

**RICE, REFUGEES, AND
ROOFTOPS**

AIR AMERICA, INC.

BOOK TEN

1969

BUDDHIST ERA 2512

YEAR OF THE COCK

Harry R. Casterlin



Air America Captain barracks cap and shirt wing emblems.

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INTRODUCTION

Each year flying civilian paramilitary--a misnomer by any name--combat and supply missions in the theoretically neutral country of Laos for Air America, Inc., ¹ presented the Author with interesting and exciting experiences, including numerous variables, and immensely challenging work. Constants seldom existed on the Lao Second Indochina War battlefield, with any two situations rarely equal.

There was a down side for a motivated aviator working in the Lao war zone. Because of political considerations that largely depended on resolution of the South Vietnam conflict, the relatively unpublicized Lao conflict was generally considered a "no win" situation for both the Royal Lao Government and USG; it was merely a pragmatic holding action and buffer zone to allow Thailand sufficient time to strengthen its military posture, and an addendum to the overt war next door in South Vietnam.

Despite the hostile environment and some minor battle damage inherent in any job while flying in a highly fluid "low intensity" conflict, the primary negative factor involved in the work revolved around the inability of the Lao Army to assume an aggressive stance to strongly contest the home grown Pathet Lao and "dreaded" North Vietnamese enemy, and then to sustain a winning posture. Although easy to rationalize, it still grated on some of us who had been U.S. Marines and wholeheartedly believed that in war there was no substitute for victory.

Spilling over from the previous unsatisfactory year, in which the Royal Lao Army and General Vang Pao's guerrilla forces

¹A non-military arm of the United States Government-USG

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were negatively impacted militarily, 1969 in Laos did not usher in a sense of optimism for the kingdom's long-term survival. All of the previous façade was gone. Pathet Lao units no longer constituted the prime combatants against government forces. For the first time in the long war, instead of withdrawing to North Vietnam to rest and refit during the monsoon season, substantial North Vietnamese Army forces remained in forward positions to continue the conflict in Military Region Two (MR-2).² Aiding this new development, they were well supplied and maintained by adequately stocked caches of "bullets, beans, and bandages" required to sustain the aggression. Therefore, Western intelligence sources expected and predicted serious trouble from the onslaught of North Vietnamese extraterritorial forces that appeared poised to envelop the entire country. There was some doubt that Laos would survive during the first few months of 1969, especially when enemy forces launched an expected, and impressive offensive in Military Region Two resulting in serious Royal Lao Government losses, to include Na Khang and Moung Soui. By the end of June, the situation in Military Region Two was grim indeed, portending a dire 1969/1970 dry season for the Royal Lao Army.

***"Oh, somewhere in this favored land the sun is shining bright;
The band is playing somewhere and somewhere hearts are light,
And somewhere men are laughing and somewhere children shout;
But there is no joy in Mudville-mighty Casey has struck out."***³

Like Casey's ignominious strikeout in Mudville depicted in Ernest Thayer's *Casey at the Bat*, there was no joy in Laos and little cause for optimism until an unexpected mid-year military

² One of five military regions in Laos.

³ *Casey at the Bat*, a poem by Ernest Thayer; first published under pen name Phin in 1888.

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reversal in Military Region Two, when the depressing military scenario surprisingly and radically reversed. Thanks to Military Region Two's commanding General Vang Pao's initiative, and the efforts of his intrepid Meo warriors' wet season offensive and seizure of the strategic Plain of Jars, which was greatly facilitated by intensive United States and Royal Lao Air Force bombing. This marked the first time in years that we held a winning posture in lower Military Region Two. However, as predicted, the successful offense campaign lasted only a few months. Nevertheless, time working on the Plain afforded the Author a pleasurable flying period, encompassing a high degree of satisfaction and sense of accomplishment. Flying supply and combat missions was enormous fun again and I could not get enough of it; I felt cheated out of my birthright when not working upcountry.

Since the North Vietnamese Army undoubtedly possessed one of the world's most experienced and preeminent fighting forces, given the size and power of Vietnamese forces, there was much skepticism that the diminished ranks of the Royal Lao Army, consisting mostly of Vang Pao's Meo forces in Military Region Two, could hold the vast Plaine of Jars (PDJ) for an extended period. This logical and realistic assumption eventually proved correct, but owing to the USAF's prowess in delivering increased air power, and to American civilian airborne supply vehicles, the Plain remained in friendly hands long enough for our "little" people to discover, capture, or destroy vast quantities of munitions, supplies, and other implements of war. This extraordinary feat quite likely influenced Paris negotiations and forced communist leaders to reset their projected timetable for efforts to conquer Southeast Asia and install their brand of hegemony. Moreover, the operation allowed Laos to remain a viable state for several more years.

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Toward the latter part of the year, Congressional hearings in Washington related to Laos revealed many facets of the previously furtive aspects of the war to the American public. In addition, the media, long thirsting for access to upcountry bases like that accorded in South Vietnam, was allowed passage north.

To repeat and if not already aware from reading the Author's previous books, the reader may be curious as to the reason the Author accorded a rather innocuous title to a largely war story. The series, which my wife calls the never-ending book, was originally envisioned to be just that-one work entitled, *The Night the Frog Ate the Moon*. This title was derived from an odd custom pervasive in some supposedly backward and superstitious cultures that considered an eclipse of the moon a sign that a celestial monster had returned and was attempting to terminate the world. Therefore, when the periodic phenomenon occurred, attempts were made to shoot the entity (in Laos a giant frog) off the moon by launching spears, arrows, rocks, or bullets to scare the perceived bogymen away. The process worked and the world was always saved.

As opposed to animist tribal peoples, much like the U.S. Marine Corps nighttime live fire training exercise called "The Mad Moment," to have fun, Buddhist Lao employed identical means to invest the skies with tracer bullets in the direction of the waning moon. If unprepared for the event, a casual observer or uninitiated soul in Vientiane, Laos might assume he was under attack or the object of yet another political coup.

As the Author's quasi-historical, political, and autobiographical work proceeded to address the Second Indochina War in Laos, and the number of books escalated, another author conversant with the era employed the frog theme for a second published work on the subject. Therefore, since there is no

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copyright protection for unpublished material, to avoid controversy or conflict, the Author obviously required another title. Lack of a suitable designation to somewhat describe and explain the Second Indochina War in Laos, as it related to the Air America helicopter program, a new title remained in limbo for some time-until conducting one of several interviews with former Air America helicopter Captain, Mike Jarina, in Milton, Florida. The inspiration for a new title occurred when Mike was describing his impressions of the Air America check-in process at the Company headquarters in Taiwan, Taiwan in 1965. During an interview in the security officer's office, Jarina inquired what he should answer when questioned by stateside friends regarding the nature of his job. With a straight face, the "former" Air Force man replied, *"Tell them you are hauling rice, refugees, and rooftops."* Bingo! After hearing this anecdote, my title was assured. Thus far, no other author has employed such a unique title.

Book Ten, as do all the previously unpublished tomes in the collection, relies on abundant research. The material also draws information from letters, interviews, flight logs, photographs, and memory to produce narrative. To enable and ease the reader's comprehension of names, places, and familiarity of events, photos and maps were accumulated for the Author's collection. Although sometimes stemming from second-and third-party information, and with some sources lost in the shuffle, every effort has been made to credit the original source.

