces may initiate limited offensives on their own to force resumption of political talks, they probably would attempt to avoid full-scale hostilities for fear of precipitating U.S. intervention.”⁶

KNIGHT

During January, personnel in the Chief Pilot’s Office assigned Captain Wayne Knight to six months semi-permanent duty at Luang Prabang. The Luang Prabang assignment continued to comprise the only crew arrangement in the country. When station lead pilot Charlie Weitz departed for Bangkok on R&R, Knight assumed his duties. Their RONS never overlapped. When

⁵ *History of the Vietnamese Volunteer Groups and Vietnamese Military Specialists in Laos, 1945-1975: Group 100-Military Advisors 959, Military Specialists, 01/01/62.* Special thanks to Bob Sander for sharing this information with the Author.

⁶ Central Intelligence Bulletin, Daily Brief, Laos, 01/03/62.

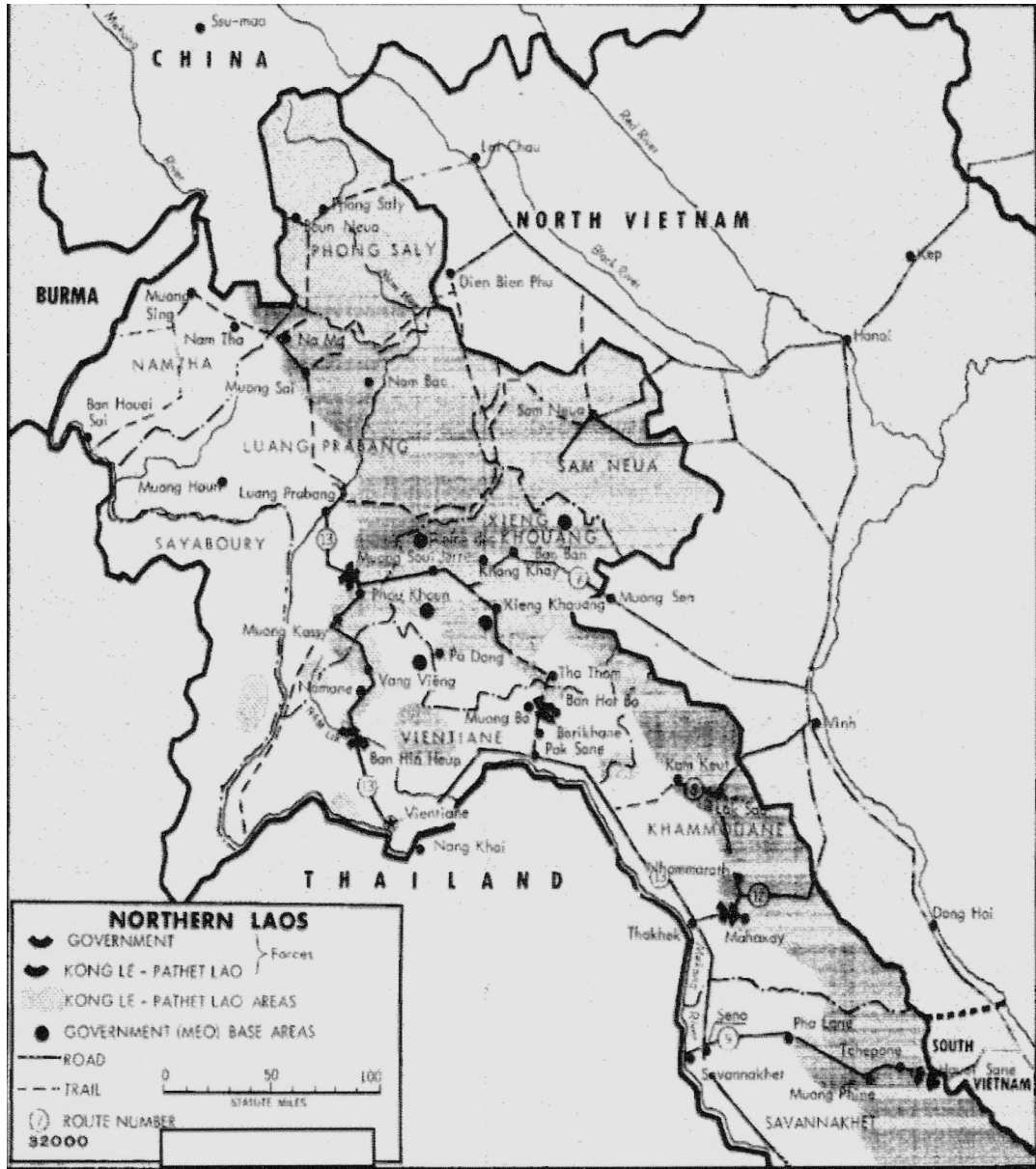
Weitz returned to the station, Knight left on R&R, or to work in other parts of Laos. Permanently stationed Air America personnel and lead pilots effectively satisfied the Customer in earlier months. The system not only effectively eliminated daily aircraft rotations and excessive ferry time from Udorn, but also fostered a consistency and rapport much preferred by Customers, who then only dealt with a senior pilot to brief his charges and assign mission requirements. Knight's Luang Prabang RONS typically lasted one month or more, during which he normally flew each day. Air America pilots enjoyed the high flight time and the 2,000-dollar plus paychecks their efforts generated. One-month Knight flew 182 hours. He used to joke that the H-34 was the ugliest machine in the world until the 8th of each month. That generally marked the time he accumulated seventy-hours and the ship became the most beautiful creature on earth. Moreover, once comfortably into overtime, no more aches and pains were noted.

All the helicopter work during this period supported White Star-MTT activities, mostly at Nam Tha, a town held by the Royal Lao Government at the time of the ceasefire.⁷

Military Region One operations in and around the Nam Tha locale assumed increasing importance, and offered a busy month, while supporting the Moung Sai western pincer movement from forward positions in the Ban Na Mo and V-100 vicinity. By the second week, an additional government battalion moved thirty-five-miles east of Nam Tha into the hills around Ban Nam Mo to reinforce the static unit there and support further movement toward Moung Sai. To enhance troop morale and provide an escape vehicle for White Star personnel during this period, helicopter crews ROned at Nam Tha, a town located in a broad valley that shared the junction of four rivers. Roughly 1,800 diverse ethnic types, generally friendly to the RLG, resided there. Sharing the overnight evacuation responsibility, fresh crews rotated to the site every other day. While crewing Hotel Lima, Captain Knight and Flight Mechanic John Timmons, spent the night at Nam Tha on the 18th.⁸

⁷ EW Knight Email, 01/03/02.
EW Knight Emails, 01/07/02, 08/03/03.
Joint Chiefs of Staff, 89-90.

⁸ Shelby Stanton 27.



In northwestern Military Region One the FAR position at Ban Nam Mo was located between the government garrison at Nam Tha and the projected target at Mung Sai (upper left). Other marks show government attempts to acquire territory in Military Region Two and Military Region Three.

CIA Map, 01/03/61.

For several days, enemy gunners subjected government outposts to sporadic shelling without injuring anyone. On the 20th, the White Star team leader advising FAR operations nineteen miles east of Nam Tha helicoptered to his "B" team headquarters at Luang Prabang, to investigate instructions from his superiors to discourage any further Lao movement toward Moung Sai.⁹ The order stemmed from Ambassador Brown's (USG) policy not to create military waves during the continuing disparate factions' attempts to form a coalition government. Earlier in the month, in order to dissuade further aggressive RLG hostile actions in the north and hasten a political settlement, USG suspended the January multi-million cash grant payment allocated for the Boun Oum government. Also, USG was reviewing its economic, financial, and military assistance program (MAP).¹⁰

By the time the captain returned to the field and could implement his orders, enemy companies began attacking the forward 24th First Infantry Battalion positions east of Ban Nam Mo, and overran the defenses. Over the next two days, the panicked battalion dispersed and left the field. The Second Infantry Battalion, moving through the area, was outflanked, and the unit withdrew toward Nam Tha.¹¹ This marked the beginning-of-the-end of FAR land grabbing attempts in Military Region One and designs on Moung Sai.

On the 21st, following an interim stop at the Xieng Lom SF-FAR camp in Hotel Alpha, Knight and Flight Mechanic Gene Lloyd returned to work and RON at Nam Tha. The overjoyed team captain greeted them. Stressing the limited availability and ability of AT-6 pilots and aircraft, he talked Knight into dropping a fifty-five-gallon drum filled with a homemade

⁹ Joint Chiefs of Staff, 12.

¹⁰ Shelby Stanton, 27, 28.

¹¹ JCS, 58.

¹² Since their entry into Laos, Special Forces personnel had invented a bag full of clever tricks to supplement scarce offensive air resources. Provided proper ingredients, assembling a napalm bomb proved relatively easy. One mixed a thickening agent, such as a laundry detergent, to the fuel, and either strapped a thermite grenade to the side of the steel barrel, or screwed an explosive device into the bung orifice to create an ersatz liquid bomb.

napalm mixture into trees on the eastern side of the valley.¹² Once over the target area, they dropped the test device from 4,000 feet, well clear of small arms fire. Upon ground contact, a detonator triggered the planned explosion. Unfortunately, from that altitude, it was impossible to observe flames or any other effects of the blast.¹³

Over the next few days, subjected to mortar and recoilless rifle bombardment, segments of FAR battalions predictably withdrew to the west. Then the entire force retreated slowly, and regrouped a few miles from Nam Tha.¹⁴ H-34 pilots Charlie Weitz and Barry Cox, occasionally contending with ground fire, honored requests to conduct White Star team assigned evacuations.¹⁵

With anticipated enemy plans to attack and eject government forces from hilltop defensive positions established in front of Nam Tha, intelligence officers expected a night probe on the 23rd. Furthermore, they considered the situation sufficiently serious to alert Air America helicopter crews for a probable night evacuation of White Star personnel, prompting Knight, Lloyd, and Jerry Souders to RON at the team house located on a flat area within sight of the airfield. New hire Souders expected to receive a first-hand taste of the mounting conflict. During a tense evening and early morning hours, Lloyd manned a sandbagged .50 caliber machine gun perched on a rice paddy dike outside the house's rear door. Prepared for immediate evacuation, Knight stood duty throughout the night in the radio room. Since Souders was suffering from a painful venereal disease contracted from a young Udorn lovely, the White Star team captain exempted Souders from any nocturnal duty. Therefore, with nothing to occupy him but to worry about a sapper attack, he nervously quaffed beers, and soon became inebriated. His obvious intoxication elicited a sour comment from the disgusted team leader, who indicated that should evacuation become necessary, he would not permit Souders to enter the cockpit. By dawn, danger of attack had passed and the tense situation pervading the garrison lifted.¹⁶

¹³ EW Knight Emails, 01/03/02, 06/25/03.

¹⁴ Shelby Stanton, 28.

¹⁵ EW Knight Email, 06/25/03.

¹⁶ EW Knight Letters, 05/13/00, 07/27/91.
EW Knight Emails, 01/03/02, 06/25/03.



From the Nam Tha Valley rice paddies, evidence of Royal Lao Air Force AT-6 strikes are visible on the white scarred mountain in the background.

Knight Collection.

The enemy subsequently moved closer to Nam Tha and by the 25th installed 75mm artillery on high ground ten miles to the east, overlooking the airfield.¹⁷

The latest enemy movement around Nam Tha caused consternation in the Western camp. An Agency recapitulation of the situation and speculation about future action in the kingdom follows:

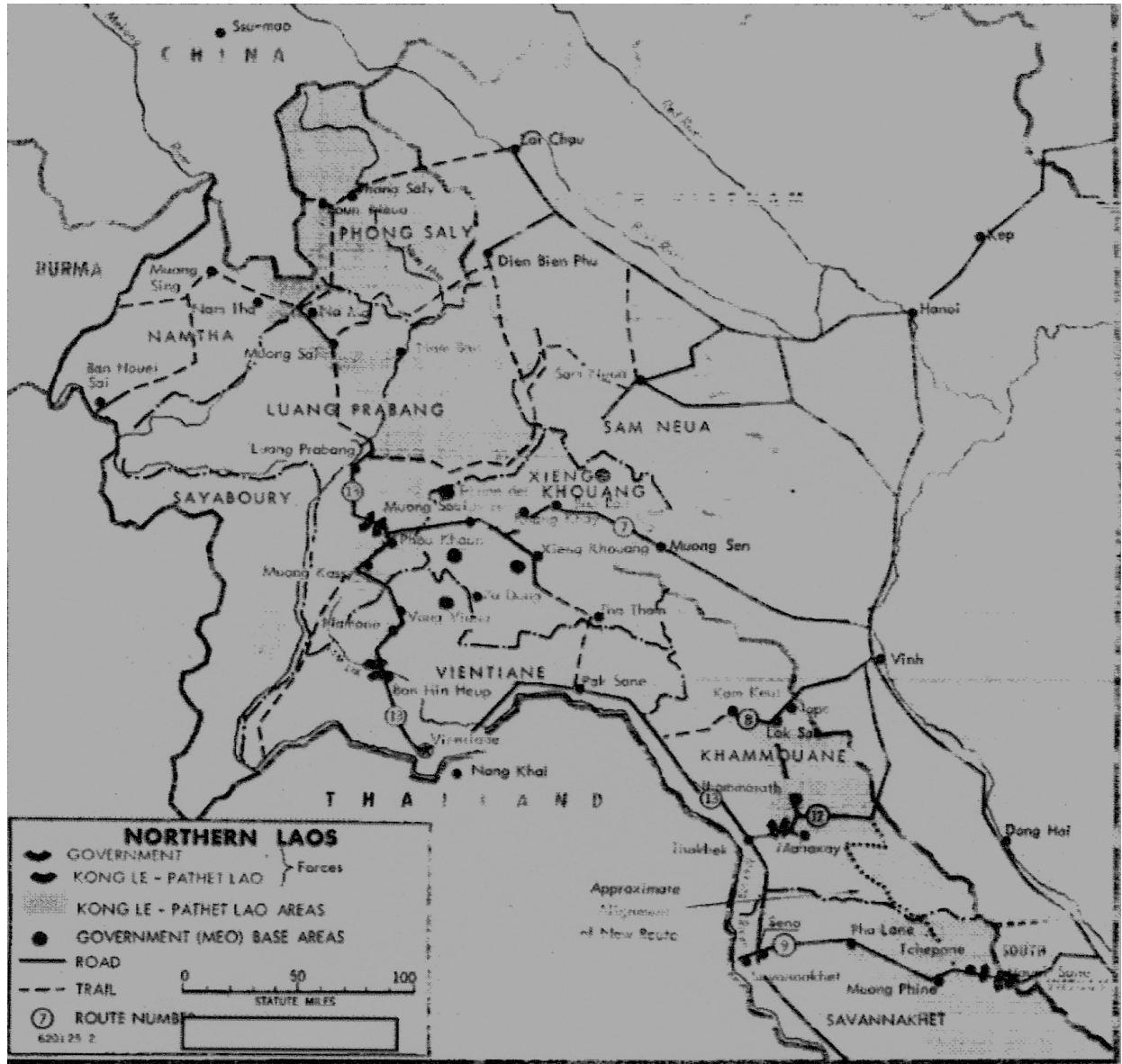
"An enemy threat appears to be shaping up against Nam Tha, a provincial capital and strategic government military base in northwestern Laos. Several enemy battalions, probably including at least one North Vietnamese unit, have advanced within a few miles south of Nam Tha, have advanced within a few miles south of Nam Tha, having outflanked two defending government battalions earlier this week east of town. The present threat to Nam Tha is a continuation of the strong reaction to efforts by Phoumi's forces last December to capture Moung Sai, an important base in northern Luang Prabang Province. In early January, other government forces southwest of Moung Sai were driven back to the Mekong River west of [LP]; last weekend government forces were forced out of [Ban Nam Mo], a post northwest of Moung Sai. North Vietnamese forces in support of the [Pathet Lao] are believed to have played an important role in these operations.

The enemy may not intend to push its advantage to the point of seizing Nam Tha, although the communists might view this as an opportunity to make Phoumi more tractable at the conference table without risking as strong a reaction as would result from an offensive against a more important center.

A review of previous reports leads us to believe that the number of North Vietnamese troops in Laos is now up to about 9,000. Reports indicate there are probably 10 [NVA] battalions, consisting of possibly as many as 5,000 troops operating on Laotian territory. In addition, it is believed there are probably as many as 2,000 [NVA] troops assigned as cadres to the Kong Le/Pathet Lao forces, and up to 2,000 more with headquarters, engineer, signal, and other support elements in Laos.

[January] aerial photography in the Plain des Jarres area--where 25 tanks were identified in aerial photography in December--showed three artillery pieces tentatively

¹⁷ Joint Chiefs of Staff, 58, 83.
JCS 68, 83.



Upper left portion of the Lao map shows the location of Nam Tha (Houa Khong Province in Military Region One) in relation to communist Yunnan, China. Because roads, foot paths, and trails were scarce, RLA supplies had to be flown into Site-100 by fixed wing aircraft and helicopters.

CIA Map, 01/27/62.

identified as 152mm gun/howitzers. These would be the first heavy artillery pieces detected with the communist forces, which are known to have 85mm, and 105mm artillery pieces and [heavy] mortars up to 120mm."

A CIA message continued the following day:

"The tactical situation at Nam Tha in northwestern Laos is deteriorating, according to a MAAG report of 26 January. One of two government infantry battalions in the area has been overrun by enemy forces estimated at four battalions. Phoumi is planning to airlift a relief battalion to Nam Tha from Pakse, in southern Laos, beginning 27 January.

Chief MAAG, recounting the series of reverses suffered this month by government forces after attempting advances into enemy-held territory in northern and central Laos, notes that Phoumi's troops have been forced to withdraw in each case after putting up no more than token resistance. He warns that if Phoumi continues to push against sensitive enemy spots, his troops will be routed. Chief MAAG notes that the Lao army—both officers and men—suffers from an almost pathological fear of North Vietnamese troops, and, despite improvements since the cease-fire last May, continues to have serious weaknesses, especially in leadership and motivation.

Phoumi, on 26 January, said he was considering an appeal to the UN—after informing the Geneva conference—for help against the buildup of [NVA] strength and the worsening military situation. Vientiane, meanwhile, has reported the Nam Tha situation to the ICC as a cease-fire violation and requested an investigation. Phoumi, who has received support from the King and the cabinet for his stand against relinquishing the defense and interior posts in a coalition government, feels that the communists are resorting to military pressure in an effort to regain the political initiative in Laos." ¹⁸

While Pathet Lao advances and probes intensified, and additional government outposts collapsed, FAR units regrouped even closer to Nam Tha. Finally, on 26 January, the entire eastern front collapsed and the dislodged Ban Nam Mo government forces fled into the confines of Nam Tha.

Reports from media types visiting Nam Tha who talked to White Star personnel indicated that sizable enemy units were attacking from three directions, and speculated that they might

¹⁸ CIA Bulletin, Daily Brief, Laos, 01/26/62, 01/27/62. The Bulletins are quite detailed and long, but germane to the unfolding situation in the country.

capture the entire site in a few days. Civilians were evacuating, and leaders believed the enemy could easily occupy high ground around the valley. Struggling to bolster and reinforce his Nam Tha forces, Phoumi immediately ordered the 30th Infantry Battalion from Pakse, along with several 75mm howitzers from Vientiane stocks airlifted to the site. Hampered by incoming mortar fire that AT-6 strikes attempted to counter, C-47 crews completed the movement by the 29th. With the arrival of the new battalion, FAR units moved east, erected defensive positions, and began desultory patrolling. Revealing Nam Tha's fragile supply situation and tenuous lifeline to the outside world, before month's end, enemy ground fire struck an Air America cargo plane during takeoff. ¹⁹

Because FAR demonstrated weakness on all fronts, Washington theorized that Phoumi's troops had little chance of forcing a military solution. Therefore, they believed Phoumi's participation and full cooperation in forming a Souvanna Phouma government the only means to save the day. Displeased by Phoumi's Nam Tha reinforcement, State reminded Ambassador Brown of his orders to avert provocations in the field. Brown countered that he sanctioned the movement, as defensive and necessary to counter the enemy build-up around the town. ²⁰

MR-3

Nam Tha was not the only contested area in the country where FAR troops performed poorly. While FAR military operations stalled in the far north, following air strikes, probing, and sweeping operations in areas seventy kilometers north and east of Thakhet in the Nhommarath-Mahaxay area, FAR units began an attack on Mahaxay. On 18 January, utilizing heavy artillery and armored vehicles, enemy units counterattacked the 8th Infantry Battalion of Mobile Group 14 moving toward Mahaxay. The battalion scattered, as Lao government troops continued to sully their reputation by retreating from the battlefield at the slightest enemy

¹⁹ Joint Chiefs of Staff, 69, 70, 73.

²⁰ JCS, 55-56.

pressure. ²¹ While the 8th Battalion regrouped, ten miles to the rear, three additional battalions continued to march. Following contact, and suffering minor casualties, one unit, the 24th Infantry Battalion of Mobile Group 12, withdrew under enemy pressure, while the others halted in place. ²²

With FAR military failures in the Beng Valley, Mahaxay, Tha Thom, and around Nam Tha, the balance of power in Laos again shifted toward the enemy. Cited were the large increases of Viet Minh in-country, ²³ increased amounts of armor and artillery, and the diminishing capability of FAR to counter the more experienced and feared enemy. Furthermore, despite warnings by his advisors, General Phoumi continued with offensives and suffered the consequences of defeat. Even more disconcerting to American advisors, Lao government forces always retreated or dispersed when confronted by the dreaded Viet Minh. In spite of advanced training and perceived improvements in the army over the past seven months, MAAG concluded that a serious lack of morale, leadership, and motivation to fight still prevailed. In a grim assessment, a January SNIE estimated that the enemy was able to hold their forward positions, counter government operations, capture important FAR sites and, with increased reinforcements, were capable of moving on the river towns. ²⁴

Hoping to gain sympathy on the diplomatic front, over a period of four days, RLG delegates at the Geneva Conference complained about Pathet Lao forces moving on Nam Tha, and

²¹ JCS, 58.

²² Estimates ranged upwards to twelve infantry battalions and a total in-country force of 10,000.

²³ Joint Chiefs of Staff, 66, 67, 80, 81.
CIA SNIE 58/1-62, 12/31/62.