The Author loathes historical revisionism pertaining to any Cold War events. Since he deems that nothing is more important in recording history than accuracy and consistency in reporting valid and reliable facts--"just the facts, son"--no attempt is consciously made to compress, modify, or otherwise skew actual historical events. Much of the era is reported as the Author

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perceived. However, if the reader discovers glaring errors in events, time frames, anecdotes, or other factors, he or she should direct them to the Author's attention for reflection and possible correction.

Serving to supplement a continuous and linear storyline, particularly when the Author was absent from the field, Internet Email and interviews with principals are liberally included.

The majority of research was laboriously compiled during previous decades and filed in individual folders for later composition. Unfortunately, except for Emails and notes from interviews, many who contributed to this multi-decade project, and who actually participated in the Lao conflict, are no longer available to confirm or deny information contained in this work. Because of finite cellular telomeres in the human body, and advanced years, this distressing situation accelerates as the years pass all too quickly.

Also helping to fill voids and to maintain a cohesive flow of narrative and consistency during the period's timeline, other writer's efforts are employed, as are attempts to footnote actual credits.

Lastly, the Author would like to salute and applaud the civilian men and women of Air America, Inc. (AAM), Bird and Son, (B&S) Continental Air Services (CASI) of all nationalities. These kudos include members of the Central Intelligence Agency and U.S. military services who participated in Southeast Asia during the frustrating Cold War era, unquestionably a prolonged period of conflict, one hopefully never to be repeated.

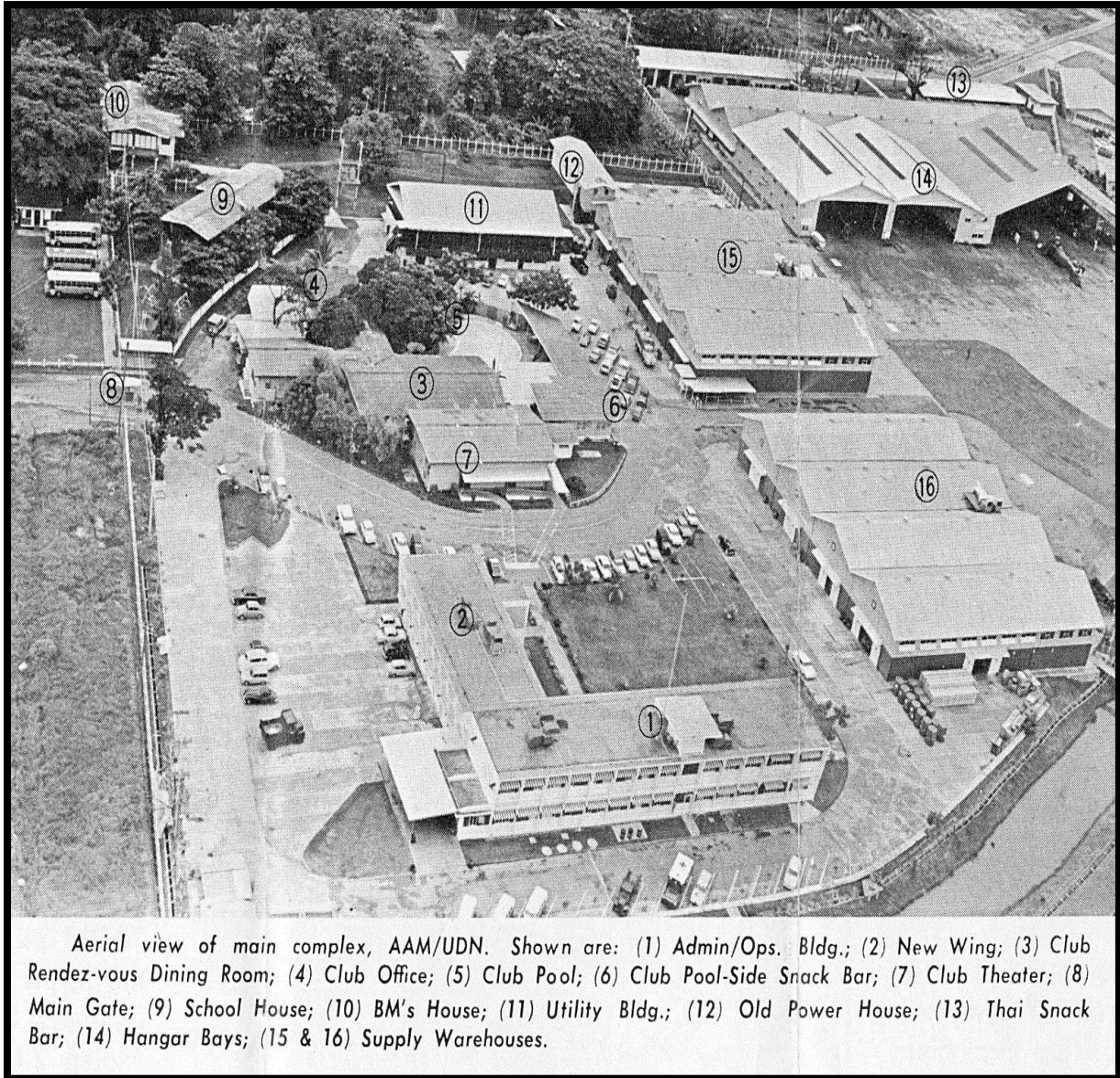
For many of those individuals who did not make the final cut...RIP.

HRC

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Air America's enclosed multi-million-dollar facility located at the Royal Thai Air Force Base Udorn, Thailand. The regional Royal Thai Army Base sits beyond the fence at the top of the photo.

Air America Log



Aerial view of main complex, AAM/UDN. Shown are: (1) Admin/Ops. Bldg.; (2) New Wing; (3) Club Rendez-vous Dining Room; (4) Club Office; (5) Club Pool; (6) Club Pool-Side Snack Bar; (7) Club Theater; (8) Main Gate; (9) School House; (10) BM's House; (11) Utility Bldg.; (12) Old Power House; (13) Thai Snack Bar; (14) Hangar Bays; (15 & 16) Supply Warehouses.

"It appears to be only a matter of time before most of the government's gains of the past several months will be lost. The situation at Na Khang, where the next major communist effort in the northeast may come, is quiet at the moment." ¹

Following General Vang Pao's (VP) late 1968 failure to recapture Phu Pha Thi (LS-85) ² in upper Military Region Two, as the enemy quickly consolidated its grip on the Site-85 area, under pressure Meo troops abandoned their bases and withdrew south and west to begin reinstating mid-1968 defensive lines. The pull-back left tribal and lowland refugees and their homeland exposed and subject to a new enemy policy, that of seeking to eliminate unfriendly villages and native populations in Houa Phan Province (commonly called Sam Neua). The reasoning was that the sites and natives previously provided safe launch sites and succor guerrillas conducting intelligence and harassing actions against Vietnamese lines of communication (LOC).

Toward the end of December and first week in January, as the area became increasingly unsecure for uprooted people, VP requested helicopter lifts for the 4,000--and increasing daily--refugee influx at Houei Hinsu (LS-215) west of Site-85. In yet another dislocation of people from harm's way, this evacuation was implemented during a five-day operation by USAF CH-3E and Air America helicopters and crews who moved thousands of individuals and their goods farther southwest to the huge United State Aid for International Development (USAID)-supported refugee center at Houei Tong Kho (LS-184). Ernie Kuhn, AID

¹ Central Intelligence Bulletin, Daily Brief, 01/14/69.

² Operation PIG Fat.

Representative for upper Military Region Two who marshaled the evacuation, encouraged those not transferred by air to walk southwest to Site-184. The evacuation was successful and most refugees who sought to avoid the clutches of the Vietnamese invaders willingly departed their former homelands.

After enemy success clearing government and Thai troops, and USAF radar technicians from strategic Site-85, the Sam Neua region was mostly devoid of government forces except to the far western hills. Since the site was of value as a base for road watch team intelligence gathering, radio intercept operations, and electronic guidance to USAF bomber strikes in North Vietnam, the loss was of incalculable assessment.

As a result of the loss, and with the advent of newly constructed all weather roads and forward supply caches along the Route-6/61/68 LOC complex, Vietnamese forces were well prepared to direct their annual dry season offensive further south than during previous years. It was time to pay the piper. With little remaining to deter Vietnamese movement, after well rested and refitted at Sam Neua Town, the spearhead of ethnically mixed 148 Regiment from the 316 Division began moving toward Na Khang, intent on battle. Sent south before the effort to retake Pha Thi completely unraveled, the 5th battalion from the 148th Regiment had been in the general Site-36 area since September. They probed, seized eastern outposts, and occasionally mortared the Na Khang airstrip, while preparing the area for the upcoming offensive. In response, government counterattacks were mounted to clear invaders in the immediate Site-36 area. During the action, the 5th was continuously savaged by air strikes. Suffering almost fifty percent losses, the unit stood down to await reinforcements.

During movement toward the Plain of Jars, communist activity increased a few miles southwest of Na Khang. Testing

Vang Pao's defenses for weakness, additional enemy units began pressure and probes on Phu Cum (LS-50) and directly across the Nam Khan Valley at Phou Vieng (LS-06). Fifteen miles north of Moung Soui, Phou Fa (Lima Site-16, also called Agony) and other government sites were probed. Pressure also was evident in large areas east of Long Tieng.

In upper Military Region One, the remote garrison at Nam Houn (LS-243) was evacuated. ³

MIKE JARINA

On the morning of 3 January, Captain Jarina and Filipino Flight Mechanic, "Moon" Centeno, test flew UH-34D Hotel-49 at the Air America (abbreviated as AAM) Udorn facility. Satisfied the ship was airworthy, Mike flew north to Vang Pao's multi-function base, Long Tieng, Laos to work the 713 contract. ⁴

An indigenous air operations officer had the aircraft loaded for Zone Steel, where some eastern areas were currently under increasing pressure from enemy forces. After flying more than sixty-six miles southeast over Padong Ridge and Padong (LS-05), past Ban Pha Phai (LS-65), Tha Vieng (LS-13), Tha Thom (LS-11), and Ban Tha Si (LS-63), Mike landed at the elevated regional headquarters site of Moung Moc (LS-46). Local work was

³ Ken Conboy with James Morrison, *Shadow War: The CIA's Secret War in Laos* (Boulder, Colorado: Paladin Press, 1995) 207.

Ken Conboy, *Indochina Report #19, Vietnam and Laos: A Recent History of Military Cooperation* (Information and Resource Center, April-June 1989) 7.

Wayne McDonnell, Abstract U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, *The North Vietnamese in Laos: 1951-73*, 48, 06/09/77.

Central Intelligence Bulletins, 01/14, 21/69.

⁴ From the very early years of the Lao conflict, the Agency was involved in advice, support, and conduct of tribal operations in the country. Contract numbers changed over time, the latest was recorded as 713 for Agency work.

followed by a flight forty-five miles northwest to San Tiau (LS-02). There he on-loaded refugees from the Ban Ban Valley and troops to populate and reinforce Thung Peeut (LS-202) a flanking position three miles northeast of Moung Moc.

Following a day supporting Zone Steel, Mike returned people to Site-20 Alternate and hopped over Skyline Ridge to Sam Tong (LS-20) to remain overnight (or RON) at the Air America hostel.

Activity under 713 in Zone Steel continued on Saturday when Jarina returned to Moung Moc. Still concerned with alerting village leaders to impending trouble, and moving people around to beef up pressured areas, the twenty-four-landing day included gathering a first-hand cross section of the latest intelligence relating to enemy movement.

Mike's first trip was scheduled forty-two miles southeast to remote New San Soak (LS-126), east of the Moan River demarcation line separating Xieng Khouang Province from Military Region Three's northwestern Khammouane Province. After collecting several troops and expecting another trip for additional men, he returned to Site-46 and worked the area.

Later, Mike flew twelve miles north-northwest to the grassy bowl near the Lao-North Vietnamese border, and one of the original Momentum sites at Moung Ngai (LS-01).⁵

After going to Ban Tham Tat (LS-81), six miles northwest of Site-01, Mike returned to San Soak to retrieve another load for Moung Moc.

At day's end, Mike returned to Sam Tong to RON.⁶

⁵When Meo resistance, advised and supported by the Agency, began in earnest in 1961 during the Second Indochina War, several original and strategic French-Meo marquis sites were assigned Case Officers, reinforced with Thai PARU and supplied by air drops. Many lay deep in enemy territory and were often pressured or captured.

SAN SOAK

Located more than one hundred miles east of Long Tieng, Site-126 and associated sites close to the North Vietnamese border had long been employed as early warning sites to relay enemy sightings and movement across the border toward government positions. ⁷ Where Meo sites were involved, military regional boundaries were blurred. Even though sites might be theoretically outside General Vang Pao's normal jurisdiction, the general had no compunction about occasionally visiting or dispatching his officers to the sites where extended families lived. Except on the border in Sam Neua Province, where ancient clan issues prevailed and often festered, Meo living in Laos consisted of his people with whom he shared a common bond, culture, language, and primarily a hatred of the North Vietnamese. ⁸

Vang Pao's influence and control was broad and extended anywhere in the country where Meo people resided (generally half the country in Military Region Two and Military Region One). Planes and helicopters crewed by Air America and CASI personnel provided him the means to access remote regions in Laos without political or other interference from the Royal Lao Army (RLA) General Staff or the U.S. Embassy in Vientiane.

Not long after arriving at Thakhet (Lima-40) in late March 1967, road watch Case Officer Mike LaDue realized that previous

⁶ Mike Jarina Interviews. Jarina's input has been instrumental in adding to the narrative and filling gaps when the Author was not in the field or not working in Mike's area.

⁷ For additional details see Author's Book-8.

⁸ Attesting to tribal clans' proclivity to excel in warfare, the North Vietnamese were quick to recognize the Meo and Tai Dam military merits and assimilate them into the North Vietnamese Army. Therefore, an autonomous tribal zone was established in northwestern North Vietnam, with tribal members forming a large portion of the formidable 316th Division, a crack unit that yearly invaded Sam Neua Province.

Case Officers had not been overly cautious in maintaining Agency-crafted cover stories to hide their primary activities in the river town. Moreover, a lack of interest among the local FAR⁹ garrison to provide for his personal security led LaDue to search for other more trustworthy people.

During the course of his duties, road watch Case Officer Mike LaDue occasionally journeyed from Thakhet to the northwest area. Having previously worked with the Meo in upper Military Region Two, he knew and respected their capabilities and loyalty. Therefore, he opted to form a small team for his personal protection. He selected ten volunteers, men and older boys from San Soak, to train and equip. He had this group delivered to Thakhet where they performed admirably well during his tour.