²⁴ JCS, 74, 81.

the 316th NVA Battalion, along with alleged Chinese and Russians invading the Moung Sai and Pak Beng areas. They called for an ICC investigation and for the foreigners to leave Laos. ²⁵

FAR buildup at Nam Tha continued for three months. Initial movements to the large, flat valley that included a long grass north-south runway, proved relatively easy. The area was self-sufficient in food production, with mountain ranges to the east and north surrounding the extensive rice paddy system. ²⁶ Since the site was located only six miles south of the Chinese border and eighty miles north of Thailand, the policy of employing Nam Tha as a strategic RLG hub appeared debatable and flawed. It seemed an improbable setting to establish an anti-communist stand and expend scarce FAR assets. To this day, historians question General Phoumi's decision to establish Nam Tha as a stronghold, and stress the difficulty involved in defending and supplying such a remote site. ²⁷

Action at Nam Tha was not the only concern in Military Region One. At the end of January, an incident occurred west of Luang Prabang that threatened dire consequences to Lao-American relations. After fleeing the Beng Valley, demonstrating a lack of fortitude, a portion of retreating FAR troops regrouped southwest in the Xieng Lom area. Following evacuation from the Beng, Luang Prabang MAAG assigned a White Star team to Xieng Lom to help bolster troop confidence and reform the demoralized men into a viable fighting force. ²⁸

²⁵ EW Knight Email, 01/97/02.

²⁶ Hugh Toye, 196.

²⁷ Some pundits at the time insisted that Phoumi created the situation merely to take a stand against communism and provide a base to probe enemy territory. However, most historians agree that the operation, encouraged by Phoumi's trusted Agency advisor, Jack Hazey, who was recalled by State for his actions. Allegedly disavowed by the Department of Defense, it seemed more likely a Phoumist ploy calculated to foster a similar Dien Bien Phu crisis, and a violation of the 3 May 1961 ceasefire agreement. A decisive battle there might test USG's regional resolve and even stimulate an American military buildup within Thailand. Additionally, the action would cause chaos at the Geneva negotiations and strengthen Lao hardline arguments opposing any political settlement with communist representation in the government, or even trigger U.S. intervention.

²⁸ Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 69-70.



Lao defenders looking down at the helicopter from the top of their wooden and bamboo fortress at Xieng Lom, Laos.

Knight Collection.

One day a dissident FAR unit leader arrived in camp following a patrol action and, allegedly upset over a pay disagreement, incarcerated the team. After word of the incident reached Luang Prabang, Wayne Knight, assisted by two other H-34 crews, flew "B" Team Commander Major Pat Marr and the FAR commanding general of the region seventy miles west to negotiate the team's release. There, Wayne watched the seemingly fearless, sandy-haired Marr stroll toward the bamboo fortress while every gun in the area trained on him. As he waved and disappeared into the enclosure, crewmembers doubted they would ever see him alive again. Bristling with guns to emphasize potential firepower, the H-34 pilots orbited for a considerable time during the tense situation until Marr emerged from the talks, waved the OK signal, and Knight landed and retrieved him. Diplomacy, and no doubt a little hard cash, worked magic that day. With another tense situation defused, White Star resumed its normal turmoil, attempting to work and shape the less-than-stellar Lao troops into viable fighters.²⁹

ESCALATION

The enemy siege on the Site-100 airfield began in earnest on 1 February. Resembling commencement of the 1954 Dien Bien Phu battle, sporadic mortar rounds launched from four 120mm tubes splashed around the area, forcing AT-6 relocation to Luang Prabang and cancellation of a planned offensive into the eastern hills. Despite enemy pounding and suspension of regular air operations, an additional unit of RLAF planes ferried the 28th Infantry Battalion into the valley. RLAF T-6 sorties, firing guns and rockets at suspected enemy positions, attempted to suppress enemy fire while the planes offloaded troops. By the end of the week, five FAR battalions were on station with an equal estimate of enemy in the area.³⁰

Naturally, attacks on Nam Tha and other government sites precluded political negotiations between the three princes. However, if the military pressures eased, Phoumi and

²⁹ EW Knight Emails, 05/29/00, 05/30/00, 06/01/00, 01/07/02, 01/09/02.

³⁰ Joint Chiefs of Staff, 83, 85.

Boun Oum stood ready to meet at Luang Prabang, the Plain of Jars, or other suitable spots. At a later meeting between Souvanna and Phoumi at Luang Prabang, the general reiterated his objection to neutralists controlling the Defense or Interior Ministries in a coalition government.³¹

During the second week in February, Phoumi informed the MAAG chief that, in response to escalating enemy pressure, he intended to dispatch his best troops, Seno's First Parachute Battalion, to Nam Tha to form part of an operation to instill confidence and dislodge the enemy from the heights near the town. He requested the use of Air America C-46s in the venture. MAAG and the Ambassador denied the request on the grounds of political unsuitability, the possibility of losing more men, and certain enemy reinforcement. Not dissuaded by the American refusal to help, Phoumi ordered the movement with his existing assets. With little opposition, two companies of well-trained and competent parachute troops jumped into a valley drop zone on 11 through 13 February. After regrouping, elements of the battalion pushed forward to secure a perimeter, to seize critical arteries, and to reduce enemy fire. Shelling continued and patrol skirmishes resulted in minor actions. On the 17th, following a two-day lull, six mortar rounds impacted the valley, causing substantial damage. The rationing of mortar fire may have stemmed from the suspected downing of a Soviet IL-14 supply plane twenty-five miles to the east by AT-6 pilots on the eighth, and a possible lack of ammunition during the period. Successful resumption of the First Parachute Battalion drop resulted in six FAR battalions on the ground, a number believed equal to the enemy.³²

In the meantime, citing a cease-fire violation and fearing that the loss of Nam Tha would provide communists easy access to Thailand's northeastern region, Field Marshall Sarit Thanarat dispatched thirteen army units to points along the Nan Province border region.³³

Special Forces teams at Luang Prabang then cobbled together a reconditioned battalion

³¹ JCS, 96, 111.

³² Joint Chiefs of Staff, 102, 103, 112, 117.

³³ JCS, 106.

from units of GM-11, previously dispersed and ejected from the Beng Valley in December and early January. Then H-34 crews reintroduced the unit into the Pak Beng area. By February, the troops moved slowly north toward previous launching positions around MOUNG HOUN. They reached this objective by early March. ³⁴

Combined FAR measures may have produced a temporary effect, as forward enemy elements located east of Nam Tha withdrew a few miles. Enemy absence, plus lulls in fighting, enabled FAR units to extend the forward defense perimeter. However, enemy mortars and small arms fire clobbered a government battalion on the 20th. ³⁵

A week of relative inactivity ensued, during which FAR units again pushed defenses forward. At month's end, contact, enemy patrolling, and attacks resumed on the defense periphery. With the expanded perimeter several miles further east, although regular planes did not land until early March, an L-20 Beaver operated in and out of the valley.

Taking advantage of a de facto ceasefire with no patrolling or troops in contact (TIC), normal air traffic resumed and, to counter enemy artillery, three 105mm howitzers and Filipino technicians were flown in from Luang Prabang on 6 March. Increasing numbers of Filipino men had been employed in Laos since 1959 as advisors for several more complicated facets of the Lao Army (quoted as 500 in July 1961). Under contract to the semi-paramilitary Eastern Construction Company (ECCOIL), the men replaced French instructors in aviation and riverboat operations, and other technical fields. ³⁶

³⁴ Shelby Stanton, 26.

³⁵ Joint Chiefs of Staff, 117.

³⁶ Ken Conboy, 24.

Within two days, FAR artillery commenced firing on eastern enemy locations. The following day, return fire from what advisors estimated as an 85mm field gun capable of lobbing ordnance more than 16,000 yards, impacted government defensive positions east of town. This was countered by dozens of 105mm shell fire.³⁷

Additional reinforcement of Nam Tha was ordered. On the 16th, first units from Seno-based 55th Parachute Battalion began disembarking at Nam Tha. However, within two days the enemy 85mm (Long Tom) gun resumed shelling the airfield with rounds that impacted the area every two hours. The timed interdiction achieved cessation of the BP reinforcement, damaged an Air America C-46, and effected airfield closure.

In order to curry sympathy in world opinion, Phoumi alleged to reporters that a large force containing several Viet Minh, Chinese and Pathet Lao battalions had attacked Nam Tha. He stated that radio intercepts heard Russian being spoken. The general was not overly concerned, as the FAR would persevere against the Viet Minh and Pathet Lao. He was not equally certain about any Chinese participation.

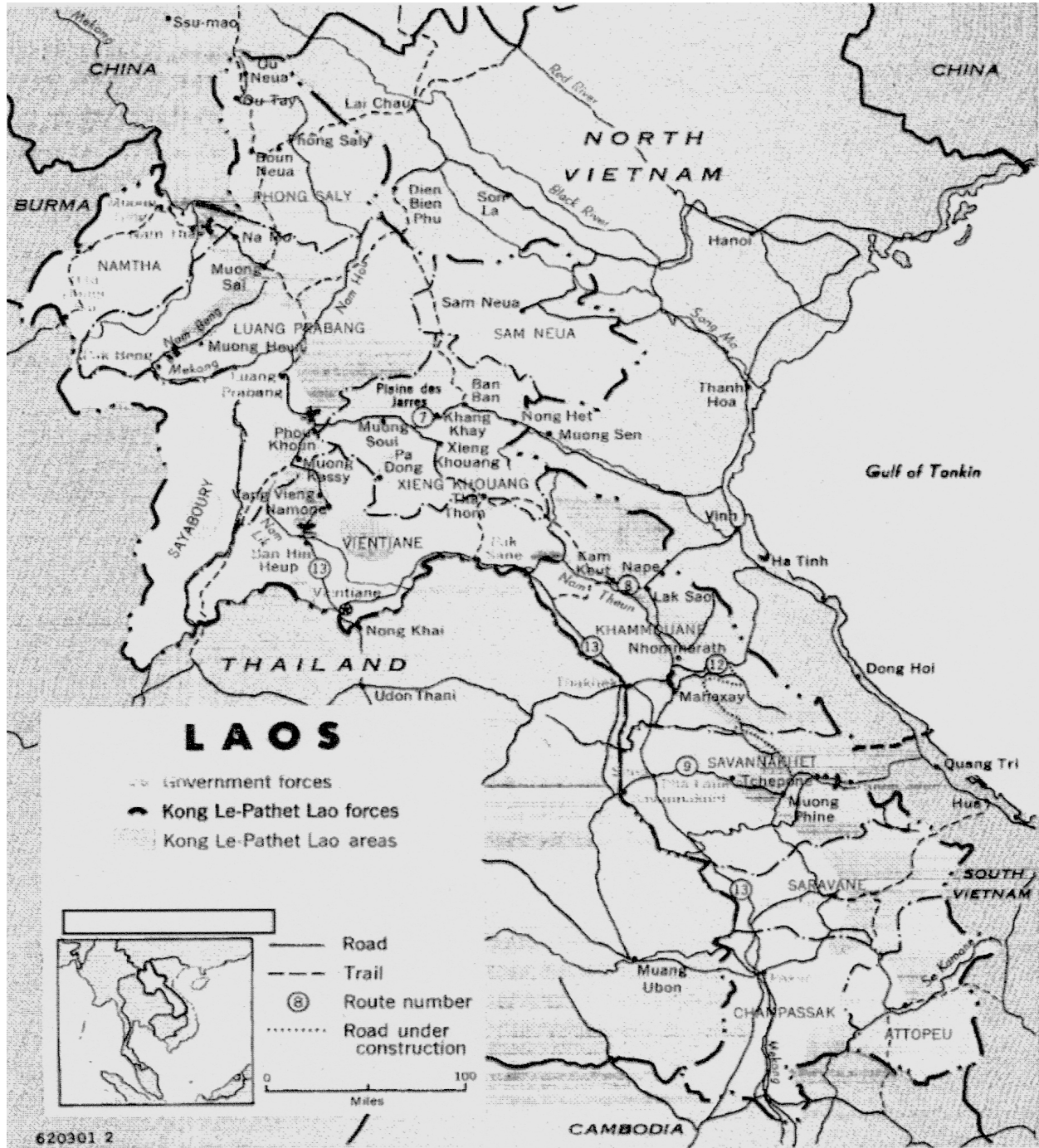
With the airfield still under artillery fire, and one FAR 105mm and a 75mm gun damaged, the additional elements of the 55th BP jumped into the valley from C-47 aircraft.³⁸

Air America helicopter crews encountered increasing hazards en-route to support Nam Tha. On 25 March, Wayne Knight and "Nookie" Hagins, flying Hotel Juliet from Luang Prabang to Site 100, were forced to fly low over the Mekong because of poor weather, and were hit by ground fire. Although there was no serious damage, the incident marked the Knight's initial "moment of truth," but not his last encounter with battle damage in the Luang Prabang area.³⁹

³⁷ JCS, 145.
Ken Conboy, 71.

³⁸ Joint Chiefs of Staff, 157, 158, 176.
Ken Conboy, 71.

³⁹ EW Knight Emails, 05/21/00, 06/10/00.



By March the enemy was encroaching on eastern Nam Tha (upper left), and China was busy building roads toward Laos.

CIA Map, 03/19/62

LP

H-34-based Luang Prabang crews continued to support White Star teams, training Meo tribesmen twenty miles south in the Kiou Cacham area. Pilots considered the Route-13 strip there the dustiest location to land in all of Laos during the dry season, and attempted to land with minimum power. One could always spot a new pilot landing at the site, for the aircraft would be enveloped in a cloud of high power-generated dust. Further south at Phu Chia, protective mountain ranges accommodated the newly developed Meo site. Lieutenant George Marecheck, of Eastern European ancestry, honchoed the show in this area. Superiors at the Luang Prabang headquarters considered him something of an enigma--a much too aggressive maverick for the current political situation. Always in hot water, at times they yanked him from the field to instill discipline. The latest example involved accompanying a Meo unit in a water point ambush, where he participated in a spirited, but forbidden firefight with an enemy coolie train.

As one of his talents, Marecheck spoke fluent Russian. On one occasion he established radio contact with a pilot in a green Soviet IL-4 (a C-47 equivalent) cargo plane. He then attempted to coax the pilot directly over his position so he could attempt to shoot the plane down. The ploy failed, for pre-briefed about Marecheck's presence in the area, the Soviet pilot responded, *"Oh no. I know who you are, comrade."*

All H-34 pilots working at Luang Prabang considered Major Pat Marr a character and top-notch individual, always ready for a prank. Marr and Charlie Weitz became particularly good friends. The "B" team group resided in a sprawling villa a short distance from the airport. A large tree, infested with noisy locusts, grew in front of the villa. One day, during the course of conversation with Knight, Marr mentioned the annoying insects. Scratching his head for a solution, he casually suggested that someday, when light on fuel and at his convenience, Knight might hover over the tree and attempt to drive the aggravating insects away. Not long afterward, Knight responded to Marr's request. Completing a local mission around lunchtime, he paid the tree a visit. Still in the dry season, the hovering rotor downwash created the mother of all dust clouds and necessitated a rapid departure to avoid encountering instrument conditions.

When he next saw Marr and enquired if his hover job had produced any tangible results in eradicating the locusts, Marr's reply truly shocked Knight. By coincidence, at the precise moment that he hovered, White Star Chief, Colonel Bull Simons, in town on a fact-finding

mission, and other staff members had sat down to lunch. Suddenly, a dust storm from hell enveloped them. The cloud so thoroughly blanketed the meal with fine powder that it rendered everything inedible. After the room cleared, Marr took great pains to explain to his superiors why the H-34 pilot had picked this particular time to hover in the front yard. Sometime later, Marr assured Wayne that the action did not upset him for, after all, he had solicited it. Indeed, it provided a little comic relief from the boring daily routine. Ultimately chalking the event up to incredibly poor timing, the two soon forgot the episode.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ EW Knight Emails, 05/17/00, 06/22/00, 02/10/01, 01/07/02, 05/03/02.

Ever since J.J. McCauley's untimely departure from Air America in December, Abadie had been searching for a reliable replacement to assist him in daily duties and during his absences. Following the move from the elevated tent offices, despite an earlier hiring of two Thai clerks, Bannie Eckapol and Suphol, to cull and implement day-to-day paperwork while he was absent on R&R or business trips to Taipei, Abadie also required a trustworthy American pilot to supplement his efforts and run the flight department. Still, he bided his time in choosing a second in command.

In the months following his departure from Luang Prabang, Jim Coble strived to assist the CPH in the office, and particularly on the flight line, as he quickly worked his way up the Udorn management ladder. As Abadie searched for someone to help him manage the Madriver Project flight program, he found Coble to be a good and willing pilot, someone who showed interest in a supervisory position. Much to his credit, Coble lingered at the airfield while other aspiring candidates for assistant chief pilot generally wanted nothing to do with extra work. Coble seemed to understand Air America's mission, and evidenced a willingness to perform additional flying duties to help achieve this end. He remained long hours after other potential candidates for the job left the compound for the tent city bar at the field or downtown. He increasingly met Abadie's criteria for the position: flying late test flights, conducting quick trips to Vientiane, and other non-qualifying project pay areas that other pilots generally refused. Abadie also needed the best qualified pilots to fly Customer special missions. The two men also displayed similar habits and temperaments. Neither drank much and, lacking extrovert behavior, both maintained their counsel and emotions close to the vest. Although never really close, the combination was a good mix. Abadie delineated the work he expected his second to produce, and Coble implemented it the best he could. Apparently Abadie considered his efforts satisfactory, for Coble never heard a cross word from his boss. For some time Abadie spent a significant amount of time at the hotel, arriving at the

office later in the day. If a major problem arose that Coble could not resolve, he sent a note to town. If the item required immediate action, Abadie would drive to the airfield. ¹

IMPROVEMENTS

Lending additional permanence to the bricks and mortar segment of the Madriver Project, in the fall, carpenters refurbished the ramshackle Thai barracks in the fledgling Air America compound. Over time, the structure eventually became a Flight Operations-Administration building. Although functional, it looked anything but attractive. The wooden, tin roof building's dimensions were approximately twenty feet wide, ninety feet long, all raised above ground, and oriented on a roughly north-south axis. Toward the north end, the largest office contained Aircraft Dispatch, Ground Transportation, and a Message Center. A sliding glass window and counter opening to the porch section in front of the office provided access for personnel to conduct business. The remainder of the building contained six additional offices one half the width of the building. In sequence, these offices accommodated Thai clerks Bannie and Suphon, Chief Pilot, an empty office, Base Manager Ben Moore, Security, and a Medical Clinic. The remaining half of the weathered building formed a combination screened porch and hallway. Two sets of steps and screen doors afforded access to the facility, commonly known as Administration Building One (AB-1). ²

An equally aged building originally erected from identical plans and only a stone's throw east of Operations, contained Technical Services, Supply, and General Maintenance

¹ CJ Abadie Email, 06/10/02;
Coble Emails, 01/23/02, 05/15/02.

² Jim Coble Emails, 03/11/02, 03/26/02.
CJ Abadie Email, 06/16/02.

offices. People referred to this unit as AB-2.

Once settled in the respective offices, considered by some only marginally improved from those in tent city, Udorn management turned its collective efforts toward further improvements and development of the compound. A master long-range plan was conceived, which Ben Moore proposed for consideration to MAAG contract officers. The plan essentially consolidated the operation into one area, while vastly increasing security, efficiency, and cost reduction. The ambitious plan envisioned all Air America administration, warehousing, and projected club facilities concentrated in and around the vicinity of the original Royal Thai Air Force hangar complex. The proposition included provisions to pave laterite roadways, ramps, and aircraft parking areas, double hangar size, erecting two of several warehouses, and supply administration buildings. It further anticipated a general facility maintenance building, a special services building, a petroleum-oil-lubricants and open storage area, development of industrial and potable water storage, treatment and distribution systems, a power house, and power distribution system. About a year after Air America's establishment in Udorn, contract officials tentatively approved funds for the proposed project, and initial work commenced with the assembly of base perimeter fencing.

Completion of what became only Phase One construction progressed off and on until mid-1963, eventually costing about 150,000 dollars. ³

COBLE

By mid-January Jim Coble, comfortable in his new unofficial position, temporarily replaced Abadie, who left Southeast Asia on a long overdue stateside vacation. ⁴

After assuming his new office duties, Coble seldom enjoyed a day off. Generally arriving at the compound by 0630 hours, he worked long hours. The days seldom ended before 2000 hours--long after all aircraft returned--and included completion, copying, distribution of flight schedules, and report to corporate headquarters Taipei, Taiwan. This established a routine that continued for the better part of three years. ⁵

³ Jack Forney Email, 4/9/99.

⁴ Air America Taipei management failed to officially elevate Coble to ACP for pay purposes until 15 April 1962.

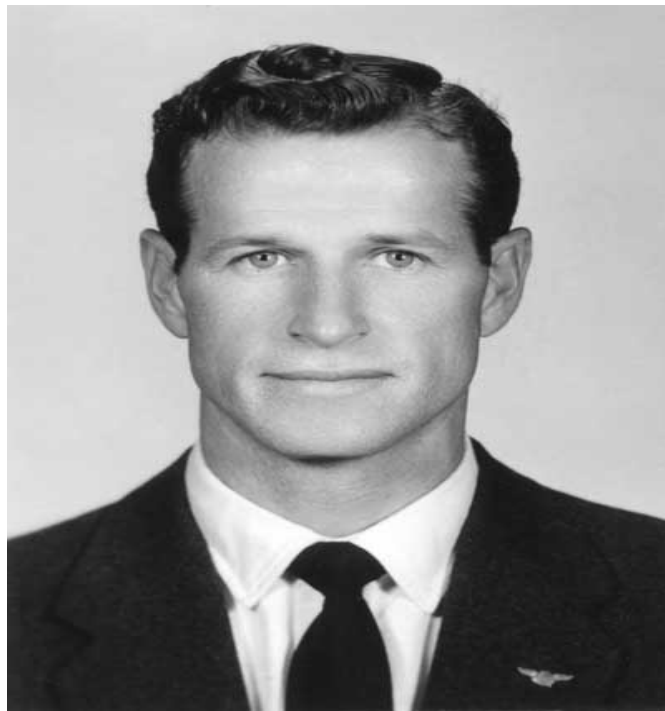
⁵ Jim Coble Email, 03/29/02.