By the spring of 1969, with enemy resurgence in northwestern Khammouane Province increasing, San Soak and other Meo sites were abandoned and villagers relocated to new areas.

Preempting accelerating enemy movement and probes, the annual musical chairs drill continued the following morning. Ostensibly working for USAID, Mike Jarina flew past Pha Khao (LS-14) to MOUNG OUM (LS-22), an old site located in the valley east of Phu Bia, the tallest mountain in Laos. After a few local trips, loading troops, the crew of Hotel-49 departed for Ban Na (LS-15).¹⁰

⁹ FAR: The French acronym for the Forces Armees Royaume-the Lao Army.

¹⁰ For accounting purposes, lines differentiating 713 from USAID contracts often intertwined and were necessarily blurred. Actually, because Meo dependents often accompanied their men into the field, both operations merged. Because funds were ultimately derived from the same pocket, the system worked, but it all seemed silly to those of us working in the field.

Perched in a valley, The Ban Na runway was located on a prominent ridgeline nine miles north of Sam Tong. The village was located down slope and west to take advantage of defilade protection. Situated only six miles from the Plain of Jars, the old site had survived, but like redoubts anywhere, given enough men, materiel, and motivation, was accessible by a determined enemy.

After discharging the soldiers, Mike began shuttling refugees south to Phu Khan Hua (LS-251), one of the numerous refugee sites four miles southwest of the original refugee village at Ban Nam Moh (LS-207), also known as "Pearson's pad".

Jarina was relieved on the sixth and returned to Wattay Airport on Air America Porter, 97X and to Udorn on C-123 576. ¹¹

UPCOUNTRY

"Well I hope that I am over being sick.

We [in the Bell program] haven't been flying much, but my paycheck has suffered even more."

Author 01/24/69 Letter home.

I had contracted a nasty virus and was quite sick over New Year and the first week in January. Since Tuie was experiencing vague pains again, she, Ricky, our maid, and Bung Orn left for Bangkok to be close to the Bangkok Christian Hospital should the baby arrive early. I planned to go down when called.

¹¹ Author's numerous interviews with Mike Jarina, either at his farmhouse in Milton, Florida, or at the Author's house in Metairie, Louisiana. Fortunately, Jarina's logs and notes were comprehensive, and depicted work sites in various parts of Laos. These are liberally used to fill in gaps and more adequately delineate site locations and explain events.



Through seasonal smoke and haze, a view of the western Long Tieng complex. The large, paved parking-loading ramp is surrounded by a concentration of protective karsts. Part of the Air America crew hostel is seen at the top right portion of the ramp; the air operations building at the lower left. Road at the left of the mini-karst leads up a hill past an antenna farm to SKY headquarters and the Agency, Raven billeting area. Amid a hodgepodge of native housing, Vang Pao's stone house and officer messing facilities sit adjacent to the runway.

Author Collection.

On Sunday 12 January, Flight Mechanic Dave Crowell and I left Udorn in Papa Foxtrot Hotel (XW-PFH) for Long Tieng. It was the first time I had operated the machine since Ed Reid and Bill Hutchison crashed it at Na Khang in late September. Since we had so few Bells in our inventory, every aircraft was considered precious, and if there was any chance of repairing one, it was done. Fortunately, our Maintenance Department had evolved over the years to a point where major repair work, including a complete overhaul could be performed on almost any type of aircraft. Unlike "Humpty Dumpty," without benefit of license, UH-34D and Bell jigs provided the capability to repair and return to service even a severely wrecked machine.

After reaching The Alternate, we were loaded and assigned north to Site-36 to help supply outposts and improve defenses for an expected enemy offense.

Following a night in the Site-20A hostel, the long building squatting at the top of the large Long Tieng parking-loading-unloading ramp, we returned to Na Khang. During the day, we conducted an exfiltration of a road watch team located five miles east of Houei Sa An (LS-127). The hilltop was almost equidistant between Routes 6 and 61, logistic routes (LOC) winding south from Sam Neua into the Ban Ban Valley.

Tuesday found us again assigned to Na Khang, where we participated in the five-day refugee shuttles between Site-215 and Site-184, where friendly forces had been pared to a minimum.

Returning to Long Tieng after a long day in the saddle, I was informed that my relief pilot was in position, waiting to take over Papa Foxtrot Hotel. Just prior to dark, I was able to

board the last C-123, 4576 out of the bowl to Udorn. ¹²

Aside from potential hostile action, the reality of other real and present dangers while working Na Khang and its windy and treacherous landing zones often surfaced. There had been several accidents at the site. The year before, while flying a Bell 205 at low level to the TACAN site and perimeter pads, I had been caught in a downdraft and slightly damaged the underside of the tail boom on a ridge. The same year, while turning downwind after takeoff, Ed Reid and Bill Hutchison crashed into a muddy rice paddy east of the strip.

The day following my RON, while flying Hotel-30, Captain Tim Woosley experienced a severe downdraft and crashed on high ground four miles north of Site-36. Woosley and Flight Mechanic Baccay were relatively unscathed, but the H-34 required substantial repair. ¹³

On the 21st, an Agency report indicated:

"...small numbers of communist troops have been probing outlying government positions defending the key guerrilla base at Na Khang. The guerrillas have responded by trying to clear the enemy from recently captured positions from which mortar fire has been placed on the base's airstrip. There is no word yet on how this small counteroffensive is progressing, but another spoiling operation has blunted a communist push against

¹² If informed, PICs of planes returning south would normally wait for us. However, this entailed a helicopter pilot, after landing and securing the aircraft, to hurriedly gather maps, RON gear, and weapons for transfer to the deadhead plane. The C-123K models, then equipped with jet pod assist, could easily depart Long Tieng with considerably more payload as opposed to the bad old days when water injection (called ADI) was employed to momentarily cool the engine cylinders for added power. Even then, with any kind of load, the ships barely negotiated the south ridgeline.

¹³ Joe Leeker, *The Aircraft of Air America*, UH-34D Hotel-30.

government positions located between Na Khang and the Plaine des Jarres..."¹⁴

DOWN COUNTRY ACTION

"After a three week respite the government base at Ban Thateng has again become the target of North Vietnamese forces positioned along the [north]eastern rim of the Bolovens Plateau. The garrison was hit with a heavy mortar attack and light ground probes on 12 January, in what appears to be the start of a fresh campaign to force the government to surrender that strategically located position. As many as three North Vietnamese battalions are dug in around the base, and the weary 400-man defending force may not hold out even if the enemy does not launch an all-out ground assault.

Evidence continues to mount, meanwhile, that the Thateng operation is part of a wider communist effort to reduce sharply the government's presence around the Bolovens.