NEWPILOTS

During the nonstop hiring of helicopter pilots to maintain the pilot-to-helicopter manning ratio (generally two to two and a half to one), the Washington office selected many former H-34 Army pilots to more equitably balance the proportion between the two major military services. Besides protracted ground school and fixed wing training at Pensacola, rank structures and required educational levels generally comprised the main differences between Marine and Army helicopter personnel. Beside a college degree, for other aviator aspirants the U.S. Navy program required a minimum of two years higher education for flight training selection. After successful completion of the course, in the case of the Marine pipeline, the candidate, known as a Marine Cadet, received his wings of gold and a second lieutenant commission. In contrast, many Army pilots first advanced through the enlisted ranks, attended abbreviated flight school, and received a warrant officer commission--a rank rarely assigned Marine Corps personnel after the Corps ceased employing "flying sergeants" during World War Two.

Before elevation to the de facto Assistant Chief Pilot Helicopters job, as part of his specified instructor duties, Jim Coble spent most of the first ten days of December training and familiarizing recent hire R.W. Gorman. Along with permanent Flight Mechanics Wyatt, Jones, Ellinsworth, Christe, and Stienmetz, they worked the Pakse, Pha Khao, Paksane, and Savannakhet areas, while Coble assessed Gorman's ability before Captain upgrading.

Richard W. Elder (DOH 12/19/61) checked into Udorn on 9 January. Of all former military pilots entering the revolving door, Dick Elder was unique, for he represented the sole Air America aviator to gain helicopter experience while serving in the USAF. After initially flying fighter planes, orders assigned him to four years piloting Kaman H-43 air rescue helicopters in Alaska. After leaving the USAF, he supplemented his helicopter experience by working for Southern Airways as a contract primary training instructor for the U.S. Army. Like Billy Pearson and Dan Alston, he enjoyed civilian life for a brief period before joining Air America. Although his helicopter credentials did not include H-34s, his



Captain Richard Elder

ability to learn and able to display a high degree of proficiency in any helicopter, the pilot checkout lasted only slightly longer than normal. ⁶

On 2 February, Flight Mechanic C.N. "Nookie" Hagins, First Officer Elder, and Captain Bob Gorman, piloting Hotel-11, departed Udorn for Pakse, where White Star personnel boarded the ship for one of the five established Kha training camps on the east side of the Boloven Plateau. ⁷ Throughout the day, they landed and shut down at all the sites. All hands enjoyed lunch at one site.

Toward late afternoon, while proceeding to Pakse, they conducted an interim landing at Paksong (V-05) on a small soccer field adjacent to the regional hospital. Gorman, flying from the left seat, lifted to a high hover, turned 180 degrees, and air taxied to the west end of the field to take advantage of additional takeoff space and the prevailing wind, and to clear perimeter telephone and power lines. Then, without stopping, he executed an immediate left pedal turn and accelerated into a takeoff mode. During the swift maneuver, RPM decayed, and, with the loss of lift, the ship descended toward the ground. Gorman immediately lowered the collective lever and instructed Elder, in the right seat, to apply the brakes upon landing. The aborted takeoff and subsequent corrective measures proved far too little, too late to arrest the ship's forward momentum. Consequently, the aircraft skidded off the end of the soccer field and into a steel telephone pole. Blades shredded into high-speed missiles that flew in all directions, while counter-rotating torque forces continued to tug the machine closer into the pole. When aircraft movement ceased, only six feet remained of the aluminum and honeycombed lifting devices. Exacerbating a bad situation, spinning debris tragically killed one infant and slightly injured another. Grounded, the distressed crew remained overnight in the hospital.

Jim Coble arrived the following day to investigate the accident. He asked Elder privately if Gorman had imbibed any alcohol on the day in question. Elder could not confirm or deny Coble's suspicion. On most stops, he had remained in the helicopter cabin section

⁶ Dick Elder Reply to Author's 12/07/91 Letter. Dick remained with Air America until almost the end of U.S participation in the war in Laos.

⁷ The alphabet finally exhausted letters to assign the bailed Marine helicopters. Numbers were then used to identify the H-34s. As attrition and battle damage took their toll, over the years these numbers eventually reached into the 90s.

while Gorman and the Army people visited Kha troops.

Bob Gorman, depressed over the incident, grounded and kept in limbo, never flew with Air America again. Before he left the Company, Elder visited him and observed about fifty cases of beer in the room. ⁸

“RED”

Former Army Warrant Officer Dan “Red” Alston arrived at the Udorn base in January. Like Billy Pearson, he had earned helicopter flight credentials while serving in the U.S. Army Rangers. Upon leaving the service, he had secured a commercial fixed wing job with National Airlines, but with little seniority and facing industry disruption, the airline soon furloughed him, whereupon, he found a chief pilot job with Sunline Helicopters in Miami, Florida. Bill Pearson also worked for Sunline. One day, while conducting Pearson’s Bell periodic check ride, Alston retarded the throttle, entered autorotation, and asked Pearson if he could glide to the runway. Pearson indicated that wires precluded a safe landing. Alston disagreed, *“You can make it. Here, let me show you.”* Taking the controls, he successfully completed the autorotation. Pearson hastily exited the helicopter and never flew with Alston again.

National Airlines eventually recalled Alston. However, he only worked for a month when the industry began transitioning from reciprocating to jet engine aircraft. Once again, the junior man found himself on the street, bumped by senior pilots bidding for choice positions. Because of the massive pilot dislocations, this time it appeared that an extended period would pass before any chance of rejoining the airline might arise. Therefore, lured by heralded big money and touted adventure, he applied for a job overseas with Air America Inc.

When he arrived in Taipei, Alston had no place to stay overnight during the processing procedure. Flight Mechanic Lou Dwyer offered him the use of his hotel room, as he would be

⁸ Segment Sources:

Dick Elder Reply, 08/09/91.

Reply to Author’s 12/07/91 Letter.

Dick Elder Email, 02/08/02.

Jim Coble Emails, 02/08/02, 02/09/02.

Jim Coble December 1961 Flight Time Records.

EW Knight Email, 01/24/02.

CIA, Operational Casualties in Southeast Asia, 12/01/62.

absent a few days. Virtually broke, Red readily accepted the offer. When he opened a dresser drawer, three grenades rolled out on the floor, and he found another drawer crammed with ammunition, giving him pause to question his decision to join Air America.

From Bangkok, he rode as a passenger on an early afternoon milk run to Wattay Airport, where Operations assured him a ride to Udon, but there was some delay. H-34 pilots landed and frequently departed the airport, but no one paid the slightest attention to him. Dressed in uncomfortable combat boots and heavy khakis that he had worn while flying commercial helicopters, he quickly tired of waiting on the hot ramp. Finally, after the next helicopter landed, Alston strode impatiently to the ship, looked up at the cockpit, shouted his full name, and requested immediate transportation to Udon. The pilot surprised him when he stated that everyone had been looking for him.

With good credentials and considerable flying experience, Dan quickly upgraded to Captain. Without considering security implications, Alston sent his mother a long letter explaining that he now flew helicopters for Air America in Laos, and describing a few particulars involved in the job. Alston's mother worked for the State of Tennessee employment service. Before long, an inter-company newsletter was distributed containing a verbatim account of his correspondence, which triggered serious uproars within the intelligence community. Alston soon found himself standing tall before Vientiane management and Customer types, explaining why he had committed such a serious breach of security. Cowed by a vicious dressing down, he somehow survived termination, and never again sent Mom details related to his work.

Management considered Alston a good pilot, but his careless mouth more often than not caused him trouble. An authoritative and gregarious individual, he talked a lot, and never would have won any Emily Post awards. When new pilots filtered into Udon, he often scared them so badly while relating hairy war stories that some quit. Eventually, he was ordered to cease talking to new employees.⁹

GEORGE

Not every helicopter pilot arriving via the Washington-Taipei-Udon pipeline in early 1962 was a proficient, reliable, and outstanding H-34 driver, with an unblemished character.

⁹ Dan Alston Interview in Mobile, Alabama, 09/22/99.

One former Army pilot, John George, somehow slipped through intelligence security checks and Company hiring process cracks. Preceding Alston's arrival by a short period, George soon broke a leg in a motorcycle accident. As a walking wounded, local management assigned him minor duties, first assisting Abadie, and then Coble, in the Chief Pilot office. Coble noted sourly that George never successfully completed an assigned task. ¹⁰

While George still "helped" in the Chief Pilot's office, Abadie witnessed a rather unusual event involving John and an indigenous serpent. Just after sunrise on a cold morning, Abadie, another crewmember, and the driver rode to the airfield in a crew vehicle. Halfway between the main road and Air America perimeter fence, they overtook George riding his Vespa scooter. At that precise moment, a snake glided onto the laterite road from high grass in a drainage ditch. Then, like an apparition, it suddenly disappeared under the Vespa. Abadie, puzzled over the snake's location, chose the only logical explanation. Obviously, when George slowed to avoid the creature, somehow without tangling in the wheel or being burned by the exhaust system, it must have entered the vehicle. George seemed unaware of the reptile's presence as he continued toward the Air America compound.

Upon arrival at the operations building, Abadie informed George of his suspicions. Incredulous, George popped open the hinged seat and cautiously peered into the engine compartment. He became an instant believer, for inside, exposed, extremely angry, and starting to move, lay a venomous green Krait. ¹¹ Thai employees standing on the porch steps, cognizant of the reptile's lethal potential, scattered in all directions. After the excitement waned somewhat, a courageous soul dispatched the undesirable hitchhiker. For some time, the topic of discussion and supposition centered on how or why any self-respecting snake would enter a moving bike. Cold-blooded, perhaps attracted to engine warmth, only the

¹⁰ Dan Alston Interview, 09/22/99.
Jim Coble Email, 03/19/02.

¹¹ Krait: The snake manufactured such a deadly neurotoxic venom that people referred to the poisonous monster as a "two stepper."

¹² CJ Abadie Email, 06/10/02, 06/11/02.
Dan Alston Interview, 09/22/99.
Jim Coble Email, 03/19/02.

snake knew the exact reason. ¹²

Over time, George was revealed to be a consummate con man. He overtly appeared to be a likeable, pleasant, friendly, soft-spoken southern Virginia gentleman, but eventually major negative facets of his dark side began to surface. George's early accident and grounding substantially delayed paying the piper, but once he resumed flight training in February at Abadie's behest, it became obvious to Coble that the man had lied about his H-34 credentials and corresponding flight time. Judging by his dismal performance in the cockpit, Coble seriously doubted that the man had ever previously flown any helicopter, much less an H-34. Despite George's suspected and obvious pilot deficiencies, pressure to create Captains and fill voids in the field prevailed, and designated pilots still attempted to train George. ¹³ However, Red Alston scratched his head and wondered about the man's helicopter qualifications during a local practice session when George autorotated to a ditch in the grassy infield.

On 23 February, preparing for a round trip to Vientiane, to include a check ride, Coble, George, and John Elben taxied onto the runway. Before takeoff, George lifted to a high hover and allowed the RPM to bleed-off. This led to a major engine overboost, which no experienced H-34 pilot would do. To prevent additional engine damage, Coble seized the controls, and simultaneously attempting to increase RPM, forcefully slammed the collective down. He failed. During a hard landing, the helicopter contacted the asphalt surface in a skid, broke the right landing gear, and bent the main rotor blades. The combination of errors sent the helicopter to the hangar for a few weeks repair. ¹⁴

Contributing to George's unsavory character and questionable reputation, one of his overwhelming demons involved prematurely issuing (kiting) bad checks, mostly to Indian tailors in town, who also acted as moneychangers. As this tendency emerged during later months, people questioned the efficacy of the much-touted national security background check supposedly conducted on all Air America applicants. Rumors circulated from those who had

¹³ Author Note: Over time, other potential employees padded their flight logs to obtain a helicopter position with Air America, and in a few instances, the eventual results were tragic.

¹⁴ Jim Coble Emails, 01/08/02, 07/17/03.

known him in the service that he wrote bogus checks. Coble saw through the man's façade very early, categorizing him as a phony individual and a compulsive liar, but for a considerable time he managed to deceive CJ Abadie with his innate charm, and he avoided termination. ¹⁵

UPCOUNTRY FUN AND GAMES

Following an engine failure in Hotel November on 24 December, and a subsequent forced landing in which Flight Mechanic Louie Jones sustained yet another minor injury, "Dangerous Dan" Gardner's streak of bad luck continued upcountry. Exactly a month later, while returning from upcountry, enemy automatic weapons fire shattered Hotel-12's windscreen, spraying glass into the cockpit and wounding Gardner on the wrist. With Flight Mechanic CP Wyatt uninjured, and both tires flattened, Gardner conducted a safe hovering landing to a friendly landing zone about thirty miles north-northwest of Vientiane. Cruising at high level, C-47 driver Fred Riley heard his Mayday report. Riley immediately flew to the area and identified the parked H-34 at the west end of a long rectangular field, near a stand of trees and a few houses. He orbited and loitered while two H-34 recovery crews launched from Udorn. Jim Coble, with new hire Roger Riviere, flew one rescue ship. From what Coble observed about Riviere, he described the uninitiated youngster as a very nice individual--much like a small puppy that would do anything to ingratiate himself to others. He also appeared to have graduated only recently from an Army flight school.

After establishing radio contact with Captain Fred Riley, hoping to expedite the most direct flight path to Gardner's location, Coble requested a UHF-DF navigation steer. Riley replied that the electronics in his World War Two vintage flying tin can included only VHF radios--no new-fangled electronics, although he estimated a likely vector to the downed helicopter. He described Gardner's H-34 position northwest of the Nam Ngum water gap, near a western extension of Ritaville Ridgeline. ¹⁶

Closing on the site, the helicopters were flying in a loose formation at 500 feet with 300 yards separation, when Coble heard the muted crackle of firecrackers that unmistakably

¹⁵ Jim Coble Email, 03/14/02.

¹⁶ During the smoky season Air America fixed wing pilots commonly used the mountainous Phou Khao Quai area as a checkpoint to describe an approximate position while transitioning from the Vientiane Plain and entering the mountains and vice versa.

indicated ground fire. He ordered his dark-haired copilot to advise the other helicopter crew that they were under attack. Attempting to relay the message, Riviere radioed in a voice two octaves above normal, while pointing to the approximate gunfire position, "They are shooting at us!"

"Where?"

Moving up another octave in the scale, instead of providing a normal clock position from the aircraft, he squawked, "There-there! Right over there!" As Coble observed Riviere stabbing his left finger in a general area, he had to laugh despite the tense situation. Obviously, the green, inexperienced lad did not realize that from a distance of 300 yards, no human could possibly see where he pointed. Coble passed the word on the Fox Mike (FM) frequency as Riviere's face turned a bright red.

Soon the crew, and later the aircraft, were recovered. Pilots who subsequently flew with Riviere generally agreed he should have chosen another profession. He never achieved Captain status, and did not remain long with the Company.¹⁷

Satisfying a preferred aircraft manning level of two to two and a half pilots per ship (allowing for field rotation, time off, and sickness), and to replace those men continuously leaving the organization, during the first two months of 1962, Coble hardly enjoyed a spare moment for himself while training the influx of new employees. In addition to those already mentioned, Valentine Hampton, Herb Baker, Don Wright, Virl Black, Guy Destefano, and Jerry McEntee arrived during the period. Consisting of a mix of former Marine and Army men, a majority of the mature pilots had a wealth of helicopter experience. Perhaps Hampton proved the most curious in the diverse group. Eastern European by birth, an American family had adopted him, but he still spoke English with a pronounced Polish accent. Peers considered the heavy man a good guy, but a little slow in his thought processes. Val never checked out as a

¹⁷ Jim Coble Emails, 04/18/02, 03/11/02, 07/17/03, 07/21/03, 07/22/03, 07/25/03.
Dick Elder Email, 07/21/03.
EW Knight Emails, 01/07/02, 06/28/03.
CIA, Operational Casualties in: Southeast Asia, 12/01/62.



Captain Jerry McEntee

PIC and did not remain long in the program. ¹⁸

Former Marine Captain H.M. Baker's appearance on the Udorn scene involved a somewhat more convoluted hiring process than normal. Interested in obtaining additional exposure and the most current information regarding Air America operations, while acting as an armed classified material courier, he arranged a trip to Udorn from Okinawa in a C-119. Heeding a request from a superior officer to obtain Thai temple rubbings, he planned a side trip to Bangkok before returning to Okinawa.

During a stormy approach to Don Muang, the pilot penetrated a large thunder bumper that resulted in a joyride of several anxious moments. Because of minor aircraft damage and subsequent grounding pending a more detailed inspection, Baker solicited a return ride to Okinawa on an Air Force C-130. Impressed with what he had learned in Udorn, and just recently passed over for the rank of major, he salivated about the prospects of working for the paramilitary organization. Against this end, he borrowed a C-45 (SNB-called a secret Navy bomber) from the U.S. Navy Naha inventory and flew to Taipei to test the Air America employment waters. His timing proved excellent, and a receptive Rousselot hired him. ¹⁹

¹⁸ Jim Coble Emails, 03/14/02, 07/17/03.
EW Knight Email, 05/04/02.
CJ Abadie Email, 06/10/02.

¹⁹ Herb Baker Email, 08/19/03.

On 4 February, a tragic incident once again demonstrated the ultimate sacrifice Air America crewmembers potentially faced while working in Laos. Flying northwest of Luang Prabang, Red Alston heard a frantic Mayday call from a C-46 pilot in Bravo-916. While airdropping supplies near the Plain of Jars, ground fire had critically damaged the ship's left engine. In the resulting crash, PIC Herbert S. Strouss, Copilot Howard F. Heinrich, and Copilot Hsu-Chiu Lee perished, but during the fiery descent, two Air Freight Specialists (former Thai PARU Varaphong and Kuchinchin) had bailed out and survived. After retrieval of the bodies and Air Freight Specialist (AFS) personnel, one of the men sheepishly related events that had occurred just seconds before the crash. Lee, a new Chinese pilot had disregarded Company standard operating procedure specifying that all crewmembers wear a harness or parachute. In the process of frantically attempting to help the young man struggle into a harness, the kicker observed rapidly approaching trees and ground objects. He immediately ceased all efforts to assist the First Officer and, with only seconds remaining before impact, he panicked. While Lee continued struggling to secure the chest strap of his parachute, the kicker shouted, "Sorry fellow, I'm gone." Then, as the burning wing collapsed and separated from the aircraft, he stepped out the cargo door at 200 feet above ground level.

HITCHMAN

Soon after the crash, the Air America maintenance chief at Vientiane requested the Operations Department attempt to retrieve the C-46 logbook, and several helicopter crews were dispatched from Udorn. During the logbook recovery, an episode involving Captain Bob Hitchman resulted in one of the more colorful stories of the period. While he was flying in the general vicinity of the crash site, a squad-sized unit of black pajama-clothed men signaled Hitchman to land. Believing them to be Meo assigned by Vang Pao to secure the area, guard the plane, and conceivably possess details regarding the crash, he landed. After recovering the logbook, the group of "friendlies" indicated that they wanted a ride home, and aggressively pushed onto the helicopter. Taking a good look at the troops, and already suspicious, the young Flight Mechanic, Bob Delaurentis, sensed trouble. Each man clutched a Soviet made weapon and they were not acting like Meo troops. When Hitchman took off and headed south

toward friendly territory, the men became animated, chattering and pointing, insisting on reversing course toward the Xieng Khouang Ville Valley. Now thoroughly convinced that the men were enemy, the Flight Mechanic notified his Captain that his cabin section held bad guys. With that sobering revelation, Hitchman varied RPM settings and jerked the cyclic forward and aft, left, and right, causing the engine to surge and the ship to violently shudder and shake. He directed his Flight Mechanic convey to the interlopers that serious mechanical problems necessitated an immediate forced landing. While they rapidly approached the ground, Delaurentis gesturing with hand signals, shouting nyet, and liberally spouting words ending in ski, attempted to emulate his conception of a Soviet crew chief. The combination of speaking rapidly in a broken dialect couched in a faux Eastern European accent, plus the presence of a Soviet PPSH "burp gun" prominently displayed in the small man's lap, convinced the unwitting and largely ignorant Pathet Lao group that both the helicopter and crew were genuine. Disappointed about losing a ride home, but convinced by the false engine problems, and the Flight Mechanic's soothing talk, the disgruntled group offloaded peacefully without incident. Then, after a diversionary feint north toward Khang Khay, and gaining sufficient altitude to avoid ground fire, Hitchman reversed course toward Pha Khao.

With the mission accomplished, yet another colorful story began circulation for crew consumption and posterity. ¹

¹ Dan Alston Interview, 09/22/99.
EW Knight Emails, 05/29/00 (2), 02/22/01, 05/05/02.
CIA, Operational Casualties in Southeast Asia, 12/01/62.

C.J. Abadie returned early from home leave, which allowed Jim Coble time off in Bangkok, where he and Bonnie resided at the beautiful modern Rama Hotel. They decided to marry, and, to preclude marital problems in Udon, Coble hurriedly forwarded a series of messages to operations requesting that his neighbor, Flight Mechanic "Nookie" Hagans, inform Miss Noi, his resident "House Mouse," (sometimes called a temporary wife in employee jargon), that he no longer required her services, and she must vacate his residence without delay.

Hagans, lacking major people skills in interpersonal relationships, merely informed the girl that Coble had recently married a Chinese girl and that she must evacuate the premises that day. She left, but her parting shots set a precedent for future Thai-American separations. Before departing, she severed the pants legs of his fine, relatively expensive Hong Kong suits, reducing them to Bermuda short size. Then she proceeded to destroy all his personal photographs, and papers, and pilfered everything else of value. As a crowning blow from the spurned and irate female, Noi defecated exactly in the center of Coble's coffee table.

After marrying on the 20th, the newlyweds boarded the Udon overnight train. Early the following morning, Bannie, one of Abadie's clerks, met them at the station with two company vans and a message requesting that Jim come to the airfield immediately for an emergency flight upcountry. Another vehicle driver delivered Bonnie to her new home in a four-unit compound on the north side of town, where the chaos she encountered proved less than an auspicious beginning to a blissful married life. One can only speculate about the dialogue that transpired upon her husband's return that night. ¹

H-34 POWER PLANTS

The 1962 hot season during the first complete year of the H-34 Madriver Project operation posed serious R-1820 engine problems, questioning the capability and uncertainty of

¹ Jim Coble Emails, 03/04/02, 03/08/02, 07/18/03.

the power plant to operate trouble free in the harsh Lao environment. During the period leading up to the rainy season, maintenance changed sixteen engines, while several other units experienced minor problems. Overt symptoms for the changes included high oil consumption, metal contamination, impeller failures, and outright piston seizures (mostly from cylinder valve ingestion). Without adequate overhaul facilities at the Udorn facility or Tainan, these damaged engines necessitated a heavy maintenance tear down at a stateside depot to determine causal factors. ²

Although manufacturers had never envisioned using R-1820 engines to power helicopters, after receiving a U.S. Navy contract to produce the HUS-1, Sikorsky engineers integrated the engine into the airframe. If properly maintained and utilized during airplane operations, the engine proved reliable and long-lived. Nevertheless, all piston engines experience failure at statistically calculated intervals, and, from their design aspect, engineers discovered that the power plant lacked performance and longevity for harsher, high demand helicopter work. However, rather than wait for years to design, develop, test, and install an engine specifically tailored for the HUS-1, Sikorsky chose the only suitable engine in the inventory at the time: The R-1820.

Due to operational demands, helicopter engines normally function at high engine RPM and elevated power ranges, in contrast to airplanes that cruise much of the time at lower power settings and perform few takeoffs and landings. Compensating for these disparities, to preclude failures, military maintenance departments established a 600-hour life cycle for the R-1820 HUS-1 engine vs. 2,000 hours for fixed wing aircraft. The time before overhaul limitations was acceptable for military squadrons flying individual H-34s for thirty to fifty hours per month, but was totally unsuitable for Air America's new normal high time

² Jack Forney-A brief history of the R-1820 engine. In the 1930s, long before helicopters leaped from engineering drawing boards to manufacturing plants, Curtis Wright developed and produced the R-1820 engine to propel airplanes. The product competed with the R-1830 Pratt and Whitney engine for industry acceptance. In general, aeronautical engineers considered the twin row 14-cylinder radial 1830 engine a better product, but the 1820 single row nine-cylinder engine afforded a slightly more efficient weight-to-horsepower ratio, and a smaller rotating mass that led to better acceleration. Airplane manufacturers considered neither of these factors important in fixed wing performance, so, depending on preference, mated either engine to the DC-3 (C-47), the Boeing 307 Stratoliner, forerunner of the B-17, and a variety of fighters. Later in the 1950s, individual services employed both engines on T-28 training planes.

paramilitary operations. When one factored tropical heat and humidity that created a high-density altitude encountered in elevated terrain, abrasive laterite dust scoring moving parts, short flight legs requiring many take offs and landings, and other unfavorable environmental aspects into the equation, engines deteriorated very quickly. In addition to these items, a few errant pilots, cognizant or not, developed bad habits and continuously exceeded operating limits, then failed to record the abuse in the logbook. This unknown vastly compounded engine problems, for a pilot did not have to push far beyond operating parameters (the envelope) of the sensitive engine to generate damage, often not evidenced for weeks or months. Therefore, few motors ever reached the military established standard of 600-hours. Hoping to solve the problems, maintenance facilities eventually modified the time before overhaul (TBO) guidelines. Revising the maximum TBO downward to 300 hours never entirely eradicated the daily and seasonal pounding the engines received, but probably saved more than a few pilots grief, and allowed the maintenance department sufficient latitude to schedule changes and order new engines well in advance of actual need. ³

Maintenance Chief John Aspinwall, a tall, balding retired Navy chief and former Sikorsky supervisor, added a wealth of expertise and knowledge to the Maintenance Department. His sunny personality also helped constitute an outstanding individual with whom to work, never too busy to discuss a maintenance problem with a pilot. As a fledgling test pilot, Jim Coble gained additional data from Aspinwall regarding H-34 systems and their idiosyncrasies. He understood pilot talk when it came to discussing items amiss with the aircraft. Aspinwall also had an uncanny ability, after weighing a written or vocal squawk, to immediately fix it, where others generally initiated several repairs before solving the problem.

Sometimes, Jack Forney, a by-the-book individual, appeared difficult to work with on ill-defined maintenance subjects. Like a "doubting Thomas," he often assumed strong positions on vague issues, and never backed down unless convinced otherwise by hard evidence. This became his modus operandi over the years, and with helicopter pilots never his favorite people, he frequently was at odds with, and contested, pilot's maintenance gripes. One early example occurred during a test flight when Coble experienced a disconcerting power loss during a maximum power check. While rapidly adding power at a thirty-foot hover, the engine

³ Jack Forney Emails, 2/2/99, 2/5/99, 2/9/99.

spooled down like an inflated balloon losing air. A gravity-induced landing followed without incident. Curiously, the engine ran perfectly on the ground, and a magneto check failed to reveal any sparkplug problem. Puzzled, Coble conducted another high-power application, but this time in a slow, measured manner. The engine again lost power at a certain setting. He shut down and discussed the problem with line mechanics. They performed a few minor inspections, which disclosed no reason for the malfunction. Next, they consulted the maintenance manual, but found no reference for such a problem.

With the matter unresolved, subordinates eventually sought advice from Forney. After listening to the evidence, and concluding the problem not purely a maintenance issue, a heated "in-your-face" confrontation between the pilot and maintenance supervisor ensued. Eventually, after cooler heads prevailed, a simple solution emerged. While interested "wrench twisters" gathered near the aircraft, Coble demonstrated another power pull. Like clockwork, the engine responded exactly as before. It confirmed his findings and convinced Forney that Coble's description was accurate. Maintenance subsequently towed the ship into the barn for more detailed troubleshooting. Personnel eventually discovered a ruptured carburetor diaphragm, and soon returned the ship to service. The episode revealed that it took a lot of baby steps before walking as Air America personnel endeavored to solve early unknowns. ⁴

IRAN

During the early days of the Madriver project, Udorn maintenance personnel were still learning the vagaries of the H-34. The automatic stabilization equipment (ASE) was a particular nightmare for them, especially during the rainy season. Air America did not have the equipment or the capability to conduct heavy overhaul operations in Udorn. By the time the Air Vietnam IRAN contract was instituted in 1962, Udorn maintenance people were considered quite proficient.

The Periodic Depot Maintenance (PDM) manual dictated that H-34s had to be thoroughly inspected every eighteen to twenty-four months on a calendar basis and major components changed. Since the Udorn facility had no capability to perform this function, and aircraft were approaching the mandatory time for inspection, in 1962 a contract was negotiated and let

⁴ Jim Coble Emails, 02/05/02, 02/08/02, 07/25/03, 07/27/03.

to the Air Vietnam Company in Saigon to perform the work. This was called IRAN, an acronym for inspection and repair as necessary. The contract mimicked a standard IRAN package such as USG would have issued to a stateside contractor for training aircraft, and specifications only covered the basics. Cosmetic, comfort, and damaged items over and above basic maintenance items had to be negotiated separately by on-site government representatives out of a budget allocation based on USG experience elsewhere. Battle damage or any other irregularities outside the basic specifications were not covered in the budget, and such work became the responsibility of the owner, Air America. Compounding the problem were overblown expectations as to how extensive the overhaul should be, and the skepticism of the Udorn maintenance unit as to Air Vietnam's capabilities.

Air Vietnam encountered the identical parts problems as Air America Udorn, and did not have the technical expertise or manpower to work around it. Nor did they have any incentive to do so, since they were held harmless by the contract for delays due to parts unavailability. It was an unsatisfactory situation. Schedules were not met, and when the helicopters were returned to Udorn, much work remained to be completed.

Aircraft were delivered and retrieved from Saigon by Udorn crews. The ships would return to Udorn with numerous write-ups. Frustrated, Udorn eventually stopped sending helicopters to Saigon, preferring to develop an overhaul capability at Udorn, since by then the shooting war had commenced again, and it was clear that the Air America operation was established for the long haul. By the time Air America maintenance people began IRAN in Udorn, they were very competent and knew every inch of the H-34.⁵

Base Manager Ben Moore's June 1962 monthly report to headquarters Taipei reflected, "One aircraft in overhaul."

An August missive stated, "The first helicopter has just returned from IRAN, leaving one still undergoing the process. The returned aircraft is undergoing a minute, rigorous inspection by our experts to learn exactly what was accomplished. It would seem that this is a waste of time, however, since all hands here had already decided before induction of the first aircraft into the rival company's plant that the job wasn't going to be good anyway."

The IRAN trips to Saigon were considered a welcome break from life in Udorn. On 30 May 1962, Captains Tom Moher and Wayne Knight, and Flight Mechanic Bulldog Butcher ferried

⁵ Jack Forney Email.
CJ Abadie Email.

Hotel Bravo, the first ship slated to undergo Saigon IRAN. They flew to Vientiane to obtain clearance and arrived in Pakse too late in the day to continue the trip. They RON and proceeded to Saigon the following morning.

They flew south down the Mekong River past Pakse to Kong Island, where they landed and topped off with drummed fuel. Then the crew proceeded further south to Strung Treng, Cambodia, and turned east, entering South Vietnam near Loc Ninh. Then they basically followed the railway track to Saigon. Moher, having a great fear of high altitude and turbulence, wanted to cruise at a low altitude, as was his custom. However, Knight did not consider this wise, as rail lines were ripped up in many places, and there was no sign of life. Without intelligence regarding the area situation, Knight convinced Moher they should remain above 3,000 feet.

An hour and a half from Saigon they encountered a nasty looking squall line. By then they had established contact with Bien Hoa, and learned that the squall line was relatively narrow, and the weather was good on the east side of their flight path. Knight wanted to penetrate the mess on instruments, but Moher, who was senior pilot, refused. Therefore, they descended to one hundred feet AGL, and flew for five minutes through the rain and on to Bien Hoa at that altitude.

When they told U.S. Army representatives at the Air Vietnam IRAN facility what they had done, the men exclaimed, *"My God, that's War Zone D you low leveled through! You should be dead!"*

With four days in Saigon waiting for commercial transportation to Don Muang Airport, the crew elected to taste the local color. Saigon was relatively quiet in 1962, as opposed to later years. The straight-laced Madam Nhu was in charge then, so the bar girls on Tu Do Boulevard had to work behind the bar. No dancing was allowed, and fraternizing between the sexes was limited to dice games, but that had little effect on liaisons.

One evening, the trio cruised down Tu Do in a Citroen 2cv taxi with the accordion top down. Moher and Butch were in the rear seat. At each stop sign Butcher stood on the rear seat, hung his arms down gorilla style, rolled his head, and growled at the top of his lungs. After two trips up and down the street, they ceased this activity, as they had no desire to inflame the local police, who were known as "White Mice" because of their white gloves. ⁶

⁶ EW Knight Email. Wayne flew on another Saigon IRAN trip on November with Viri Black.

IRAN trips continued. Jim Coble conducted two double crewed trips to Saigon. He flew to Pakse, topped off and loaded two fuel drums, then flew to Kong Island and topped off from the small fuel stash there. Although calculating that there was sufficient gasoline to complete the trip, he retained the already loaded drums for insurance.

Enroute over Cambodia they attempted to establish radio contact on every published frequency except guard, without any response. Communication was eventually established just northwest of Saigon. There were no maintenance or hostility problems encountered during the trip. The Civil Air Transport Station Manager arranged hotel rooms and transportation back to Udon. Coble usually had dinner and went on the town with people from the spook house. ⁷

Senior people continued to get the nod for the IRAN trips. CJ Abadie conducted one trip to Saigon during the early Air Vietnam contract. Two pilots were sent, as much for the experience of flying to Saigon, as for safety. After departing Kong Island, they followed the Mekong River south to the Khone Falls rapids, where the river dissolved into several branches. On this trip, the area was flooded and it was difficult to discern a true Mekong channel. Therefore, they climbed to a high altitude and flew direct to the Saigon low frequency homer beacon.

Upon arrival at the maintenance facility, an H-34 was ready for ferry to Udon. During the preflight inspection, it appeared that not much had been done to the aircraft. Workers had performed a good job of applying red slippage marks on every nut and bolt, but little else.

At the Air America base in Udon, maintenance personnel deemed the IRAN contract a total scam. The ships received after "overhaul" were little better than those initially delivered to them. The machines had not been disassembled, and they returned to Udon with many of the same discrepancies noted in the logbook.

After several of these so-called overhauled jokes failed to pass muster, Jack Forney decided Udon could perform a better job. It took time to cancel the Air Vietnam contract and establish procedures to conduct IRAN in Udon, but the move proved beneficial. Maintenance crews completely disassembled and inspected the magnesium airframes for corrosion and signs of metal fatigue. The finished product improved with time until the Udon IRAN unit became outstanding and timely. It was believed that Sikorsky could not have performed a better job. ⁸

⁷ Jim Coble Email.

⁸ CJ Abadie Emails.

BAN PHA KHAO

A few aggressive Customers rarely forgot their military backgrounds (many were from the lower ranks) or were slow to adjust to civilian thinking when dealing with civilian flight crews. In addition, the social instruments and charm seen in Udorn personnel were rarely required for Agency field types, sometimes causing personality clashes at outstations.

In early 1962, Art Elmore, the acting head Customer, with a loud, gruff, and aggressive demeanor, assigned missions from Pha Khao. Air America flight crews judged working for the former Army captain generally difficult. Similar to Captain Carl Nagle and a few White Star personnel's occasional intimidation, Elmore believed crews should never question his orders. Hardly any helicopter pilots enjoyed working for the man with his questionable management methods. In spite of helicopter crew animosity, Elmore remained at the site until transferred to Sayaboury Province, and many believed his behavior typified exactly what his superiors endorsed.

Pha Khao was a busy place with abundant helicopter, Helio Courier and cargo plane traffic. During one particularly active period, Captain Jerry Souders challenged Elmore's authority. When ordered to take off over a parked H-34 in order to perform a mission, Souders, realizing the danger in such a maneuver, refused. A bitter verbal fight ensued, resulting in Elmore giving Souders hell. The matter festered unresolved until referred to Udorn. Ultimately, both Company management and the AB-1 Customer cooperated in a decision, correctly judging Elmore wrong. Such a maneuver was unwise and unsafe, and they vindicated Captain Souders. ⁹

Wayne Knight first met Vang Pao at Pha Khao. Spoiled by other pilots who allowed him to sit in the left seat acting as "General Direction," Vang Pao indicated by sign language and guttural English that he wanted to fly the helicopter. Knight complied, but limited his participation to cruise configuration and only manipulating the cyclic control. The origins of the warlord's pilot status are obscure. He had certainly observed Flight Mechanics operating controls and likely believed himself capable of the same. In addition, perhaps Bob

⁹ EW Knight Emails, 05/17/00, 02/03/01, 07/31/03, 08/01/03.

Elmore was the first Agency person Knight worked for at Padong. Wearing military type fatigues, Wayne initially thought Art was with White Star. When Pits Camp was built in western Thailand during the mid-1960's Elmore and Jack Shirley were assigned there as advisors.

Hamblin or another Bird pilot had let him operate the controls, or even instructed him in simple principles of fixed wing flight.¹⁰

Except for a deep hole in the ground, no provision to house or feed prisoners existed in Meo camps. As Jim Haver discovered earlier at Padong, enemy atrocities perpetrated on Meo villagers and refugees had fostered no sense of fairness or sympathy for any captured enemy. Therefore, always eager to set examples for his people, Vang Pao's mode of justice was swift, sure, and ruthless. To "blood" his young men, many times he encouraged his youthful troops to shoot prisoners. The policy did not change until later in the war when prisoners became valued and recognized for intelligence information, and were interrogated by experts. Those individuals often possessed critical information regarding troop locations. Flown to Vientiane, they were displayed to the press and world as proof that, despite denials, Vietnamese soldiers were involved in Laos.

Although not personally observing the behavior, Knight was upcountry when prisoners, either enemy or local troublemakers, were about to be terminated at Pha Khao. Just prior to one execution, guards led the men around the airstrip on hands and knees like leashed animals. Word rapidly spread throughout the area and a crowd quickly gathered for the public spectacle. Sam Jordan, who photographed everything he could, indicated that he was going to record the event for posterity.¹¹

STICKY WICKET

More intelligent pilots, well aware of the Murphy principle, always expected the unexpected when operating an H-34. One evening early in March during the smoky season, while Captain Wayne Knight was returning to Udorn from V-102 in Hotel-12, the Vientiane Oscar Mike ordered him to stop at Wattay Airport for a passenger, Captain Jim Coble. Coble climbed into the left seat and the journey continued south. Soon after establishing level flight at 500 feet and a cruise setting of 2350 RPM, Knight asked Coble to monitor the controls while he attended to logbook entries. During the transfer, he neglected to inform Coble about the previous trouble he had encountered with the throttle friction lock. Like many H-34s, a spring in the collective mechanism caused an exceptionally noticeable roll-on-throttle that one normally countered by a slight application of the friction knob. However, during the

¹⁰ Knight Email

¹¹ EW Knight Emails.

first days of his RON, he discovered that addition of any amount of friction caused the device to stick and was almost impossible to unlock. Indeed, some instances required Joe Marlin to employ his metal vise grips to correct the problem. Thereafter, for the remainder of the upcountry tour, Knight flew without any throttle friction.¹²

Nearing Udorn, Knight resumed aircraft control. To his dismay, he discovered that while he attended to the daily paperwork, Coble had reached across the center radio pedestal and frictioned the throttle. In vain, both pilots strained to roll off the friction with counterclockwise twisting movements. They then deferred to Marlin, who retrieved vise grips from his toolbox and attempted to free the knob from below. While working in the confined space, Marlin accidentally pushed the collective up causing engine RPM to drop to a dangerously low 2100.¹³

Observing the diminished RPM, Wayne slammed the collective down, but could not regain original cruise RPM. In the space of seconds, the deferred emergency escalated to a more serious situation requiring immediate action.

Fortunately, a patchwork of sun-bleached cracked rice paddies lay directly beneath the aircraft, giving Knight the opportunity for a running landing on level terrain. He plunked the aircraft onto the hard-baked ground at forty knots and 2100 rpm. Sweating profusely, he watched helplessly as the ship rolled and bounced over the jigsaw terrain, five low dike berms, and stopped a few feet from a major klong. Once on firm ground, and after heartbeats had slowed to normal, Marlin successfully loosened the offending friction knob and they continued on their way.

Before leaving the flight line, Knight logged a hard landing, calculated to spark a detailed maintenance inspection. Reflecting later on the incident, he considered himself particularly lucky that day. Without question, he believed that three major items had contributed to the successful outcome of the incident: First, forestalling the possibility of ground resonance, the later model helicopter he flew that day was equipped with "V" leg

¹² Like brakes and a relief tube located exclusively on the right side of the cockpit, knurled collective friction locks were also only available on the pilot's side. A circular device at the base of the throttle grip frictioned the throttle, another located at the base of the collective tightened that unit. The phenolic blocks inside the mechanisms tended to stick at times, particularly if over tightened.

¹³ At low rotor RPM, helicopter rotor blades lose rigidity and tend to cone upward and produce less lift. Additional RPM deterioration could result in blade stall and complete loss of aircraft control.

landing gear, in contrast with the old "bent leg" series; second, rice paddy berms were low; and lastly, perhaps the most important item, Sikorsky manufactured an extremely sturdy landing gear. ¹⁴

¹⁴ EW Knight Emails, 08/02/00, 08/03/00, 03/03/02, 05/05/02, 08/05/03.
Jim Coble Email, 03/16/02.

In the second week of March, Air America crews participated in perhaps the first Agency-sponsored H-34 Special Mission, ¹ but it was definitely not to be the final clandestine border insertion during the protracted war. ²

The rare helicopter assignment involved placement of an indigenous Vietnamese cross border team in North Vietnam to gather intelligence on suspected activity along a selected road section. The operation deviated from normal border penetration operations. For this mission Customers selected helicopters to deliver the team because Taiwanese C-54 plane crews, usually tapped for selected paratroop drops along the lengthy border, were still undergoing specialized training. Moreover, hard pressed by Washington planners, the Agency required current intelligence concerning suspected enemy Route-7 movements toward the Military Region Two border.

On the morning of 11 March, two H-34 crews gathered for a preliminary mission briefing. Although not the most senior pilot, CJ Abadie selected one of his favorite line pilots, Bob Hitchman, as mission leader. ³ Abadie believed that Bob, despite talking a lot, displayed a forceful "take charge" personality. Despite being something of a self-promoter, he possessed excellent piloting skills and would see a mission to a successful completion. What really endeared the CPH to Hitchman was his aggressiveness and devotion to duty while attempting even the most difficult tasks. Soon after arriving in Udorn, he had told Abadie to call on him at any time to fly, for he rarely drank, and desired the flight time. He proved this soundly, when, on Christmas Eve, Hitchman came to him and said he would not be drinking, and was available to fly. Because it was during a period of emergency medical evacuations and other pressing needs upcountry, when additional helicopters and crews were required there was always a pilot scheduled to standby at home or at the airfield. Early on Christmas morning, Abadie received a Customer request to launch a bird for an emergency mission. He summoned the

¹ Special Mission: By definition considerably more hazardous than normal work.

² Later books will narrate many vastly compartmentalized, clandestine "Black Operations" which the Author frequently participated in for the Agency.

³ Senior to Bob Hitchman, Jim Coble generally only conducted training and test assignments at this time and rarely flew the line.

designated standby pilot, who was still hung over from the previous night and failed to arrive. Next, he alerted Hitchman, who arrived within minutes, sober and ready to fly. After that, Hitchman was Abadie's boy.

Jim Coble, Wayne Knight, and Carl Gable (an experienced and excellent mechanic, also from the Sikorsky organization) crewed the second ship. At this time, Knight worked from the Udorn base during one of his rotations as lead pilot with Charlie Weitz at Luang Prabang. Helio Courier pilot Ron Sutphin, an Agency favorite familiar with much of Laos, who had previously participated in "Black" Southeast Asian Operations, also attended the briefing. Since shop-worn French 1:50,000 military maps proved inadequate for accurate navigation, and helicopter crews were unfamiliar with terrain in the insertion area, the Case Officer in charge of the mission instructed Sutphin to lead the helicopters to the destination. Knight, a fledgling pilot with the organization, had never met, or known anything about Sutphin. To the naive and impressionable youngster, Sutphin appeared to be a highly impressive individual. Although all the principals dressed in civvies, the dynamic Sutphin, who had no doubts about anything, created the impression of a true spook, the first with whom Knight had ever worked. After the group had studied the landing zone's location on the map, plotted a tentative flight plan, and hashed over minor housekeeping items, the armada launched for Paksane. The briefing provided no escape and evasion procedures for crews should an aircraft be forced down. ⁴

The H-34 crews landed on the dirt strip at the small Mekong River town toward mid-afternoon for a projected last light mission. A plane containing a male team, who had previously farmed in North Vietnam, awaited them on the laterite runway. Of the Catholic faith, the men were disaffected with paganism and harsh communist rule. They had voted with their feet and left the region many years before. Dressed in black clothing, black felt hats, and barefooted, displaying all the characteristics of peasant farmers living in the target area of operation, the men boarded the helicopters. They carried new AK-47 assault rifles. Attached to their small frames, they lugged enormous black backpacks containing

⁴ According to CJ Abadie, in 1962, the Customer generated Special Missions and sponsored planning. Except for scheduling aircraft and crews, local Air America management provided little or no input. Both left overriding safety or performance issues to the designs of individual pilots, especially when assigned to field operations.

communications equipment, rations, and other essential trip items.