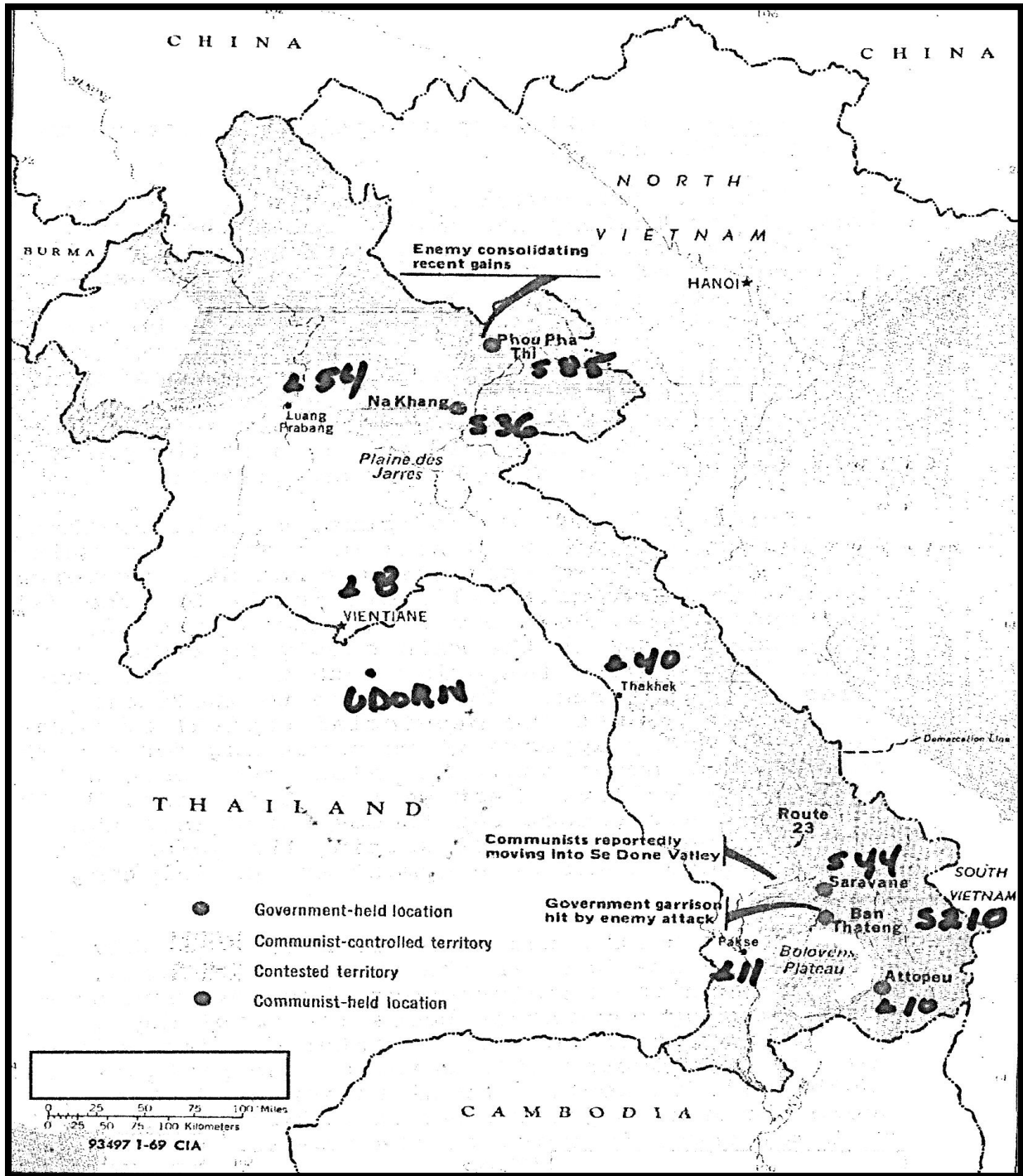
Last year at this time, North Vietnamese and Pathet Laos troops moved into the Se Done area and began offsetting the gains of a two-year government development...program [WAPI]."¹⁵

Enthusiastic enemy soldiers in the Pakse MR-4 region boasted to villagers that they would soon capture the Bolovens Plateau, seize Attopeu Town (L-10), and continue to march toward the Thai border.

Because of the successful U.S. pounding of enemy concentrations and supply lines, except for a substantial mortar attack and minor probes on 12 January, there was no follow-up pressure, and hostile activity at the Thateng (LS-210, PS-28) stronghold from the three reconstituted Vietnamese battalions

¹⁴ CIA Daily Bulletin, 01/21/69.

¹⁵ CIA Daily Bulletin, 01/14/69. Laos: The military situation is heating up again in the south.



Mid-January 1969 map displaying areas of enemy activity in upper Military Region Two and Military Region Four.

CIA Map, 01/14/69.

massed in the area. Therefore, to marshal their forces and prevent severe casualties like those experienced in December, enemy action was largely quiescent in January.

As intelligence indicated on 21 January:

"Only light skirmishing and patrol activity has been reported over the past several days near the Bolovens Plateau, where the heaviest fighting of the two-month old communist offensive has taken place. As many as three North Vietnamese battalions are still dug in around Thateng, but the enemy has made no effort to bring additional pressure on the base's tired defenders. Although heavy air strikes and government guerrilla operations are helping to keep the communists at bay, it may be that the North Vietnamese are not willing to run the risk of another costly all-out assault." ¹⁶

An enemy resurgence to capture the area and secure LOCs leading to base areas began during the first week in February and subsequently diminished, largely because of massive U.S. air strikes, aerial scattering of mines, and barbed wire, and the combination which discouraged enemy units from attacking the 400 government defenders in force. The air activity allowed a company of relief troops and vital supplies to be shuttled in by helicopter. But pressure from four or more Vietnamese battalions still continued on the area, which was calculated to reduce government presence around the Bolovens Plateau.

As an Agency report speculated:

"Although the air strikes may initially prove effective, the outlook for the heavily outnumbered government relief force and garrison does not appear bright." ¹⁷

¹⁶ CIA Daily Bulletin, 01/21/69. Laos: The military situation is quiet as the communists prepare for the next round of their dry season offensive.

¹⁷ CIA Daily Bulletin, 02/11/69. Laos: The government is making a last effort to relieve the besieged garrison at Thateng.



Bold print shows locations of enemy pressure in north and south Laos.
CIA Map, 01/21/69.

Efforts to relieve pressure against the garrison achieved some early success. As per Ambassador Sullivan, helicopter support during Thateng's defense was supposed to be conducted exclusively by RLAF crews. However, Lao Air Force pilots complained of heavy ground fire while attempting to perform supply and evacuation missions. Therefore, through the auspices of ARMA, AIRA and General Phasouk, the Commanding General of MR-4, elements of an elite airborne and infantry battalion were lifted by Air America and RLAF helicopters to the commanding high ground on top of Phou Thiouom southwest of Thateng.¹⁸ Supported by crew-served weapons overlooking Route-23, the Lao helicopter crews were able to continue their task of servicing the besieged fort. However, the overall tactical situation remained largely unchanged until toward the end of February casualties, withdrawals, and the several-month-long siege began taking a toll on morale on the remaining defenders.

To the west, villagers living in the Sedone Valley reported that the enemy opened Route-23, the artery connecting to the main supply corridor from North Vietnam, and was moving troops and supplies into the area. While increasing pressure against Saravane, the enemy appeared to be preparing to attack RLG positions on the western edge of the valley.

*"The communists, meanwhile, are still maintaining pressure against other government positions in the Bolovens plateau area, including the provincial capitals of Attopeu and Saravane. Recent enemy troop movements southwest of Thateng, may be the communists next major target in this area."*¹⁹

About two weeks later an Agency bulletin reported:

¹⁸ The southern face of Thiouom was the mountain range where Air America H-34 Captain John Cooney and Flight Mechanic Earl Bruce crashed and died in 1967 while flying in foul weather.