Because of cloud buildups and threatening weather to the north, the pilots elected not to wait, and launched earlier than planned. Less than halfway to the drop area, Sutphin flew ahead to scout the landing area. After judging landing conditions unsuitable at the landing zone, he then recommended a mission abort. Consequently, the helicopters returned to Paksane. After discharging the team, the cockpit crew in Hotel X-Ray discussed the clandestine unit's projected disposition for the night. Dressed in mountain tribal attire, and carrying Soviet weapons, the men certainly looked out of place at either the air strip or in Paksane town. While the helicopter crews prepared to leave for Udorn, the team was last observed huddled in the cabin section of the plane.

The following day, mission participants again gathered at Paksane. This time local weather conditions appeared more favorable. Hoping again to time their arrival at the landing zone to coincide with last light, late in the day the flight departed north on the sixty-three-mile trip. Nervous, largely unfamiliar with area terrain and the enemy situation, the H-34 pilots sighted the target area shortly after 1715 hours. March sunset occurred at 1815 hours, far too early to conduct a last light landing without substantial loitering. Therefore, rather than orbit and possibly alert unfriendly elements, Hitchman elected to land. The objective area, conforming to the course of the Nam Mo, included a prominent border resembling a bird's head curved beak that jutted far into Lao territory. The selected landing zone lay adjacent to the border at the "bird's" beak. It was nestled on a low hill encompassing a grassy meadow large enough to accommodate both helicopters. Planners had selected the spot carefully for its remoteness, yet still a sensible humping distance accessing rudimentary trails that, with minimum difficulty, would afford the team opportunity to advance twenty miles toward their objective. During a thorough map reconnaissance, planners had selected a location judged the most devoid of civilization. The pilots landed next to a foot path, and while departing they were surprised to see an eight-hut hamlet located only a half-mile from the landing zone.

After recovering and refueling at Paksane, without benefit of a debriefing, the crews returned to Udorn and landed at the Air America facility after dark. They logged 5+15, 1+50 project, and thirty minutes night time on the first mission. Except for the early landing, which highly irritated Coble, the helicopter crews had successfully performed their segment of the incident-free mission. Knight considered the experience exciting and wondered if it

might be a harbinger of future operations.

Unfortunately, history would not record a successful outcome for the ill-fated road watch team. After effectively penetrating North Vietnam, on the fourth mission day, alert North Vietnamese patrols discovered and hotly pursued them. During the ensuing action, enemy units killed several team members, and captured the remainder.

With the Agency judging the operation a total failure, the exercise once again exposed the futility of extra territorial units' ability to conduct cross border intelligence gathering operations within the closely monitored and tightly controlled North Vietnamese society. However, this disappointment failed to discourage future attempts to penetrate North Vietnam, forays that usually, but not always, led to abject mission failures.⁵

PHU PHA THI

On the day following the cross border mission, flying in separate helicopters solo pilot, Captains Knight and Hitchman departed Udorn for Vientiane. At Wattay Airport, as customary, Flight Mechanics loaded fuel drums in the cargo compartment with fork lift vehicles, while Clancy, the Customer Air Operations Specialist, assigned them work at Pha Khao, where Tony Poe anxiously waited for a helicopter to visit Phu Pha Thi. Located far to the north, neither pilot had ever previously flown in that area. Therefore, Poe climbed into Hitch's cockpit and, avoiding the Plain of Jars, directed the flight past Xieng Dat, (called flying around the horn), threading between friendly mountain sites at Agony and Phu So, to Phou Vieng. At Site-6 they acquired a Meo guide and interpreter familiar with the Pha Thi area.

Upon reaching the prominent mountain, they discovered only one suitable landing site

⁵ Segment Sources:

CJ Abadie Emails, 02/13/99, 02/26/00.

EW Knight Emails, 06/18/00 (2), 06/22/00, 06/24/00, 02/25/02, 02/27/02, 05/07/02, 05/08/02, 05/15/02, 07/27/03, 07/28/03 (2), 07/29/03 (2), 07/30/03, 07/31/03, 08/01/03 (2).

This new type of operation was exciting for Knight, who was still fairly new with Air America. It made him wonder if this type of operation might become normal fare in the future.

Jim Coble Emails, 02/09/02, 02/11/02, 03/28/02, 05/13/02, 05/14/02, 07/28/03 (2), 07/29/03 (2), 07/30/03 (2).

Kenneth Conboy & Dale Andrade, *Spies and Commandos: How America Lost the Secret War in North Vietnam*

(Kansas: University Press, 2000) 46, 47.



A landing zone on Phu Pha Thi, Laos. Hardy mountain ponies provided a preferred mode of transportation for individuals and to haul supplies for the hill tribes.

Knight Collection.



Curious natives, including a married, bare-breasted Meo woman, approaching the helicopter landing zone at Phu Pha Thi.
Knight Collection.

perched on the southeast edge of the 5,800-foot summit that appeared clear of boulders and high vegetation. Observing the confined spot from altitude, they calculated the landing area would present a very tight spot to land both ships adjacent to each other. They also speculated whether any helicopter had ever previously landed there. After performing a low recon, while Knight circled overhead, Hitchman landed in a cloud of dust, then repositioned to the far edge of the pad. Completing shut down, he rotated the rotor blades to afford Knight maximum landing space. Knight cautiously began a slow approach. Hovering at maximum power out of ground effect, during the final yards to the lip of the pad, he found himself unable to cope with gusty wind conditions. Losing most aircraft control, he settled onto jagged rocks, contacting obstacles with the underside of the tail pylon. Fortunately, the uncontrolled landing resulted in only minimal damage that included slight fuselage denting.⁶

While soldiers unloaded clothing and supplies, local people arrived from a village below the summit. Some individuals ascended the dusty trail riding tiny mountain ponies. Tony Poe, eager to shore up area resistance and recruit new blood for Vang Pao, appeared very jovial. He chatted with village leaders for two hours, while Knight snapped candid photographs of curious villagers who climbed the steep slope to visit and gawk at the weird-looking green machines and blond-headed foreigners.⁷

⁶ EW Knight Email. The incident marked Wayne Knight's sole PIC error during his long and distinguished Air America career. His statement relating to the incident revealed that he carried four passengers, 400 pounds of cargo, 1,100 pounds of fuel, and experienced wind gusts of thirty knots. He intentionally omitted that he considered the landing zone too confined for both H-34s, and the fact that they could not rotate drooping rotor blades without contact.

⁷ EW Knight Emails, 06/10/00, 06/11/00, 07/31/03, 08/01/03 (2), 08/05/03.

Acquisition and dissemination of current valid and reliable (Agency term for evaluating information) intelligence on enemy disposition in the designated work area continued to be a distinct predicament for crews. The lack of up-to-the-minute, trustworthy information, particularly in remote combat areas, often caused grief for helicopter crews.

During the turbulent spring period of 1962, the fluid situation in Military Region One illustrated this peril. Helicopter pilots supporting remote FAR units always faced unknown hazards, and a potential life-threatening incident involving Hotel Mike occurred on 22 March.

Shortly after Wayne Knight replaced Charlie Weitz at Luang Prabang for seven weeks, and assumed the lead pilot billet, the Customer scheduled a priority mission, still under the 1674 contract for two helicopter crews, to supply a western FAR outpost located along the south side of the Mekong River. Knight selected former U.S. Marine Captains Herb Baker and Ed Subowsty to conduct the flight. While working at Luang Prabang, the two men had formed a mutual admiration society and, because of Knight's senior pilot status at the station and their age differences, they referred to Knight behind his back as "The Kid".

Both Customer types attended the briefing and expressed deep concern over the current status of the listening post because of the loss of radio contact. They judged restoration of immediate communications with the site paramount to assessing operations in the area. The unit's radio operator and medic had arrived at Luang Prabang late the previous day to scrounge proper radio equipment and sorely needed medical supplies. In addition to assigning the helicopter pilots to haul the repaired radio, two passengers, rice, and ammunition, the Customers cautioned about a recent change in the site's signal panel.

While still at altitude after a fifty-minute flight, crews observed the restricted landing zone perched on a small level knob forty yards above the nearest cluster of pole-supported houses lining the narrow river bank. From the number of foxholes surrounding the perimeter, and his prior experience landing at the site, Baker estimated that a platoon-sized unit currently occupied the position. Before descending, he radioed Subowsty that two personnel had just displayed last month's signal panel. Subowsty, slightly more experienced in country and considerably more cautious, urged vigilance stating, "*You cannot be too sure*

it is safe."

Baker answered, *"Well, anyway it's the same letter as before. I'll go down and make a low pass and check out the situation."*

"Be careful Herbie."

Baker conducted a screaming dive over the landing zone at ninety knots. Then he made a slower pass. He could see that men on the ground wore standard FAR equipment and held U.S. weapons. One man clutched a rocket launcher. Another guy waved, and the medic in the helicopter gestured to land. With everyone waving in such a friendly manner, everything appeared fine to Baker. However, not entirely convinced of the outpost's security, he made another slow approach, touched the tail wheel briefly on the pad, and then went around again. Still no problem, but the aborted landings agitated both the medic and the radio operator. Through the Flight Mechanic, they relayed to Captain Baker that the men on the ground were definitely from their unit and pointed to their commanding officer. This time, emboldened by his passengers' positive identification, a lack of ground fire, but discounting an unfamiliar sense of foreboding, Baker elected to land. He called his wing man, who still orbited at altitude, *"It looks OK. I'm going in."*

"Careful Herbie."

Still unconvinced that there was a problem on the ground, but to skew the odds in his favor, Baker landed with high RPM and power, placing only the main gear on the pad. Then splitting the two men standing on the landing pad, he positioned the exhaust stack over the rocket tube on the left and the red beret lieutenant on the right, where he could observe his actions. Clouds of dust churned up by the rotor wash of the nearly hovering helicopter forced the troops to initially face outward in their foxholes. Suddenly the lieutenant wheeled toward the H-34, leveling his carbine at the cockpit, whereupon Baker increased pitch and rotated off the pad toward the river. Heavy fire commenced from troops on the perimeter. While bullets, directed mainly at the rotor head, whizzed through the air and impacted the helicopter, rocket man attempted to direct his tube and deadly contents toward Hotel Mike. Luckily, the enormous rotor downwash diverted the small soldier's aim, preventing an accurate launch.

As Baker dove off the hill and descended toward the safety of the river, R.L. Delaurentis crouched behind rice sacks, but still incurred a slight wound. During the fusillade, another spent round struck the radio operator in his generously proportioned

stomach.

Despite the Flight Mechanic's assurance that he could see no visible damage to either the cabin or the tail cone section that might impact flight safety, Baker was aware that Hotel Mike had incurred severe battle damage. Therefore, once away from the hornet's nest, he froze the collective and RPM to avert further potential emergency conditions. After requesting Subowsty to position his ship so his Flight Mechanic could provide covering fire should it become necessary, Baker commenced a slow climb to avoid turbulence. For an unknown reason, Subowsty failed to comply with his entreaty. Restricted movement of the flight control system convinced Baker that the wounded machine would afford him only one landing attempt. Consequently, the remaining trip to Luang Prabang seemed unduly prolonged, while he reflected nervously about the ship's condition. After a successful landing, Baker climbed down from the cockpit, looked up, and observed substantial damage to rotor head components that included a holed pitch change link. He also noted a flat right tire. Having seen quite enough, he left further inspections to the Flight Mechanic and repair crew. Convinced that his theory of not changing RPM, and minimizing control inputs to the rotor head, had been a major factor in his survival, he did not care to see further damage.

Still upset because his lieutenant had shot him, the wounded radio operator struggled from the cabin section. Bent over, clutching his stomach, he staggered off mumbling, gesturing wildly, and blaming others for his problem.

Following a debriefing, the perplexed Customer speculated that the entire platoon had defected to the Pathet Lao that day. Moreover, before vacating the area, they intended to destroy or capture the helicopter and crew as a trophy to show good faith and garner support from their new masters.

Extensive battle damage grounded Baker's aircraft. In addition to over a hundred holes scattered throughout the fuselage, inspection revealed damaged blades and a multitude of rotor head dings. It required a few days for an Air America maintenance crew to arrive and sufficiently restore Hotel Mike to an airworthy condition for a ferry flight to Udorn. Knight flew a forty-minute test flight on 27 March, and noted many airframe holes still visible.

Sometime later, Air America Washington Office Manager "Red" Dawson visited the Udorn facility. By chance, Baker walked into the Chief Pilot's office and Abadie introduced him to Dawson. After pleasantries, Dawson mentioned that he had previously heard the account of the pilot who nearly bought the farm after landing at an enemy position. The manager's account

shocked and offended the highly opinionated Baker. He contended that Dawson's account totally distorted the facts and actual circumstances of the incident. ¹

Not long after the Baker incident, an enemy battalion counterattacked the 3d Infantry and the 15th Volunteer Battalions in the vicinity of the Beng Valley town of Moung Houn. By 3 April, the White Star team found themselves under attack and compelled to fend for themselves, while the Lao company they advised, including the commander and staff, once again scampered off the battlefield. The following morning, a radio call summoned H-34 pilots to evacuate the American team who had evaded along the Beng River. Several days later, many friendlies were still missing. ²

GEORGE

In the period since John George's botched check ride with Coble, and under upper management pressure for additional line pilots, the Udorn CPH office eventually, and reluctantly, upgraded George to Captain. Stories soon filtered through the organization about George's weak flying ability and poor performance in the field. When Abadie heard through the grapevine that his new Captain had been flying unprofessionally without a shirt, he called George into the office and admonished him. After continuing to fly shirtless, George nearly lost his position, but managed to sweet-talk Abadie into retaining him.

On 20 April, while flying twenty minutes west-southwest of Luang Prabang, George experienced a mechanical problem. Committed to a forced landing, he crashed Hotel Victor into an east-west flowing river, part of which wound through steep and narrow hillsides. During the crash, Hotel Victor ended up on its side. Searching the area, Wayne Knight discovered George perched on a hill some distance from the aircraft. He was unhurt, but was sunning

¹ Dick Elder Letter, 08/09/91.
Dick Elder Phone Conversation, 09/07/92.
Dan Alston Interview, 09/22/99.
Herb Baker Emails, 08/18/03, 08/19/03, 08/20/03, 08/28/03.
CIA, Operational Casualties in Southeast Asia, 12/01/62.
EW Knight Emails, 05/17/00, 08/05/03 (2), 08/28/03.

² Shelby Stanton, *Green Berets*, 26.
Joint Chiefs of Staff, 186.

himself with his shirt off. Shortly after this incident, George contracted hepatitis, which kept him bedridden for a few weeks, and off the flight schedule for several additional months.

For several days, Knight ferried John Aspinwall's recovery team to and from the crash site to assess the damage to Victor and determine what could be salvaged. As disassembly of Hotel Victor progressed, he ferried bits and pieces to Luang Prabang. Sandwiching other work into his busy schedule, on the 23rd, he slipped off to Nam Tha with Joe Marlin in Hotel Alpha. After the maintenance team separated the engine and stripped Hotel Victor to the basic cabin section, while he prepared to sling these loads out, Udorn told him not to attempt the operation. Jim Coble would arrive the following day to conduct the lifts. This turn in events was disconcerting to those present, as it meant delay, risks, and additional time in the field. As announced, Coble arrived on the 25th and commandeered Hotel Alpha. Then, much to Knight's chagrin, he conducted the two lifts, and immediately deadheaded back to Udorn.

Following the recovery, Knight reverted to full time work at Nam Tha, flying nine hairy hours per day on the 26th and 27th. Absent from the fall of Nam Tha, he last flew at the site on 1 May with Joe Marlin and new pilot Bill Cook in Hotel Tango. Despite receiving a commendation from Ben Moore and a long R&R in May for his part in the aircraft recovery, Knight sorely resented the apparent lack of confidence by Udorn management in his ability to perform sling loads. He never talked to Coble about the subject, and assumed that he might have desired the prestige attached to the recovery.^{3 4}

Combat hazards for Air America crewmembers Dan W. Gardner, new hire W.C. Russell, and Flight Mechanic C.P. Wyatt again surfaced on 28 April, while flying missions out of Savannakhet on the 1674 contract. As the beleaguered landing zone was considered hot by RLA

³ External loads were not part of the early training-checkout program, and there was a sling load restriction contained in the base operations manual. Abadie was likely to approve a Customer sling load request, particularly if it involved a former Marine pilot. However, he might be reluctant to approve such a request in a case where his personal evaluation of a pilot's ability to perform might be lacking.

⁴ EW Knight Emails, 05/21/00, 05/22/00, 06/10/00, 03/14/01, 01/03/02, 02/01/02, 02/02/02, 02/25/02.

Memorandum Ben Moore Dated 05/07/62.

sources, a Special Forces sergeant was onboard to provide firepower if it became necessary. Wyatt sat next to the soldier in front of the cabin door to observe and supplement counterfire. As Russell manipulated the controls during the short final approach to landing, suddenly multiple volleys of AK-47 fire rang out, loudly smacking into Hotel Romeo's fuselage. Wyatt, relieved to be unscathed, asked the soldier if he was all right. The man nodded yes, but then Wyatt was shocked to see an expanding pool of blood on the floor. He shook the sergeant, whose complexion by then was a pale yellow. Wyatt alerted Gardner that the man was bleeding excessively and on the verge of losing consciousness. Gardner immediately assumed control, increased power, lowered the nose of the aircraft, and called the White Star house at Savannakhet. The Army medic who met the ship with a canvas stretcher sliced the injured man's pants to his groin, revealing multiple gunshot wounds to both legs. The man was hurriedly patched up and evacuated to the Vientiane White Star headquarters. After recuperating, the grateful sergeant forwarded a letter to Air America management praising and thanking the crew of Hotel Romeo for saving his life. ⁵

POLITICS

During an interim lull in Nam Tha hostilities, amplified diplomatic efforts persisted to dissuade General Phoumi from continuing his ill-advised military adventure in the north, and agree to a coalition government headed by Souvanna Phouma. In January, the U.S. State Department had suspended monthly economic resources earmarked for the RLG in an effort to force a political settlement. Oddly enough, military support continued to flow to the army. Therefore, the temporary cessation of money failed to influence the general, Prime Minister Boun Oum, or his rightist cohorts, and full funding soon resumed.

On 24 March, a three-hour high-level meeting took place on the southern bank of the Mekong River at Nong Khai, Thailand. It was attended by Generals Phoumi and Bounleut, ranking government officials, Prime Minister Sarit, Foreign Minister Thanat, Bill Sullivan, Forrestal, Ambassador Young, and USG's chief representative at the Geneva conference on Laos, Averell Harriman. During the course of the meeting Sarit frankly told General Phoumi that:

"He had the choice of being responsible for the military take-over of his country by

⁵ "Stash" Wyatt, Emails, 05/20/07, 05/26/07.
CIA, Operational Casualties in: Southeast Asia, 12/01/62.

the Pathet Lao or of working to help a Souvanna [Phouma] government maintain its independence, with the support of the United States, Thailand, and other friendly countries..."

The obdurate general refused to agree to any political settlement that included leftist elements in the proposed government. In rejecting this proposal, he echoed Thai, CIA, and DOD sentiments concerning past failed policies.

Averell Harriman, accompanied by General Phoumi, departed for Vientiane to meet with King Savang and the RLG cabinet the following day. The discussion in Vientiane provided no ready solution to the problem. With the King supporting him, Phoumi ignored Harriman's veiled threats, that should he not agree to the proposals, no American troops would intervene to assist him, and only a neutral Lao could ultimately prevent a communist victory and possible overthrow of the monarchy.

The U.S. State Department continued further efforts to relegate the Military Region One situation toward the back burner and keep the peace talks moving forward in Geneva. Following the Nong Khai talks, William Sullivan, Harriman's deputy, flew to Khang Khay on an Air America plane with the express purpose of assuring Souvanna Phouma that the U.S. was doing everything possible to assist in the formation of a coalition government, and to invite him to Washington for bilateral talks with President Kennedy. Sullivan also met with "Red" Prince Souphannouvong and Kong Le to discuss the potentially explosive Nam Tha situation in detail. ⁶

⁶ Segment Sources:

Joint Chiefs of Staff, 172-173.

Arthur Dommen, *Conflict*, 216.

Marek Thee, *Notes of a Witness: Laos and the Second Indochinese War* (New York: Random House, 1973) 231, 233.

Roger Hilsman, 139.

Arthur Schlesinger, 432.

Hugh Toye, 181-182.

United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, Part 2 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1970) 421, United States Security Agreements and Commitments Abroad, Kingdom of Laos.

Toward the end of September 1961, MAAG, recognizing an additional requirement for administrative air logistical support aircraft, requested CINCPAC Hawaii to arrange the delivery of seven STOL Helio Couriers for use in Laos. A later message indicated that should the Helio Couriers be unavailable, L-20 (DHC-2 Beaver) aircraft would suffice. ¹ The following month the Department of Defense, along with the Joint Chiefs of Staff, requested the Department of the Army to forward seven L-20 planes with spare parts to MAAG Laos (read Air America). ²

During January, Colonel Arthur "Bull" Simons' Kha program received a much-needed boost and funding when MAAG Lao finally recognized its encouraging aspects. The program attained additional aviation support when the U.S. Embassy modified the original AAM/MAAG Laos Madriver AF62 (531)-1674 Contract. A supplemental agreement to the contract dated 28 January (modified on 12 April) included the introduction of seven high-winged, six passenger L-20 Beaver aircraft and the hiring of ten fixed wing pilots. The assets would specifically support White Star team efforts throughout southern Laos, particularly Kha operations on the Bolovens Plateau. Planners expected the Udorn based Beavers to become operational by March. ³

Despite General Phoumi's initial recognition of the first Kha ADC company, the Lao General Staff remained indifferent to the Kha experiment and left White Star to its own designs. In time, while working from Houei Khong, much of the Plateau eventually came under friendly control, although not without incident. One of the first Kha operations conducted to test the raw recruits' training against a Pathet Lao-influenced tribe on the southwest Bolovens nearly ended in disaster. Initial shots fired during the skirmish resulted in a friendly unit bolting from the action, leaving White Star advisors to fend for themselves. The bug out suspiciously took place after the Pathet Lao clearly stated their intentions to

¹ Joint Chiefs of Staff, 211.

² JCS, 299.

³ Joe Leeker, Military Aid, 17-18.

take only American scalps. ⁴

The DeHaviland of Canada L-20 Beavers, slated mainly for administrative duties, arrived at the Udorn facility in March. Preconceived as another short takeoff and landing (STOL) vehicle like the Helio Courier, the former army bush aircraft afforded the potential to carry more passengers. However, before long, Company pilots judged the plane incapable of performing to STOL expectations.

During training at Udorn, in order to simulate takeoff conditions encountered on short Lao mountain strips, Jack Forney installed artificial end of runway barriers. He noted that pilots selected for the Beaver program, unhappy with L-20 flight characteristics, returned from practice sessions shaking their heads in disbelief over the aircraft's poor performance. Experienced pilot Bob Gains was not enthusiastic at all. ⁵

Management assigned Captain W.H. Beale, Jr the Beaver Chief Pilot billet. Beale, a well-liked, capable, and experienced Air America fixed wing driver flew with the original B-26 "Old Timers" out of Takhli during the Millpond experiment. Anxious to sell a countrywide program to the U.S. military, he chose Military Region Two to begin flying the aircraft upcountry.

On 6 April, he and trainee George W. Varney, with six military types (Britton, Kaatz, and others) onboard, attempted a takeoff from the short Xieng Dat strip south of Moung Soui. Density altitude, heat, heavy load factor, and high grass concealing stumps all combined to trigger a disaster. Failing to achieve sufficient lift, 207 rolled past the end of the runway at high speed into tall grass. Slamming into concealed stumps, the impact ruptured belly fuel tanks, causing the plane to flip over and explode. A helicopter pilot arrived shortly after the accident and exposed several rolls of film. The chilling photos graphically displayed burned human body parts that the pilot later described to peers in "gallows humor" as resembling standing rib roasts. The remains were forwarded to Udorn, where they resided in a

⁴ Dick Elder Phone Conversation, 01/29/99.

⁵ Jack Forney Email, 3/26/99. As was revealed the aircraft did not perform as advertised, and were discarded within a year after a fatal crash and other major damage. The Beaver program failed to accomplish much, and by accounts of some assigned pilots, the airplane was not up to the STOL expectations of whoever conceived its use in this manner.

hastily fashioned morgue type conex cooler at the maintenance area awaiting shipment to their final destinations.

Following the crash, Customers wisely elected to discontinue further use of the L-20 in Military Region Two, or at higher elevations. Subsequently, the machine exclusively supported White Star operations on the Bolovens Plateau and on the flatlands of southern Laos. The supplies provided by Beaver pilots to Special Forces teams included medical items, food, soft drinks, water, and beer. Since the Bolovens elevation of 4,000 plus feet precluded landing, tin sheeting for roofs was air dropped on the Plateau. White Star teams on R&R were ferried between Laos, Udorn and Bangkok by L-20 pilots.

Because of the L-20's limitations, and especially cancellation of the ill-supported Kha program, the Beaver contract was terminated in October. (Many wags joked that Beaver pilots carried only verbal messages for hundreds of miles.) The unused planes were stacked near the fence at the western end of the Air America taxiway, pending a decision on their disposition. When the Helio Courier demonstrated an ability to perform safely and reliably, the Beavers were remanded to the U.S. Army inventory. ⁶

WASHINGTON

During the third week of April National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy forwarded a memorandum to the Secretary of State, the Secretary of Defense, and the Director of the Central Intelligence Agency and others with a need to know:

⁶ Segment Sources:

Jim Coble Emails, 03/19/02, 05/13/02. Jim had previously flown a couple trips with Beal and even attempted to get into the Beaver program.

EW Knight Emails, 02/22/01, 05/05/02. Wayne only knew Beal casually. The accident was a case of the wrong aircraft; too heavy at a high altitude. It was the end of Beaver operations in the elevated regions of Military Region Two.

CJ Abadie Emails, 06/09/02, 06/10/02. The Beaver program was another attempt to introduce aircraft into Laos without much financial support. It was on a par with the H-19 program; old underpowered aircraft, not suited for STOL work. William H. Beale, a Tachikawa pilot, was assigned to run the program as the initial Chief Pilot. He was not happy with the program and vocalized this on many occasions. Bill was a great guy and a good pilot. We were all saddened when he crashed. Abadie saw graphic photos of the burned bodies and later contributed them to the Air America archives at University of Texas, Richardson, Texas.

CIA, Operational Casualties in: Southeast Asia, 12/01/62; Joe Leeker, Military Aid, 17-18.

"The President has authorized the Secretary of Defense to plan for the withdrawal of those MAAG White Star teams in Laos which are located in forward field positions. Approximately 7 or 8 White Star Teams would be withdrawn to the rear echelon and would remain in Laos until their normal tour of duty expired. Their replacement will be decided upon subsequently.

The withdrawal will take place at such time as the Secretary of State deems appropriate; it is not presently contemplated that this would occur before May 7th, 1962.

The Secretary of State will prepare an appropriate public announcement of the action at the time the withdrawal takes place. Prior to such time every effort should be made to keep this matter confidential."

This decision was likely based on the attempt to defuse the gathering storm about to unfold in Laos. ⁷

⁷ National Security Action Memorandum no. 149, Withdrawal of certain military units from forward positions in Laos, 06/19/62. NASM, #189, 09/28/62. President Kennedy approved retention of U.S combat forces in Thailand pending development of further events in Laos.

As April, normally the hottest month of the year, commenced, events in northwest Laos rapidly moved toward a predictable and ultimate conclusion as the communists stepped up their offensive toward their target of Nam Tha. Estimates of a hundred artillery rounds (specifically 120mm mortar fire) landed in the valley every day, delaying the arrival of the remaining parachute battalion (BP) from the Seno base in Military Region Three.

MAAG noted little change in the tactical situation.¹ By the second week in April, Commander Brigadier General La Pathammavong was ordered to the front to resume the eastern offensive, after several GM commanders had been relieved because of poor leadership. Two FAR infantry battalions moved out, but made little progress.² However, from established hill positions east of Nam Tha, with little opposition, the 55th Parachute Battalion managed to reposition onto high ground five miles further east toward Ban Na Mo by the 10th. Following the BP's successful movement, the infantry managed small gains before meeting resistance that stalled the unit.³ Soon afterward, on the 16th, elements of BP 11 jumped into the Nam Tha valley.⁴ Bolstered by their success, over the next few days, the 55th twice attacked enemy positions. Supported by the First BP, they failed, and enemy counterattacks consequently dislodged them. By the 21st, the battered units joined with a friendly force ten miles southeast of Nam Tha at Ban Nam Pick. The following day, pressured by enemy small arms and

¹ Joint Chiefs of Staff, 178, 197.
Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 71.

² Oudone Sannikone, 107.
JCS, 178.

³ JCS, 197.
Oudone Sannikone, 108.

⁴ Ken Conboy, 72.
Shelby Stanton, 29.

mortar fire, diminished paratrooper units and other FAR elements pulled back to the front lines around Nam Tha. ⁵ Because of a relatively high casualty rate, even though many more enemy casualties were claimed, the costly engagement reduced the two BP's functioning power as effective fighting forces.

As a stopgap measure to stiffen a shallow eastern front from the rapidly encroaching enemy and losing a key ridgeline, over a period of a few days, General Phoumi rushed the remaining portion of the "elite" 11th Parachute Battalion into the valley. With these new troops on the ground, the five infantry and three parachute battalions, totaling 4,500 men fortifying the site, were considered sufficient to outnumber enemy forces estimated to number six battalions. ⁶

Daily artillery and mortar fire continued from both sides. On 27 and 30 April FAR units repulsed company sized probes on their defenses.

A large-scale battle plan had been in place by North Vietnamese military leaders to counter Phoumi's efforts to maintain large forces in northwestern Military Region One. North Vietnamese Army Colonel An, who had commanded a regimental unit at the Dien Bien Phu battle, was the Headquarters Chief of Staff who coordinated efforts to move supplies to the battlefield and planned the main assault on Nam Tha. Supply lines were very long and logistics proved difficult over 300 miles of arduous terrain.

With North Vietnamese supply lines stretched to the limit and troops reduced to starvation rations, final movement to the front lines began on 25 April. ⁷

⁵ Joint Chiefs of Staff, 207.

⁶ JSC, 211, 217.

Suspecting the addition of these government troops to be offensive rather than defensive, Ambassador Brown frowned on the movement.

⁷ Submitted to the Author by former CIA operative and published author James (Mule) Parker in 2013.

During a visit to Marshall Sarit in Bangkok seeking additional support, Lao leaders Prince Boun Oum and General Phoumi soon realized that the political attitude of their staunchest ally had drastically changed. Influenced by Averell Harriman, the Thai ruler was now firmly convinced that formation of a bona fide coalition government remained the sole option to maintain a free Lao society. Phoumi departed Thailand harboring doubts regarding the success of his military venture. ⁸

"The extent to which Thai leaders were able, during the recently concluded Laotian goodwill mission to Bangkok, to influence Phoumi toward reaching an accommodation with Souvanna Phouma is not clear. Phoumi has told the U.S. Ambassador in Vientiane, however, that he considers Souvanna's mandate to form a coalition government still valid and will take no action that might revoke it. Phoumi said categorically that he would not go ahead in the near future with the project of forming a government under the King--a scheme strongly opposed by both Souvanna and the Pathet Lao.

The Laotian Foreign Ministry has asked the Laotian charge [Fr] in Paris to sound out Souvanna as to what assurances he would be willing to grant in return for concessions on the key ministerial posts of Defense and Interior. The charge is also being asked to ascertain Savanna's views on the present political impasse and the date of his return to Laos..

Meanwhile, the Vientiane regime is under increasing economic pressures as a result of the suspension since February of American financial support, amounting to the withholding of 3,000,000 monthly" ⁹

Losing political support of normal allies, and casting the proverbial die with a final troop reinforcement, nothing earthly could be done to save Nam Tha. On 2 May, front line FAR battalions successfully repulsed yet another major communist probe on the complex's southeastern defenses. However, nine enemy battalions attacked during the early morning hours of 3 May, causing the loss of the vital Moung Sing airfield, an important government outpost

⁸ Charles Stevenson, *The End of Nowhere: American Policy Toward Laos, 1954* (California: Beacon Press, 1972), 174.

Arthur Schlesinger, 432.

⁹ CIA Bulletin, Daily Brief, Laos, 05/01/62.

located twenty-miles northwest, which produced a serious blow to FAR resupply capability and particularly to troop morale. Up to that point, despite a previous ten days of minor skirmishing, western flank defense positions and the important supply point in the Moung Sing valley had continued to support Nam Tha. With only minimal resistance encountered, the enemy attacked and detained forty-six FAR warriors.¹⁰

Later in the morning, an Air America helicopter crew perched on a hilltop overlooking Nam Tha sighted a Lao-piloted cargo plane descending overhead toward Moung Sing. Dan Alston hurriedly raised the aircraft on VHF guard frequency (121.5) and informed the crew of the unfolding situation at his proposed destination. Despite Alston's timely warning, the pilot elected to land. Presenting a sitting target, heavy enemy fire burned the C-47 and killed the crew.¹¹

Later rumors and gross speculation regarding Moung Sing's capture alluded to initial Chicom military involvement in the area. According to Customer Bill Young's sources, during the engagement, Chinese troops crossed the border and dislodged friendly units from northern Nam Tha outposts.^{12 13}

From Vietnamese historical archives in Hanoi:

¹⁰ Arthur Dommen, 217.

¹¹ Dan Alston Interview Mobile, Alabama, 09/22/99.
EW Knight Email, 01/03/02.
Hugh Toye, 196.

¹² As often stated in the past, Chinese troop involvement in Laos was considered unlikely by Agency sources. However, passage of Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese units through Chinese territory was believed allowed, as was logistical support furnished by Soviet and North Vietnamese airlift.

¹³ Bill Young Interview.

CIA Special National Intelligence Estimate (SNIE 58-3-62) Implications of the Fall of Nam Tha 05/09/62.

"On 3 May our troops captured enemy outposts on the outer perimeter and high ground dominating the enemy's outer defenses.

On 5 May, all units launched ferocious attacks into the center of the Nam Tha military complex.

On [5 and] 6 May the enemy retreated from Nam Tha. We pursued them to Vieng Phu Kha and Ban Pung [Poung], twenty kilometers [north of] Houei Sai city." ¹⁴

After denying Moung Sing as a resupply base for FAR units, and taking up positions at Moung Lang by 5 May, the enemy noose tightened measurably around Nam Tha. ¹⁵ The hard lessons and trenching techniques, so successfully employed by General Giap's troops during the French-Vietminh battle at Dien Bien Phu, also served North Vietnamese Army veterans well at Nam Tha when they captured a friendly outpost only 2,500 yards to the east on 4 May. This action prefaced a major offensive leading to the imminent and decisive battle. ¹⁶

HAMBLIN

Bob Hamblin, a twin Beech Baron pilot recently hired by Bird and Son--Air America's theoretical competition--conducted last minute evacuations at Nam Tha on 5 May. With Chief of Maintenance Cye Engalls in the cockpit to teach him the country, he conducted early morning personnel shuttles from Nam Tha south to the Mekong River town of Ban Houei Sai. After a second trip, while landing on the dirt strip a stray rock deeply sliced the right main gear tire, which subsequently blew out during an extended roll out.

An American missionary, his wife, and two pre-teenage daughters lived at the besieged site. The family nearly remained too long, but now with the "barbarians gathering at the gates," they prepared to board the pastor's Cessna 180. Before departing to safety, the minister offered Engalls use of his tools and entire aircraft parts inventory located in a small shed adjoining the runway. Discovering neither a jack nor a spare tire, the mechanic asked a departing Air America crew to request that Bird and Son Vientiane send the required

¹⁴ *History of the Vietnamese Volunteer Groups and Vietnamese Military Specialists in Laos, 1945-1975.*

¹⁵ Marek Thee, 250.

¹⁶ Arthur Dornen, 217.



Nam Tha, Laos. Left to right: First Officer Jerry Souders, Captain "Fighter" Barry Cox, White Star U.S. Army Special Forces Customer, and Bird and Son Beech Baron Captain, Bob Hamblin.

Knight Collection.

equipment on a returning flight. None arrived. Close to noon, the crackle of gunfire and artillery barrages intensified and reverberated throughout the valley. Obviously, the few grains of sand remaining in the eleventh-hour hourglass were diminishing by the minute. Hamblin realized that they must leave soon. Scouting the area once more, Engalls formulated a plan. He hastily rounded up Lao soldiers standing by to board Air America planes. With their help, he dug a hole around the afflicted tire. Then he found a fifty-five-gallon fuel drum and a discarded Jeep tire. As soldiers raised the right airfoil, he slipped the drum and cushioning tire under the wing tip. Repeating this upward process, he gradually worked the barrel close to the landing gear. Digging continued, finally resulting in a hole in which the tire at full strut extension did not touch the ground.

Engalls then removed the wheel without difficulty, and the two Bird and Son employees strode to the missionary's shed to search for some means to patch the tubeless tire. Several options failed. Then Engalls spotted three fifty-foot half-inch hemp rope coils hanging on the wall. First, he burned hot patches over the cut tire, and then covered these with cold patches. Next, he coiled almost the entire three lengths of rope tightly around the inside of the tire until it appeared sufficiently "inflated." The patches held. After reinstalling the wheel, the ultimate test of the unique endeavor awaited Hamblin's takeoff.

It was nearing sundown by the time they completed repairs. The PIC of the final C-46 evacuation plane waited patiently, as some of his passengers lifted the Baron off the barrel and steered it away from the hole. Tension mounted as the twin engine Baron crew prepared to depart. Now Hamblin must either attempt to fly out of that "damned" valley, or destroy the machine and catch a ride south on the C-46. Despite an unbalanced, heavy load on the right side, the ersatz tire remained intact while he barreled down the grass runway and lifted off the deck. Hamblin glanced back over his shoulder and observed the C-46 rolling down the runway behind him. At the moment Hamblin's plane broke ground, a mortar round exploded in the center of the runway a hundred feet to the rear of his aircraft. Despite being a near miss, the shell fragments failed to damage the ship. Hamblin then turned south toward Ban Houei Sai.

During the remainder of his Southeast Asian tour, Bob Hamblin fondly recalled the

assistance Air America provided him on that momentous day. ¹⁷

For a time throughout the stressful period leading up to the final battle at Nam Tha, the Udon Operations Department assigned four H-34 crews to work at Luang Prabang. Because of the steadily deteriorating situation, Customers rarely scheduled Nam Tha RONs during the first week in May. Two crews worked at Site-100 during the day, then rotated back to the royal capital in the evening. The following day, the other two crews worked in the barrel. After reporting to the White Star team commander for assignments, crews resupplied positions in and around the Nam Tha Valley. ¹⁸

THE LOSS OF NAM THA

On 5 May, Captains Bob Hitchman, Dick Elder, and "Russ" Russell flew Commanding Officer Brigadier General La Pathammanvong and several field grade and general officers into Nam Tha to direct the action and bolster troop morale. The commanding officer's refrigerator and personal goods sat onboard one helicopter. Before the high-level officers departed for the command post, a subordinate officer advised helicopter crews that they would all spend the night in the valley. He further cautioned them that under no circumstances should they attempt to depart Nam Tha without the general and his staff. If they attempted to leave, strategically positioned guards would not hesitate to shoot them. There may have been method in this madness for, according to Special Forces Sergeant Donald Valentine, radio operator of the B-Team in Luang Prabang, in a ploy often used by the enemy to diminish RLA resolve to fight, a communist officer would radio the Lao commander and inform him of the number of troops, mortars, and cannons he had at his disposal, that the final attack would commence at

¹⁷ Bob Hamblin eyewitness account in Email to Wayne Knight, 01/01/01, which Knight subsequently passed to the Author.

¹⁸ EW Knight Email.
Dan Alston Interview, 09/22/99.

¹⁹ Donald Valentine *Memoirs of a Lifer: 1st Special Forces Group and White Star Mobile Training Teams in Laos* (<http://www.don-valentine.com/gruntp.htm>, Chapter 2 1997) 12.

dawn, and that the North Vietnamese unit would eat the livers of FAR dead and wounded. ¹⁹

Air America crews billeted in tents that night near a battery of six 105mm howitzers. At 2400 hours, the outer FAR defensive perimeter began collapsing. After an incoming mortar round exploded in close proximity, Russell dashed outside and jumped into a rice paddy. When no one else followed, he decided everything must be all right and returned to the tent. Another round hit even closer. This time the entire White Star team rushed out, leaving Russell sitting in a chair without a clue as to what to do. Finally, a sergeant arrived, mustered the crews, and moved them from the exposed tents to a rice paddy. For several hours, while FAR platoons scurried around the valley like rats, the Americans followed them to several different locations. ²⁰

By 0300, after moving along the Moug Sing Road recently vacated by the reluctant BP unit tasked to retake the town, the main enemy assault force, consisting of four battalions, employing mortar fire and .50 caliber weapons, struck the northwest perimeter. Later, coordinated battalion attacks commenced from the high ground east, northeast, and southeast.²¹

Before dawn, mortars dropped into the White Star compound and near town. Soon the Tom Dooley Foundation's Saint Patrick Hospital caught fire. At daylight, anxious to depart the besieged valley, ranking FAR officers converged on the helicopters. They boarded with all their household goods. In the confusion and scramble to depart, no one bothered to alert the White Star teams.

Senior pilot Bob Hitchman departed first. Despite a pre-briefing pin-pointing the enemy location one mile north, Bob flew over a 12.7mm machine gun, and received heavy ground

²⁰ Dan Alston Interview, 09/22/99.
Dick Elder Letter, 08/09/91.

Dick Elder Reply to Author's 12/07/91 Letter.

²¹ Arthur Dommén, 217.
Roger Hilsman, 141.

fire. To avoid duplicating Hitchman's mistake, Dick Elder wisely climbed through a thin cloud layer that enveloped the valley and both ships proceeded south toward the river. ²²

As Parachute Battalion One dashed through town at high port, and FAR leaders helicoptered out of the valley, panic ensued among remaining rank and file troops. By 0700 hours, FAR artillery personnel began spiking howitzers. Then, without informing American advisors of their intentions, following the BP, they moved out smartly on the road leading to Ban Houei Sai. ²³ Recognizing a general FAR bug-out in progress, the White Star team radioed their situation to Luang Prabang, then destroyed all their equipment, including two Jeeps, and re-positioned to a pre-designated emergency landing zone. ²⁴

During the morning that overwhelmed Nam Tha was falling, Charlie Weitz and Dan Alston RONed at Luang Prabang. They were awakened early when the crank type field phone, plumbed into the crew villa from White Star's B Team house, rang. The Army radio operator informed them of the Site-100 team's serious predicament and urgent request for evacuation.

By the time the helicopters arrived in the valley, heavy fire pounded the Beaver strip, forcing the team leader to promptly select an alternate landing zone.

Red and Charlie retrieved all the American WS-MTT personnel by 0900. Before departing the area, Captain George O'Brian, a furloughed commercial aviation pilot Alston had known at National Airlines, arrived overhead the valley intending to drop a load of "hard rice" on the strip. Weitz advised him of the strip's questionable status, but the PIC adamantly insisted on discharging his load. Frustrated by the man's stubbornness, Charlie sarcastically radioed, *"Well, go ahead and drop. I'm sure the PL will appreciate it."* O'Brian finally grasped the serious implications of Weitz's statement and followed the helicopters to Luang Prabang. Once relieved by fresh crews, who went back to Ban Houei Sai to accomplish what was possible, they all partied for the remainder of the day with the elated and grateful Army survivors. During the drunken festivities, the team members continuously reiterated that if the pilots ever

²² Dick Elder Reply to Author's 12/07/91 Letter.
Dick Elder Phone Conversation, 09/07/92.