¹⁹ CIA Daily Bulletin 02/24/69.

"Communist forces have been applying new pressure against government positions west of the Bolovens Plateau. The effort may be designed to force the government to strengthen its thinly stretched forces in the Mekong Valley by withdrawing assets committed to the defense of Thateng. Although North Vietnamese troops are still dug-in around the base, heavy air strikes have prevented them from launching new ground assaults in the three-month-old struggle." ²⁰

Then on 12 March:

"...the communists are bringing fresh troops and supplies into the Thateng area...in what may be a prelude to a new assault against the base there." ²¹

The government holding action at Thateng continued until 3 April when, beset with low morale and problems with troop rotation and supply, some of the fort's defenders deserted their positions. Therefore, General Phasouk ordered the remaining forces evacuated.

"...Thateng is the first important government position to fall to the enemy in southern Laos this year. The government withdrawal comes after costly five-month effort by the communists to take the position.

...[Thateng's loss] does not significantly alter the military equation in the plateau area. It is, however, another step in a communist campaign that began in late 1967 to isolate the plateau and keep government forces confined to areas along the Mekong River.

Recent Pathet Lao harassments along Route-13 appear to be part of this effort, and fresh pressure against small government positions at Keng Nhao and Paksong may be designed to remove the

²⁰ CIA Daily Bulletin, 03/06/69. Laos.

²¹ CIA Daily Bulletin, 03/13/69. Laos.

last vestiges of government pressure in the northern portion of the plateau." ²²

Since total withdrawal from the Thateng portion of Route-23 afforded the enemy vehicular passage into the eastern Plateau leading to Paksong and other minor RLA positions, fresh troops were introduced to high ground overlooking the valley. Plans were also developed to occupy another high point to block movement into the Plateau.

The battalions remained on Phou Thiouom interdicting and blocking the enemy for a month and then withdrew to Pakse. ²³

Returning to the field on the tenth, Mike Jarina deadheaded to Pakse (L-11) onboard CASI Porter XW-PDG. Continuing on to Ban La Tee (LS-190, more commonly called-PS-22) a special guerrilla camp (SGU) on the Bolovens Plateau eastern rim, he joined the Thai crew of Captain Boonrat Com-Intra and Flight Mechanic in Hotel-47 for the purpose of conducting two Special Missions.

SPECIAL MISSIONS

In order to assist USG's effort to stem the flow of arms and men to South Vietnam, and consequently shorten the war, and bring the North Vietnamese leaders to the negotiating table, Washington and 7th Air Force leaders in Saigon required additional intelligence to conduct productive air strike missions on the Ho Chi Minh Trail system. Expansion of the

²² CIA Daily Bulletin, 04/05/69. Laos: Government forces have abandoned their base at Thateng in southern Laos.

²³ Segment Sources:

John Pratt, Project *CHECO: The Royal Lao Air Force 1954-1970*, HQ PACAF Directorate, Tactical Evaluation *CHECO* Division, 101, Reprinted by the Dalley Book Service.

Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 221-222.

Victor Anthony and Richard Sexton, *The United States Air Force in Southeast Asia: The War in Northern Laos 1954-1973* (Washington: Center for Air Force History, 1973) 285.

Central Intelligence Agency Bulletins, 01/14/69, 01/27/69, 02/24/69, 04/05/69, 04/11/69.

indigenous trail watch team program had become a high priority when Ted Shackley arrived in mid-1966 to assume the Vientiane Agency Chief of Station (COS) slot. Such an ambitious plan required additional men, trainers, and machines to deliver and retrieve teams. In Military Region Three, this task was initially satisfied by USAF assets from Nakhon Phanom air base. However, for various reasons, these resources were not always reliable, hence, the Savannakhet and Thakhet Customers deferred to the services of Air America.

Fast, more powerful at higher elevations, somewhat quieter than an H-34, and providing a lower profile, Bell "Huey's" were purchased in 1967, ostensibly by Air America, but actually with Agency funds through diverse channels to either supplement or replace H-34s in performing long range Special Missions. Sensitive missions would be conducted with all American crews. However, this plan never fully succeeded, for the number of Bell aircraft in the Company inventory was never sufficient to satisfy escalating intelligence gathering demands throughout the country. This only became worse as accidents and attrition took a toll on the aircraft. Therefore, to take up the slack, H-34 pilots and third country flight mechanics either performed a majority of road watch missions or participated jointly with Bell crews.

Road watch or related offensive missions were conducted with a minimum of two helicopters, one for infiltration or exfiltration, the other performing the role of SAR should that become necessary. Larger harassing missions required additional assets, involving either Air America or Air Force CH-3 helicopters called "The Pony Express."

The tight structure of Special Mission packages evolved over time. These SOPs largely resulted from hard lessons incurred during especially dangerous SAR work retrieving

military pilots during the mid-1964 through mid-1965 period. Eventually, Special Mission requirements for line personnel specified: two qualified pilots in the cockpit, a reconnaissance of the target landing zone by senior PICs, a clean SAR ship, and military escort to and from the landing zone. The system worked well and we experienced few hostile encounters.

Air America fixed wing crews and Alpha T-28 pilots flying "Black Operations," received extra pay. Helicopter pilots aware of this gross inequality complained bitterly and lobbied hard to receive equal compensation for similar dangerous work. For a long time, our entreaties fell on deaf ears in both local management and Taipei corporate headquarters.

Because of potentially increasing hazards ²⁴ envisioned while flying road watch missions deep in enemy territory, called denied area, as determined by the Customer, helicopter crews were eventually compensated fifty dollars per mission or hour. ²⁵ For helicopter pilots, these new monies were allocated from local Agency back-door funds and periodically distributed by the helicopter Chief Pilot (CPH). A signature was required by the party receiving the cash (likely an AB-1 CYA procedure). To obfuscate the issue, we did not talk about this money, and the under-the-table payments became known as "Greenies."

The advent of "Greenie" payments took some sting out of performing Special Missions. However, a substantial downside still existed. A normal day's flying in an area might entail up to ten hours. In addition to pro-rated base pay, this equated to about a hundred additional dollars. During the month, every logged flight hour over seventy paid an extra ten dollars. When

²⁴ Enemy AAA and counter trail watch operations increased proportionally to trail watch activity.