²³ Ken Conboy, 72.

²⁴ Shelby Stanton, 30.

required something from them to just ask.²⁵

Encountering little actual resistance or physical contact, enemy forces completely routed the FAR infantry battalions. However, while most infantry units plodded southwest in relatively disorganized columns toward what they considered safety, some parachute units resisted minor enemy pressure. The ninety-mile surge down the unimproved road to Ban Houei Sai continued unabated for several days. Demoralized troops streamed past rural hamlets, villages, and through valleys containing larger population centers at Ban Vieng, Ban Tha Fa and Ban Poug.

"Communist forces apparently are moving rapidly to exploit their success at Nam Tha. They have occupied Vien Pou Kha, thirty-five miles southwest of Nam Tha on the trail to Ban Houei Sai, a key government strong point located on the Thai [Lao] border. Government troops withdrawing from Nam Tha reportedly have established a new command post at Ban Ta Keo, five miles to the south of Vien Pou Kha. It is doubtful, however, that they could offer serious resistance to any determined enemy advance on Ban Houei Sai.."

*Soviet Foreign Minister Gromyko, meanwhile, has turned down a British request for Soviet participation in a joint appeal by the Geneva cochairman to the International Control Commission for an early report on the Nam Tha incident..."*²⁶

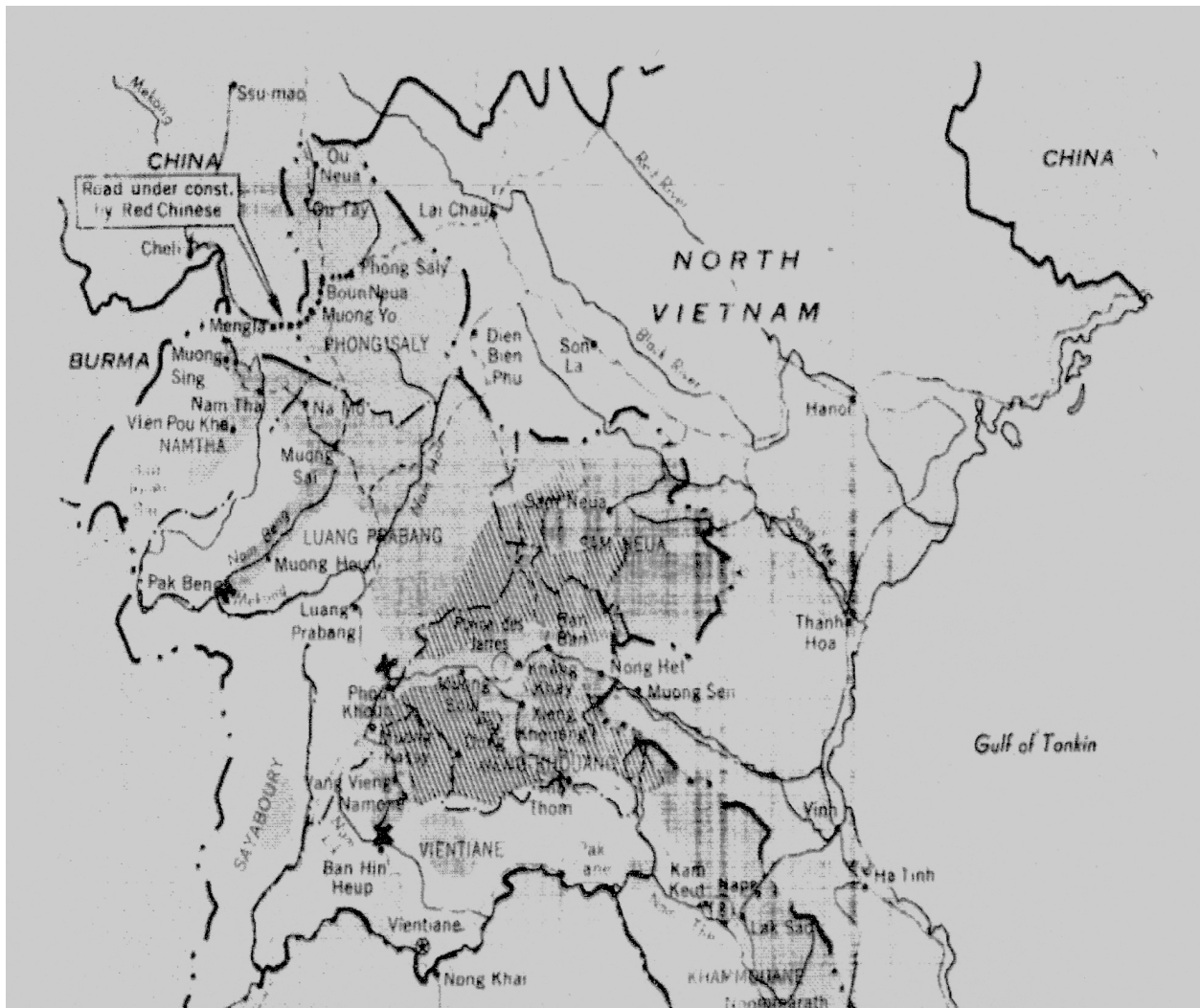
"The initial orderly withdrawal of government troops from Nam Tha toward Ban Houei Sai, the government's alternate command post near the Thai border, apparently has turned into a rout. Chief MAAG, General Tucker, who visited Ban Houei Sai on 9 May, reports that Lao army commander General Bounleut hopes that the former Nam Tha garrison troops can be regrouped for a stand a few miles outside the border town. On the basis of his findings, however, General Tucker estimates that the combat effectiveness of the retreating government troops is nil. They are approximately 30 miles, or two days march from Ban Houei Sai."

On the basis of findings by its Watch Committee, the United States Intelligence Board [in Washington] on 9 May reached the following conclusions concerning Laos.

"The seizure of Nam Tha has compromised the RLG position in all northern Laos [MR-1],

²⁵ Dan Alston Interview, 09/22/99.

²⁶ CIA Bulletin, Daily Brief, Laos. 05/09/62



Stretching northwest from Luang Prabang to China and Burma, Military Region One included Nam Tha, Vien Pou Kha and the town of Ban Houie Sai on the north bank of the Mekong River.

CIA Map, 05/10/62.

including the defense of Luang Prabang. Enemy pressure continues on RLG troops withdrawing from Nam Tha. Enemy actions against other RLG-held areas are possible. Lao government positions in southern Laos remain vulnerable, and the enemy retains the capability to move against any population centers with little warning.”²⁷

AFTERMATH

Over the next few days, pursued by enemy units as far as Vien Phou Kha and Tha Fa, thousands of soldiers and panicked refugees from abandoned villages located along Route-3 poured into Ban Houei Sai’s small river town.²⁸ The schoolhouse, and thatched or wood frame, tin-roofed structures quickly overflowed with humanity. Other people lined the riverbank, spilling over onto sandbars while awaiting any mode of transportation to Thailand. Rumors soon circulated of enemy troops close on their heels about to attack the town. Then, when people heard a few desultory shots outside of town (probably from disgruntled FAR), the spooked masses crossed the Mekong River any way possible. According to second-hand information, several individuals drowned in overloaded boats. At Chiang Kong, elements of Thai military units patiently waited to sequester weapons, provide housing, and temporary sustenance to those who had survived the crossing. Following the panicked exodus, except for the few remaining White Star personnel, who prematurely burned selected buildings and destroyed ammunition, Ban Houei Sai was rapidly reduced to a ghost town.²⁹

KMT

Shaming the Lao Army, the 111 Special Chinese KMT battalion attached to Nam Tha, like U.S. Marine units at the Chosin Reservoir in Korea, fought a slow “advance in the opposite direction” until 12 May, and then broke contact with the enemy.³⁰

During this period, ordered by the MAAG chief to remain in Laos and defend the Ban Houei Sai airfield, twenty-one White Star Mobile Training Team members (WSMITT) camped at the town. Searching for a way to perform such an impossible task should the enemy actually appear on the town’s outskirts, a FTT captain, soliciting help to defend the airfield, contacted the

²⁷ CIA Bulletin, Daily Brief, Laos, 05/10/62.

²⁸ Marek Thee, 250.

²⁹ Joe Flipse Email, 05/06/97.

³⁰ Ken Conboy, 73.

KMT commander. The Chinese officer dearly wanted to kill Vietnamese, and vowed that his troops would never let them take the strip, but negotiations failed, probably due to the political ramifications.³¹ Thereafter, first serving in the Beng Valley and then at Nam Tha, disgusted with FAR's inglorious battle performance, the Chinese unit disbanded and withdrew from the field.

THE DOOLEY LEGACY

At Ban Houei Sai, before and during the RLA's mass departure from Nam Tha, a Special Forces "A" team resided in Doctor Tom Dooley's former bungalow on a hill north of the Mekong River.

A small Dooley clinic had first begun operating at Vang Vieng. Then hospitals were erected at Nam Tha in 1956 and at MOUNG SING in 1958. Dooley and three former U.S. Navy corpsmen chose Laos to work because the entire country possessed only one trained doctor. The bamboo and thatch facility at Nam Tha consisted of a surgical ward with fifteen beds, a medical ward with woven thatched throw mats for thirty people, an operating room, and an out-patient clinic. Without electricity, X-ray equipment, or plumbing, Dooley and his crew treated one hundred patients daily for tuberculosis, malnutrition, diphtheria, dysentery, pneumonia, small-pox, and other indigenous diseases.

According to Freedom of Information Act documents obtained by Father Kegler, OMI Director of King's House of Retreats in Buffalo, Minnesota, not all Dooley's activities pertained to altruism and humanitarian pursuits. While likely not actually working for the Agency, Dooley kept CIA Case Officers informed on enemy troop movements and villager sentiments within walking distance of his Nam Tha Province Lao hospitals.

Following Dooley's death from terminal cancer in January 1961, the Medical International Cooperation Organization (MEDICO), a non-sectarian group established in 1957 to provide medical service to villagers in foreign lands, established a final clinic at Ban Houei Sai.³²

An old French fort and small hospital sat close to the small house. A frail,

³¹ Don Valentine, 20, 23.

³² Mac Thompson Email, 12/30/98.
Joel Halpern, 27.

bespectacled German doctor, assisted by an American, managed the hospital. After several evacuations across the river and back to the hospital, each time punctuated by major trashing of his clinic, the stressed Doctor Wiedermann lost control and attempted to slit his wrists. The White Star medic watched over him, but somehow the addled physician acquired a .45 caliber pistol and wounded himself in the head. Despite having a sizeable portion of his skull and brain shattered, the doctor clung tenuously to life. Tom Moher, RONing with the team, recommended that he evacuate the injured man immediately to the Chiang Rai, Thailand, military hospital. He indicated that the emergency flight would necessitate a one-way trip, and he would return to Ban Houei Sai in the morning. However, the White Star leader prevented him from leaving, for his H-34 ensured the team's only avenue of escape should the military situation rapidly deteriorate. In addition, current SOP prohibited night flights in the sector. Alternatively, they administered available aid to the critically injured man. The doctor moaned pitifully throughout the night and mercifully died toward early morning. ³³

PUNCHING BACK

Responding to the MAAG order to pursue contact with the enemy, team members patrolled a considerable distance north on the Nam Tha Road. H-34 pilots shuttled Americans and Lao "commandos" from the Thai refugee camp to positions where they probed several miles northeast toward Ban Pong and beyond. Over a few days, they established roadblocks at intersections, accomplished some light enemy contact, and encountered minor firefights. Throughout this period, White Star personnel utilized Air America helicopter crews to move equipment, and ferry, support, and extract team members from tenuous situations. ³⁴

During an 8 through 11 May visit to Southeast Asia by the Secretary of Defense, Robert McNamara, General Boyle, outgoing Chief of MAAG Laos, presented a critical summary of the recent events in Laos. A version of the situation closely paralleled other official reports.

³³ Tom Moher Tapes.

Don Valentine, 10, 24.

Mike Marshall Phone Call, 09/23/91.

³⁴ Don Valentine, 15, 19.

However, he added several additional personal comments and viewpoints regarding the fall of Nam Tha, mainly stating that, to no avail, he had earlier appealed to the Lao military leadership to readjust their low ground defenses at Nam Tha; the Lao trooper involved in the fighting presented a reasonably good account, but officer and NCO leadership proved unsatisfactory. This deficiency was widespread, and what was left of the Lao Army could not be expected to acquit themselves with any effectiveness in the future.

Particularly damning, the general harbored doubts as to any actual violence during the fighting, for the [Lao] field commander prevented direct U.S. observation of the operation, and few actual casualties were noted.

More unsettling was his pronouncement that a substantial logistical (enemy) build-up was occurring along the entire former ceasefire line. Logistic activity in the Tchepone area was growing, and an attack could be expected in the general area. ³⁵

Three days after the fall of Nam Tha, the Agency produced and disseminated an assessment of the communist victory. The depressing report indicated that the withdrawal of RLG forces from the Nam Tha area eliminated government authority in all northern Laos, and opened western Luang Prabang Province and all Houa Kong Province to communist domination. It was believed that with nothing to stop them, the enemy would continue to roll up the area and eliminate Ban Houei Sai as a viable government post in northwestern Laos.

Discounting the garrison's loss of equipment and supplies, which could eventually be replaced, the combat effectiveness of the beaten and demoralized battalions was reduced to zero. As a result of General Phoumi Nosavan's investment in men, materiel, and highly publicized stand, he was certain to lose prestige within the RLA and Souvanna Phouma's government, and call into question the army's confidence and willingness to continue the fight.

In contrast to former skirmishing and pecking, the enemy attack on Nam Tha constituted a major departure from the technique of low-key conflict and a gross violation of the 1961 cease-fire agreement. The beginning of a general offensive throughout the country was not envisioned by prognosticators, but, lacking any Royal Lao Government and USG response to the

³⁵ Visit to Southeast Asia by the Secretary of Defense 8-11 May, 1962, Conference with Chief MAAG, Laos, FRUS 1961-63, Volume. 2, Vietnam, 1962, 180, (www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_ii_1961-63/p.html), downloaded 4/16/02.

victory, further enemy attempts on the scale of Nam Tha to dislodge government forces from other sites was believed possible.

After achieving the projected goals in northwest Laos, and gaining valuable logistical experience in harsh terrain and combat, North Vietnamese Army units were ordered to withdraw to North Vietnam, leaving the field to their Pathet Lao surrogates.³⁶

*"The Americans and their puppets reacted violently to this painful blow. On the night of 11 May, President Kennedy held an urgent meeting of his National Security Council and decided to 'prepare to intervene in Laos.'"*³⁷

CONSEQUENCES AND BEYOND

The rest is consigned to history and future books. The geopolitical implications of Nam Tha's loss were broad, and required timely U.S. military action to preserve allied cooperation and unity within the Southeast Asian Theater. Likely influenced by the timely introduction of Task Force 116's Third Marine Expeditionary force (MEU), which initiated the Author's participation in this portion of the Theater and other U.S. military elements into Thailand during mid-May as a show of force to create a balance of forces, enemy leaders who were satisfied with their immediate political and military goals never moved their men much beyond the gains achieved at Nam Tha.³⁸

The fourteen books that follow will document and trace the Second Indochina War in Laos and the Author's participation as a civilian in the long conflict.

³⁶ SNIE 58-3-62, #357.
Jim Parker.

³⁷ Vietnamese Military History.

³⁸ For additional information regarding the Nam Tha episode refer to Author's books two and three.

EPILOGUE

Of course, this relatively brief account of the early Air America era in Laos is not the end of the story, but merely the beginning. Fourteen volumes, including the Author's Marine Corps service and subsequent books sequentially covering the Lao war through June 1974 will follow.

Many of the principals mentioned in this work, with whom I worked for years, have passed to celestial realms. Over time, from the Air America permanent pilot ranks mentioned in this book, Tom Moher, Billy Pearson, Ed Reid, Charlie Bade, Mike Weinberg, J.J. McCauley, Dan Gardner, Bob Hitchman, John Fonburg, Herb Baker, Charlie Weitz, and others have vacated our ranks. As to the rest, time is rapidly running out for those associated with our era, and constant updates are necessary for the epilogue.

Until moving to another state, Clarence Abadie lived about an hour north of the Author in Tickfaw, Louisiana, where he affected the demeanor of a country gentleman, nurtured hawks, and piloted a self-built autogiro and single seat gas turbine helicopter.

After working in Singapore and Russia, Charlie Weitz retired and lived in Sarasota, Florida, until his death in 2016. Dick Elder and other former Air America compatriots continue to live in the same area.

Wayne Knight immigrated to Australia and worked as Chief Pilot for an offshore oil company in the Indonesia area. Following retirement, he toiled on his fruit orchard, but now is fully retired.

Following stints with the U.S. Customs Department that took him back to many of the battlefields in Laos, Jim Coble finally settled in North Carolina. However, finding the climate too hot and humid, Jim relocated to the highlands of Mexico where he claimed that life was good. Following the death of his wife Bonnie, he moved back to North Carolina.

Dan "Red" Alston retired as an airline captain and the last time I saw him, having divorced his wife Jane, he lived in Mobile, Alabama. Uncharacteristically, Dan painted for a hobby.

After leaving Air America, Jackson Forney worked in management for aerospace companies. Retired, he now lives with his wife Judy in California.

Many Customers still wander the earth. Like military generals during times of crises,

EPILOGUE

they never quit working and respond when called.

Bill Lair shared his time between a business in Bangkok and Texas before the passing of his wife. Bill then passed at a ripe old age in 2014.

While I was interviewing Bill Lair in Bangkok, a mutual friend of Bill and former Case Officer at Ban Na, Brian Mills, provided me with information concerning his time at that site.

Bill Young resided in Chiang Mai where he spent his formative years. He passed in 2011.

Tom Fosmire is deceased.

Jack Shirley, Pat Landry, and Bob Moberg passed in Thailand.

Don Courtney remained with the Agency until retirement. He now lives with his wife Anita in Montana and has provided much interesting eyewitness information for this and later books.

Our beloved and respected Tony Posephny, who eventually returned home to live in San Francisco with his daughter, departed our ranks during June 2003. His family and all who had the pleasure to work with him sorely miss the intrepid and legendary warrior. Although America produces many stalwart patriots, I doubt there will ever be another combatant and character quite like Tony Poe.

After the fall of Laos, pressured by encroaching communists at Long Tieng, Vang Pao left Laos with many of his followers in 1975 to settle in the U.S. He touted the Meo--now called Hmong--cause, and his old warriors seek veterans' status. Vang Pao passed in January 2011.

I have not heard of Kong Le's passing, so assume he is still living in Paris, where he settled after being expelled from the neutralist command structure.

While gathering information for this work, I have indeed been fortunate to converse either on the phone or by E-mail with several temporary crewmembers. Without their verbal input and photos, I never could have compiled this story. In fact, a partially written draft gathered dust on Smith Corona word processor discs for many years because of a dearth of information. Now, at the risk of boring potential readers, there may be too much.

While on a jaunt with my wife Prapapon to Harrah's Casino at Tunica, Mississippi, I visited former Temporary Flight Mechanic, Bert Palmer, in Hernando, Mississippi. At the time, Bert spent his days fishing in a nearby lake. He now lives somewhere in western Tennessee

near Knoxville.

Fred Sass, who lives in Panama City, not only contributed valuable information, but also provided several precious photographs. Much of his interest stemmed from a desire to write a memoir for his children. I talked to Fred in early 2022. He still lived in Florida.

After selling a thriving dentistry practice and semi-retiring, Jim Haver still lives in the far Northwest. Upon leaving Air America, Jim searched for events of the Air America experience from the deepest recesses of his memory. With gentle coaxing, he has provided far more information regarding his tenure than he ever imagined possible.

Of all the Air America's Temporary pilots, Malcolm Bird offered the most interesting and colorful accounts relating to the period. Unfortunately, some of Malcolm's peers failed to share his extraordinary recall or enthusiasm for the project so many years after the fact.

Bird retired from the Marine Corps in 1975 to pursue other interests. He worked for Merrill Lynch for five years, then he built a house for his family. Next, he started a business in the health construction business. After outpatient surgeries, he built another house, and now resides in Franklin, North Carolina. In 2014, while compiling his events in Laos for his children and posterity, Bird contacted me requesting information recorded in this book.

Jerry Buffington also provided information. Buff retired as a commercial airline captain, and passed in 2010.

According to Malcolm Bird, respected Flight Mechanic Carl Diggs attended the U.S Army flight training program, obtained flight wings, and was killed in South Vietnam.

In my quest to gain additional information regarding Temporary pilots who purportedly refused to fly H-34s north of Vientiane, I queried Don Babitz. Cooperative, Don kindly sent me his flight records and several photographs. However, he failed to recall major events while serving with Air America. His selective memory is somewhat explainable, since he remained in the Marine Corps for thirty years, achieving the rank of a full colonel. Subsequent Vietnam tours, where he distinguished himself, and a long career quite possibly dimmed his memory of those early years.

Bill Leary, aviation author and professor of history at the University of Georgia continued to teach and also write about aspects of the Air America era until his untimely death from throat cancer in 2005. His original notes provided me with starter information long ago during a three-day visit to my house. Bill also proffered advice regarding writing:

EPILOGUE

"use strong verbs". Courtesy of his wife Martha, supplements are now posted on the Internet and have been quite valuable in directing me to individuals and reliable facts.

Ron Clarke, along with his Air America experiences, provided me with nearly one hundred color photos of Thailand and Laos. Many of these are intertwined in the narrative and duly credited. Having grown up repairing trucks for his Dad's business, after the Los Angeles Air helicopter bankruptcy, he gravitated to this form of work, owning and operating a filling station/garage for thirty years. He resides today in the Big Bear Lake resort area of California. Ron misses aviation and claims he always will.

My son Peter has helped with copying and inserting photos, and computer technical issues.

Lastly, Pat Whitacre, wife of a former Kappa Sigma brother at Duke, has taken an avid interest in my work. An accomplished author of three books and editor of civil projects, Pat has spent hours providing major editing recommendations as to grammar and some content. She is interested in seeing the books reach publication. Hopefully, this will be achieved. ©

Work last edited 08/31/17, 01/05/18, 03/18/18, 04/09/18, 04/17/18, 04/29/18, 05/08/18, 07/08/18, 07/23/18, 07/25/18, 08/27/18, 09/12/18, 10/02/18, 10/23/18, 02/04/19, 02/11/19, 02/27/19, 06/23/19, 07/08/19, 07/29/19, 08/20/19, 08/22/19, 11/27/19, 12/03/19, 06/14/20, 07/29/20, 04/26/21, 07/02/21, 04/11/22, 06/25/22.

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AAA	Anti-Aircraft Artillery.
12.7 MM machine gun	A lethal Soviet AAA weapon.
AACL	Asiatic Aeronautical Company Limited.
AAM	Air America, Inc.
AB-1	Generic term used for the CIA unit in Udorn coordinating the tribal war effort in Laos against the communists in Laos.
A/C	Aircraft.
ACPH	Assistant Chief Pilot Helicopters.
ADC	Auto-Defense de Choc-mountain village home guard.
AFS	AAM Air Freight Specialists. Also known as Kickers on cargo planes.
AFB	Air Force Base.
A-frame	A device used in the field to help mechanics change H-34 engines and main rotor blade transmissons.
Agency	Term the Author substitutes for CIA.
Agony	Name for VS-26, a very difficult site for fixed wing pilots to work.
AGL	Above Ground Level.
AGP	Aircraft grounded parts.
Air America, Inc.	A CIA proprietary airline in Asia. Main headquarters in Washington, D.C.; Asian headquarters located in Taipei, Taiwan.
Air Asia	The maintenance division of the Company, located at Tainan, Taiwan.
AIRA	U.S Air Force Air Attaché imbedded in the Vientiane U.S Operations Mission to provide air operations advice to the U.S. Ambassador.
Airdale Corporation	A Delaware corporation, formed by the CIA in 1950 as a holding company to acquire the stock of CAT. Name changed to the Pacific Corporation in 1957.
Air Opium	A drug running operation conducted by Corsican pilots out of Laos.
AKA	Also known as.
AK-47	An efficient Soviet high rate of fire, automatic assault rifle.
AMFPA	Air Material Force Pacific Area.
AMHFO	Acting Manager of Helicopter Flight Operations.
Angels	Military term used to assign or specify a flight altitude.
ANL	Armee National Laotienne-anglicized-Lao nationwide Army, 1949-1959.
AN-9	"Angry Nine" WW-2 vintage manually run high frequency radio.
APM	All pilot's meeting.
APU	Auxiliary Power Unit. A small gasoline run generator installed in the aft right cabin section of a H-34 to provide electricity if necessary.
ARMA	U.S. Army Attaché same as AIRA, but provided advice on ground issues.
ASAP	As soon as possible.
ASE	Automatic Stabilization Equipment installed in the H-34.
ASL	Above Sea Level.
AT-6	T-6 training aircraft retrofitted to carry machine guns and rockets.
A-Team	Special Forces field team; B-Team was the headquarters unit.

AVG American Volunteer Group. Flying Tigers. Aviation unit sent to counter Japanese aggression in China, 1941-1942.

AWOL Absent (from a base) Without Leave (authorization).

BAR Browning Automatic Rifle. WW-2 weapon that formed the squad base of fire during an engagement.

BACI A Lao party to celebrate almost any type of occasion.

Balance of Power Approximate equalization of military forces in a given conflict.

Ban Lao house or village as in Ban Na.

Bay of Pigs Ill-advised attack on Fidel Castro's regime by expatriate Cubans. Sponsored by CIA/USG, the attack failed because of unanticipated resistance and lack of air support.

BD Battle Damage. Damage to an aircraft in a hostile area.

B-26 Invader A three-place, midwing, twin engine, all metal monoplane, light -bombardment aircraft fitted with tricycle landing gear.

B-52 Multi-engine USAF bomber used extensively in the Vietnam War.

Beaver Single engine DeHaviland DHC-2 or L-20 plane used for cargo or passenger delivery. The plane was not suitable for work in Laos.

Beech Baron Twin engine Bird and Son plane staged at Udorn and used by Customers for transportation to upcountry sites.

Bird and Son A "competitive" airline based at Wattay Airport, Vientiane, Laos. Also called Bird Air or B&S.

Black A clandestine or highly classified mission.

Black Ace A Naval aviator who crashed, or was involved in five aircraft crashes. Contrasts with an "Ace," one who has shot down five enemy planes.

Black Box Term used for electronic equipment contained in a metal box that controlled a specific system like the auto stabilization equipment.

BM Base Manager.

BOQ Military Bachelor Officer Quarters.

BP Bataillonde de Parachutistes. Anglicized to Parachute Battalion.

BPP Thai Border Patrol Police.

Bullets, Beans & Bandages Term used to describe the tools of war.

Bungalow Term for the hotel at Luang Prabang. Also known as the Phu Si.

Bug Out Slang for a military (Lao) unit' unauthorized departure from the field of battle.

Burp Gun Nine-millimeter drum fed Soviet and Chinese weapon.

BV Bataillon Volontaire. Anglicized, Volunteer Battalion.

Cannibalized A grounded aircraft stripped for difficult-to-obtain parts.

Case Officer Agency field-assigned personnel, who advised and coordinated between guerrilla units and Udorn headquarters. Always capitalized to denote respect the Author had for these brave men.

C-4 A composition C plastic explosive.

C-7 Caribou Twin-engine propeller type STOL cargo aircraft.

C-45 Beech Twin engine passenger aircraft used in naval training for radio instruments.

C-47 Twin-engine propeller transport aircraft. USMC version was called a R-4D; civilian a DC-3.

C-119 Flying Boxcar Twin-engine, twin-boom, high-wing, propeller transport.

C-124 Globemaster Large four-engine propeller aircraft.

C-130 Hercules Four-engine turboprop, high-wing transport.

CAT Civil Air Transport. Purchased by the CIA in 1950.

CATC Central Air Transport Corporation. Chinese government airline flying commercial routes in China during the postwar period.

CATI Civil Air Transport, Inc. Incorporated in Delaware in 1949 as a means to acquire the aircraft assets in Hong Kong.

CEO Chief Executive Officer.

CG Center of Gravity.

CHECO Contemporary Historical Examination of Current Operations.

ChiNat Chinese Nationalist.

CIA Central Intelligence Agency. Main intelligence arm of the USG.

CINCPAC Commander-in-Chief Pacific. Based in Hawaii.

CNO Chief of Naval Operations.

CNAC China National Aviation Corporation. A sino-American airline.

CNRRRA Air Transport Airline formed in 1946 to operate in China. Became Civil Air Transport in 1947.

COD Cargo Onboard Flights. Delivery to a carrier by a S-2F crew.

COLA Cost of living allowance.

Company Capitalized term Author uses for Air America.

CONEX box A large sturdy steel container used to transport materiel by sea to a destination.

CONUS Continental United States

CO Commanding Officer.

COS Agency Chief of Station.

COU Agency Chief of Unit.

Crew Chief Military term for a non-aviator in charge of the well-being of an aircraft. Known as a Flight Mechanic with Air America.

Customer Anyone we worked for while upcountry, but more focused on an Agency type.

CYA Descriptive term for Cover Your A--.

Dead Soldier Term used for an empty bottle of alcohol.

DD/A Deputy Director for Administration.

DOD Department of Defense.

DOH Date of Hire.

Don Muang International airport located north of Bangkok, Thailand.

DZ Aircraft Drop Zone.

ECCOIL Eastern Construction Company in Laos. Mostly staffed with Filipino Technicians.

E&E Escape and Evasion.

Erawan Special Forces refresher training for FAL troops at Lopburi, Thailand, 1959-1960.

There was also an Erawan Hotel located in Bangkok.

FAC A three-headed elephant that appeared on the Lao flag.

FAC Forward Air Controller.

FAL Forces Armees du Laos-anglicized-Lao Armed Forces, 1959-1961.

FAR Forces Armees Royales-anglicized-Royal Armed Forces, 1961-1975. Succeeded the FAL.

Feet Wet Navy/Marine radio call to alert interested parties that the entity has departed the beach for the ocean.

Field Expedient Clever adjustments by motivated mechanics to perform field repairs without proper tools available at a maintenance base.

First Indochina War French-North Vietnamese war in Indochina, 1945-1954.

Flight Mechanic Capitalized term used by the Author in recognition of the crewmembers' excellent work. Called crew chiefs in the military.

FM Frequency Modulation. A radio installed in the H-34.

FM Flight Mechanic

Four Deuce 4.2-inch mortar assembly.

FRUS U.S. Foreign Relations.

FTT U.S. Special Forces Field Training Team.

F/W Fixed Wing.

GCMA Groupement de Commandos Mixte Aeroportes-anglicized-Mixed Airborne Commando Unit.

Geneva Accords 1954 agreements leading to French forces withdrawal from Vietnam and separation of the country into North and South. It specified Laos as a neutral country and restricted outside military forces in the kingdom.

GI Gastrointestinal

"Gs" Forces of gravity other than the normal amount imposed on the body during certain aircraft maneuvers.

GM French designation for Groups Mobile adopted by the Lao Army; A GM consisted of three infantry battalions and a 105mm howitzer.

Golden Worm Slang term used for CAT's Convair 880 Mandarin jet (B-1008).

GP A large military general-purpose tent.

Gung Ho Derived from a Chinese phrase. Originated by WW-2 paratroopers, who shouted the phrase when departing a plane. It evolved into something showing high spirit or motivation.

Gyrene Slang for GI Marine.

HAPC Helicopter anti-Submarine Plane Commander.

Hard Rice Term used for boxed ammunition carried by cargo planes.

H-19 Sikorsky (S-55) all-metal, semi-monocoque fuselage transport helicopter. The three-rotor bladed lift system with anti-torque device was designated a HRS in the Marine Corps; H04S in the Naval training command.

H-21 HUP Twin rotor helicopter. Used in training at Ellison Field, Florida.

H-34 Sikorsky (S-58) transport helicopter. Four bladed rotor system equipped with a more powerful engine than the H-19. Designated HUS-1 in the Marine Corps.

H-43 Kaman Small helicopter with counter rotating rotor blades. Used for reconnaissance in the USMC; to fight fires in the USAF.

H-47 Bell Small twin rotor reciprocating engine bubble type helicopter. Designated a HTL-6 in the PNS Naval training command at Ellison Field Pensacola, Florida.

HF	High Frequency; a transmit-receiver radio installed in the H-34.
High Port	Military term for moving out quickly.
H&MS	Marine Corps aviation Headquarters and Maintenance Squadron.
HMM	Designation for a HUS-1 USMC medium helicopter squadron.
HMR	Helicopter medium; this term preceded HMM.
Ho Chi Minh Trail	The communist logistical supply route (LOC) from North Vietnam into Laos and south along the eastern border into South Vietnam and Cambodia.
Hotel ----	Air America call sign and marking for the H-34. Phonetic alphabetic letters were initially used; i.e. Hotel Alpha, Bravo, Charlie...
Hot Soup	A thickened mixture of drummed gasoline delivered by AAM crews on enemy positions at the behest of Special Forces personnel.
HQMC	Headquarters Marine Corps located at Quantico, Virginia.
HSS-1	Navy version of the Marine HUS-1.
HT-1	Hand held receiver-transmitter radio used by Customers to converse with aircraft crews.
HUK	Communist insurgents in the Philippine Islands, mostly Luzon.
HUS-1	Helicopter Utility Sikorsky. Later called a H-34.
IATA	International Air Transport Association.
ICA	International Cooperation Administration.
ICC	International Control Commission.
IFR	Instrument Flight Rules; a term used mainly in the USA.
IL	Ilyushin. Designation for Russian aircraft designed by Sergei Ilyushin.
IMC	Instrument Meteorological Conditions; term used mainly overseas.
In the Blind	Radio transmission without direction to any specific person or location.
IQ	Intelligence Quotient.
IP	Instructor Pilot.
IRAN	Inspect and Repair as Necessary. Maintenance conducted in Saigon.
JCS	Joint Chiefs of Staff.
JFK	President John Fitzgerald Kennedy.
JUSMAG	Joint U.S. Military Assistance Group.
Karst	Described as an irregular limestone peak or region with jagged ridges, sinks, underground streams, and caverns. They proliferated throughout Laos, but more prevalent northwest of Thakhet in MR-3.
Kha	Like Meo, a generic, pejorative term used for lowland tribal clans inhabiting remote areas of Laos.
Kicker	Crewmember of a cargo plane who loaded and pushed supplies out over a drop zone. Also known as an AFS.
Kilometer	A standard of metric measure not common in the USA. One kilometer is equivalent to .6214 statute miles.
KIP	A Lao monetary unit
KL	Kong Le; a neutralist military leader.
KMT	Kuomintang, political party of the Chinese Nationalists. Term used to designate Chinese Nationalist forces in Burma and Laos.
LAA	Los Angeles Airways. A FAA 135 helicopter operation that went

bankrupt.

Lagniappe French word for a little more received than expected.

Lao Issara Lao Independence movement, 1945-1949.

Lao Theung Mon-Khmer minority in Laos.

LOC Line of Communication. Usually a road or similar artery.

Long Tom Soviet long barrel 85MM field howitzer.

LP Luang Prabang; the royal capital of Laos in MR-1.

LZ Helicopter Landing Zone.

M-1 .30 caliber Garand rifle, standard issue for infantry troops in WW-2.

M-3 Nine-millimeter, multi-firing tanker weapon issued in WW-2; also known as a "Grease Gun."

MAAG Military Assistance Advisory Group.

MACTHAI Military Assistance Command, Thailand.

Madriver Code name for the early AAM Udorn, Thailand helicopter operation.

MEDICO Medical International Cooperation Organization.

Mekong A Thai whiskey tasting much like kerosene.

Meo Generic term used throughout the war for mountain people resisting the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese in Laos.

Memo Memorandum.

MEU Marine Expeditionary Mission.

Mil-1100 Designation of the oil used to lubricate the H-34 R-1820 engine.

Mil-5606 Designation of the red hydraulic oil used in the H-34 systems.

Milk Run An easy, stress-free flight.

Millpond A 1961 U.S operation planned to retake the Plain of Jars employing B-26 and H-34 equipment and crews.

Momentum Code name for early paramilitary operations in Military Region Two.

Moment of Truth An incident that requires an aviator's full attention, skill, and an abundance of luck to survive.

Monsoon Seasonal winds in SEA that blow from the southwest Indian Ocean during April to October and from the northeast out of China the rest of the year.

MR Military Region in Laos.

MTT Mobile Training Team.

Murphy A mythical entity, who purportedly delivered on the principle that what can go wrong, will go wrong-particularly in aviation.

Nai Ban Village Chief in Laos.

NASM National Security Action Memorandum.

NAS Naval Air Station.

NAVCAD Naval Air Cadet undergoing flight and officer training at NAS Pensacola, Florida. Later designation became MARCAD for Marine Air Cadet.

NBC National Broadcasting Company.

NCO Non-commissioned officer.

NDB Navigational non-directional beacon.

NLHS Neo Lao Hat Sat. Political arm of the communist movement in Laos.

NMCB Naval Mobile Construction Battalion-Seabees.

NSC U.S. National Security Council.

NVA North Vietnamese Army; also known as PAVN-People's Army of Vietnam.

NVN North Vietnam.

OB Operation Brotherhood. A medical program run by Filipino doctors, dentists, and nurses staged at various clinics throughout Laos.

OICC Officer in Charge of Construction.

OJT On-the-job-training.

Old Timer Term used for an AAM helicopter pilot who had been with the Company for some time.

OM Operations Manager at an Air America base.

OMI A Catholic order of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate.

OPC Office of Policy Coordination. USG's covert arm, 1949-1952.

Opium An illicit drug derived from the white sap of a poppy.

OPLAN Military Operations Plan.

OSS World War Two Office of Strategic Services; U.S. intelligence agency from 1942-1945.

PACAF Pacific Air Force.

Pacific Corporation A Delaware holding company, originally named Airdale and formed as a cover for various airlines operating in the Far East.

Landing Pad Another term for a helicopter landing zone.

PARU Highly trained Thai Police Aerial Reinforcement Unit.

Pathet Lao Military portion of the communist movement in Laos.

PDJ Plain of Jars. A strategic, and historic, high plateau in MR-2.

PDM Periodic Depot Maintenance.

Pentagon Pentagonal shaped building in Washington containing the Department of Defense and representatives of all branches of the military, where high level planning and decisions were made.

PEO Programs Evaluation Office embedded in USOM.

PIC Pilot in Command.

Pincushion Special Forces program to train tribal clans on the Bolovens Plateau and the Saravane MR-4 area in guerrilla warfare.

PL Pathet Lao.

PNS Pensacola, Florida.

POL Petroleum, Oil, and Lubricants.

Pri-fly Primary flight deck on a carrier where air traffic was controlled.

PSP Pierced Steel Planking. A product used to rapidly construct a runway.

PX Post Exchange. Establishment for military personnel to purchase sundries.

QEC Quick Engine Change. Generally mounted on an "A" frame and transportable to the field by fixed wing or helicopter.

RAG Replacement Air Group.

RB-26C Reconnaissance version of the B-26 plane.

Red Cap Agency Logistics unit located on the military side of Don Muang Airport, Bangkok, Thailand.

Red Lined Cautionary marking on an aircraft cockpit instrument.

RF-101 Reconnaissance version of the McDonnell F-101 jet.

RLA Royal Lao Army.

RLAF	Royal Lao Air Force.
RLG	Royal Lao Government.
RMI	Radio Magnetic Indicator. Cockpit instrument used for both VFR and instrument navigation.
RON	Remain Overnight.
RO	Requirements Office. Inserted within the U.S Embassy structure.
Round Eyes	Term some Asians used for foreigners, particularly Americans.
R&R	Rest and Recuperation.
RPM	Revolutions per Minute.
RT-33	Reconnaissance version of the T-33 jet.
RTA	Royal Thai Army.
RTAF	Royal Thai Air Force.
RTG	Royal Thai Government.
SAT	Southern Air Transport. A subsidiary of the Pacific Corporation.
SAR	Search and Rescue.
Sarong	A tube type skirt worn by most Lao women. The fabric clung to the body in a most fetching manner.
Save Their Bacon	Slang for escaping a bad situation.
SDO	Squadron Duty Officer.
SEA	Southeast Asia.
SC-47	C-47 reconnaissance type aircraft. Also used as the VTE Embassy liaison plane.
S-2F	Twin engine plane used to deliver personnel and goods to a carrier.
Sea Supply	CIA's commercial cover in Thailand.
SEATO	Southeast Asia Treaty Organization.
Second Indochina War	Hostilities between U.S. surrogates and communist sponsored forces.
Sheep Dip	A term used for military personnel temporarily removed and records expunged from a respective service to conduct sensitive work.
Sierra	Preface for listing sites in Thailand, as Sierra-08-Udom.
SITREP	Situation report.
SNIE	Special National Intelligence Estimate.
Sikorsky Hotel	Term used for sleeping in the H-34 when no other accommodations were available to crews.
Skoshi Cab	Small Japanese taxi.
SOP	Standard Operating Procedures.
Special Forces	Elite U.S. military crossed trained in basic and specialized skills; organized into small teams to train, organize, supply, direct, and control foreign forces in guerrilla warfare, counterinsurgency, and unconventional operations.
SGU	Lao Special Guerrilla Units.
Special Mission	An extra hazardous operation conducted mainly by AAM helicopter crews.
Spook	Slang term often used for a Central Intelligence agent.
Squaw	CAT operations in support of the French military in 1953 Indochina.
"Stick Buddy"	U.S. Army term for a second pilot in a helicopter cockpit.
STO	Monthly Scheduled Time Off the flight schedule. Synonymous with R&R.
SVK	Savannakhet.

SVN	South Vietnam.
TAD	Temporary Additional Duty.
"Tail End Charlie"	Term to describe an aircraft last in line.
TBO	Time before overhaul. The R-1820 engine TBO was initially 600 hours. This was later reduced to 300.
TCN	Third Country Nationalist. A worker hired by AAM from Taiwan or the Philippines.
TDY	Temporary Duty away from a main base.
Temporary	Term used for Sheep Dipped military pilots introduced to the Lao war during March 1961.
Temporary Wife	Term used by Air America personnel to describe a live-in Thai woman.
TF	Task Force.
T-6 Texan	Propeller type single-engine, two seat, conventional gear, low wing Trainer airplane. Called a SNJ in the Pensacola training system.
T-28 Nomad	Propeller type training plane used at NAS Pensacola. Retrofitted to mount machine guns, rockets, and bombs in South Vietnam and Laos for close air support missions.
Tom Dooley	A former U.S. Navy medic who gave his life developing clinics and hospitals to treat people in remote regions of Laos.
TPE	Taipei, Taiwan.
Tracking flag	A hand held device by mechanics to check a H-34 main rotor blade track after changing a blade or rotor system component.
Turtleback	A louvered metal cover on the rear portion of the H-34 main transmission compartment.
"Two Rag Leaker"	Term used to describe a bad oil leak from the H-34 R-1820 engine.
U-2	A Lockheed manufactured single-engine, high-altitude reconnaissance "spy" plane with glider like characteristics.
U-10 Helio Courier	Single engine propeller, STOL aircraft.
UDT	U.S. Naval Underwater Demolition Team.
USAF	United States Air Force.
UN	United Nations.
Upcounty	Term used by Air America helicopter pilots to describe work in Laos.
USAID	United States Agency for International Development. Also seen as AID.
USARPAC	U.S. Army Pacific.
USG	United States Government.
U.S.	United States.
USMC	United States Marine Corps.
USN	United States Navy.
USOM	United States Operations Mission.
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republic.
Valid and Reliable	Agency term for vetted intelligence information.
Vertical Envelopment	USMC concept to deliver troops by helicopter into a war zone.
VHF	Very High Frequency; radio system installed in H-34.
Viet Minh (VM)	Vietnamese guerrilla forces fighting the French for independence.
Ville	Village.
VNE	Velocity Never Exceed. A red lined airspeed for aircraft.

VPFO	AAM Vice President of Flight Operations.
VPO	AAM Vice President of Operations; original title for VPFO.
VP	Vang Pao. The civil and military leader of the Meo in MR-2.
VTE	Vientiane; the administrative capital of Laos.
V Leg	Newer model H-34 landing gear designed to reduce or eliminate ground resonance the original "bent leg" gear was susceptible to on aircraft carriers or on uneven ground.
VIP	Very Important Person.
White Mice	Term used by Americans for South Vietnamese police in Saigon.
White Star	Mobile Special Forces teams assigned to Laos to train FAR and Meo guerrilla troops.
WIA	Wounded in action.
WSMTT	White Star Mobile Training Team.
WW-2	World War Two.
XO	Executive Officer.