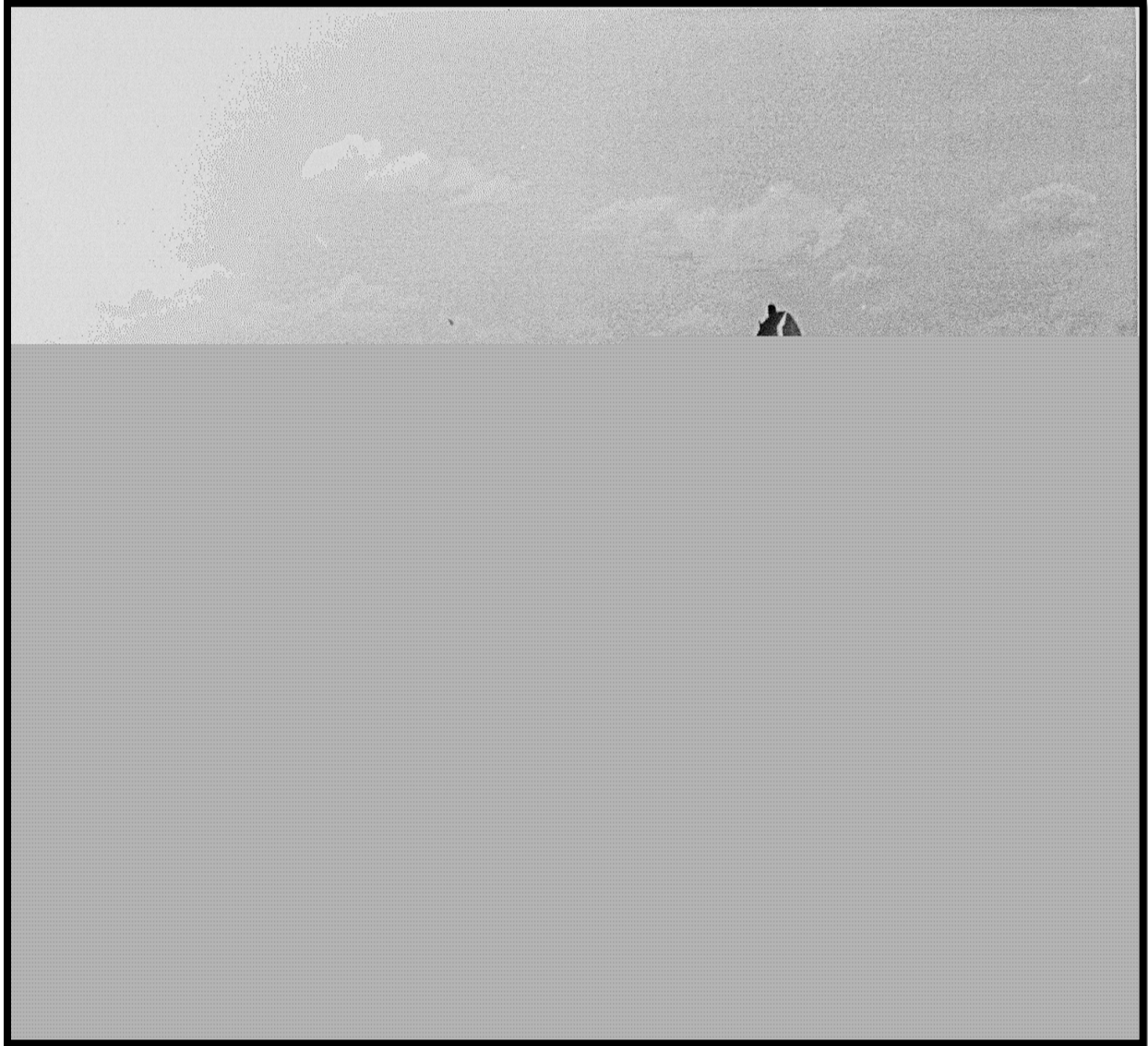
²⁵ For years, similar, but smaller, abbreviated missions were flown by H-34 pilots within project pay areas at the normal hazardous rate of ten dollars per hour.

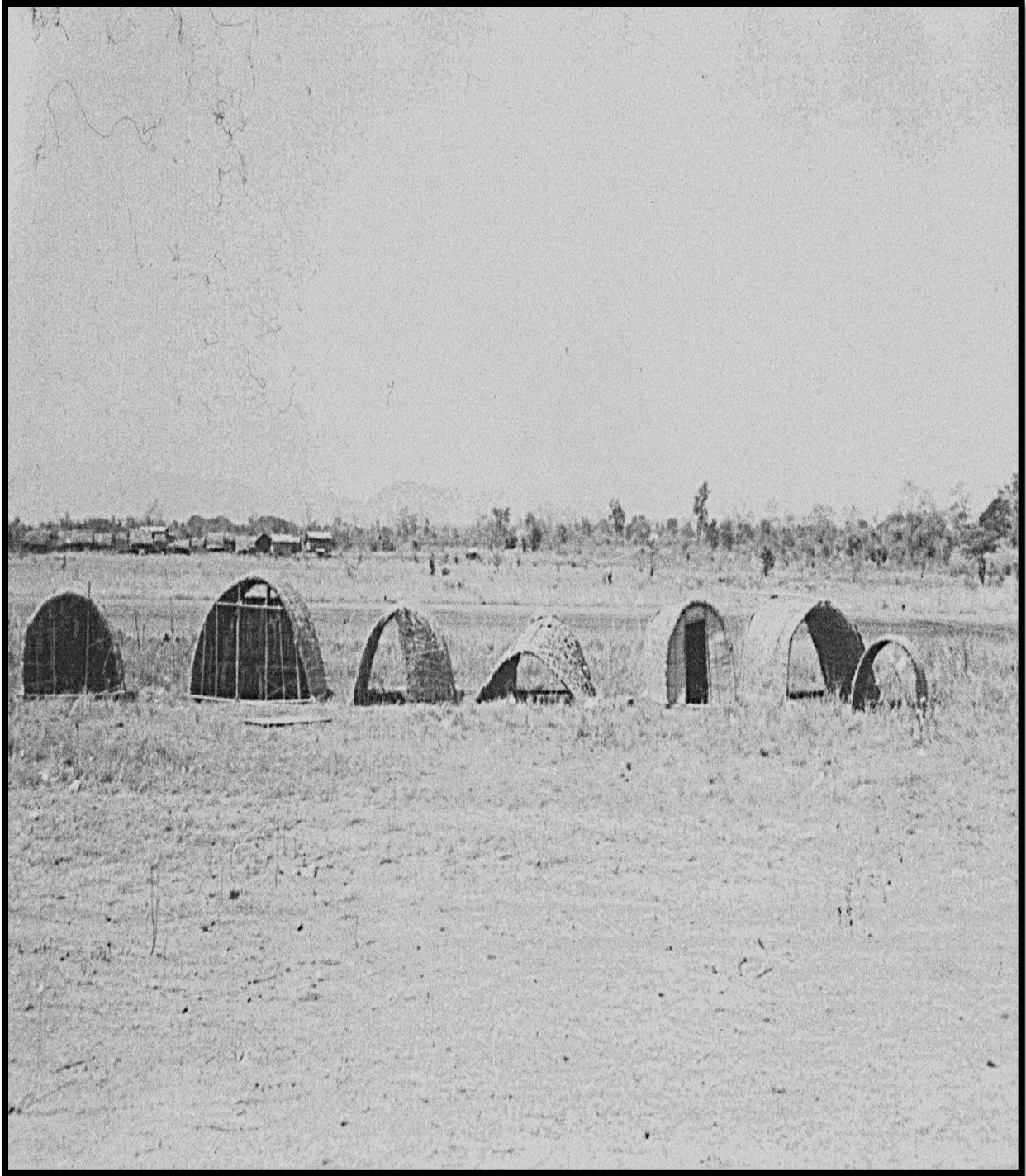


Airport parking ramp at Pakse, Laos. Center photo shows the remains of a Lao C-47 after the pilot taxied into a stack of flares.

Jarina Collection.

Wreckage of Lao C-47 after taxi accident at Pakse, Laos.
Jarina Collection.





Makeshift thatch and bamboo guard huts located at the Pakse airport.
Jarina Collection.

a steady diet of Special Missions in Military Region three and four became the norm, our flight time and monthly paychecks actually suffered. Depending on the launch time, to enhance assets available, normal work was usually not performed while waiting for a mission; weather failure of escort ships to appear, maintenance, problems, or simply a Customer abort all contributed to downtime and no extra pay. Combination missions (one out, one in) were tabulated and compensated as one mission. Loss of pay was generally not excessive, but the original intent of the "Greenies" strictly for extra hostile work was negated. Still, complaints were few, for we had waited long and patiently for the extra compensation. Particularly significant, no one quit the program.

There were always exceptions to the rule. While awaiting USAF escort aircraft, Jarina's crew performed five landings consisting of less than two hours local work for Will Greene. The first mission, an exfil, fourteen miles northeast of PS-22 (YB1086) was located near a new trail that wound generally east from the Se Kong Valley to intersect the main artery Route-96's Sihanouk Trail. The troops were returned to Ban Nam Tieng (LS-165) SGU camp southwest of PS-22 for debriefing and rest.

The mission helicopters repaired to PS-22 for fuel and to await the second road watch exercise. Considerably longer, the H-34 pilots flew thirty-six miles southeast of PS-22 to (YB4748) the hills a few miles north and east of a Route-96 complex that contained Vietnamese Army Base Camp-613 and a road leading into Cambodia. The landing zone was probably on or close to the border line of Saigon Command's SOG (Special Operations Group) cross border area of operation.

After returning troops to Site-165, the crew returned to Pakse for the night.

Saturday morning Mike joined Captain Larry Wilderom and Flight Mechanic Lakrod in Hotel-44. Consistent with the Customer aircraft sharing policy, they repositioned north to Savannakhet (L-39) for dual road watch missions. After refueling, the mission aircraft departed with troops for Phou Dotouy (XC5691), 110 miles east-southeast of Lima-39. After discharging SGU troops, the H-34 pilots flew thirty-five miles northwest over flatlands to a point about six miles south of Mung Phine, and less than a mile east of Route-23 for an extraction. At the completion of the mission, their charges disembarked at one of the Whiskey SGU training sites near Savannakhet and the crew of Hotel-44 RTB Udorn. ²⁶

Jarina's respite from field work was short lived. On Sunday morning, Mike, Herb Baker, and Rick Decosta crewed Hotel-50 to Thakhet to participate in two Special Missions. After recovering to the Nakhon Phanom (NKP, T-55) USAF base for fuel and some food, the men and machine RON at Savannakhet.

Baker had transitioned to the Bell program the previous year. Still relatively proficient in the H-34, he elected to revert to the H-34 when accidents reduced Bell assets. Baker had received a line check in the H-34 from Chief Pilot Wayne Knight at Luang Prabang (L-54) on the 11th.

Herb had been an Air America employee in the early days before the Author's arrival, but because of family and health problems, he had departed the program and later returned to Udorn. This move caused him to resume flying with a very high seniority number.

²⁶ Hotel-44 was inspected, towed out of the hangar, tested, and sent upcountry to work at Na Khang. While parked alongside the runway, Hotel-44's main rotor blades were damaged by Hotel-48's tail rotor blades during the PIC's careless taxi operations.

Using Hotel-53, Knight also provided line checks to Jerry McEntee and Larry Egan. Wayne continued Egan's line check the following day in Hotel-33 at Nam Yu (LS-118A). During the day, they became stuck over an extensive cloud layer. Larry, anticipating broken clouds with holes, made a bad decision in choosing to go on top over what looked like a short stretch of overcast. Wayne confessed that he made a bigger mistake in letting him commit the error. However, it was a check ride and both men learned from the mistake. They RON at the river town of Ban Houei Sai.

On the 13th, Wayne flew with Lloyd Higgins in northwestern Military Region One. At the end of the day they returned to Udorn.

Special Missions continued in Military Region Three during the shortened day. Since agency missions took priority over normal FAR work, there were often long waiting periods at Savannakhet for missions to launch because of recons, weather, USAF escort coordination, troop readiness, and a host of other reasons.

The crew of Hotel-50 and the accompanying ship departed twenty-three miles east for a SGU camp located at WD0838 between Routes-13, 9 and southeast of the old French parachute training base of Seno (L-46). After loading a team and contacting the A-1E escort pilots, the crews flew seventy-two miles further east to coordinates XD3123 in the hills thirteen miles east of MOUNG PHINE, west of Route-234, and an area encompassing many river systems.

A recently escaped Lao, incarcerated for two years in prisons around Route-912, provided information regarding deteriorating enemy and civilian morale in eastern Military Region Three. Spirits were reported at a low ebb in both groups

because of the pervading threat of bombing, little food, and fuel.

Area villagers supported the enemy because of intimidation and strong-arm tactics. The people were forced to relinquish much of what they grew to the occupiers. Animals and other food were similarly confiscated. Clothes were sometimes bartered and only Pathet Lao money was used.

Regardless of gender, villagers above ten years were conscripted to support enemy activity. Younger people either sewed clothes or performed coolie work. Older ones carried an assortment of weapons. Old men and women remained in the villages. Young males were assigned to the front lines, while young women acted as home guards.

Enemy propaganda was deemed unproductive because troops had been in the region spouting the same ideology since 1962 without corresponding results. The people had welcomed the Pathet Lao and Vietnamese at first, but after so many years of war and privation they no longer wanted them.²⁷

Jarina's flight time increased measurably when he and Decosta moved south to Pakse.

With the inability of government troops to sustain the Toumlan Valley gains, allowing enemy movement and action in and around Thateng, Saravane (L-44) became increasingly exposed. Therefore, it was necessary to bolster the northern flanking defenses. To help implement this, Jarina was assigned work at Lima-44. During an exceedingly active day of forty landings, Mike shuttled troops between PS-39, located in the hills twelve

²⁷ Edgar Pop Buell related to the Author at Sam Tong similar villager dissatisfaction with the enemy in Military Region Two. Confiscated items were "paid" using worthless Pathet Lao scrip and promised bolts of clothing were never forthcoming.

miles north-northeast, and the Agency SGU camp at Ban Khok Mai (LS-171), five miles northeast of Saravane Town.

Gaining Flight Mechanic Stan Waite, Jarina swapped Hotel-50 for Hotel-40 on the 15th. His workday was equally as active as the previous one as he shuttled supplies and troops in the PS-38 area on the southeast portion of the Bolovens and between Kong Mi (PS-7), twenty-six miles southeast.

At the end of the day, Jarina was replaced and he deadheaded to Udorn via Wattay Airport on C123, 374. ²⁸

MILITARY REGION TWO

There was no word from Bangkok regarding the impending birth of our second child, so I was scheduled upcountry on the 17th. After maintenance inspections and being cleared as airworthy, Flight Mechanic Jay Meyers and I crewed Bell 205 PFF late in the day to Long Tieng.

Saturday included a full day of over ten hours working north helping to reinforce defenses at Na Khang and outposts to the west and north. Additionally, the refugee lift was officially over, but there were always people to move further away from enemy advances.

The following day was much the same. Work all day out of Site-36, high flight time, and RON at the 20 Alternate hostel. It was a good feeling, and satisfying to fly in an area where one was not constrained by maintenance problems or Special Missions and the delays these entailed.

²⁸Mike Jarina Interviews.
Joe F. Leeker The Aircraft of Air America: Sikorsky UH-34D (2nd Series).
EW Knight Email, 09/18/00 Regarding his Flight Logs.

HOSTELS

Crew rooms in the two Air America hostels at Sam Tong and Long Tieng were equipped with two beds. The Company Personnel Manual specified, like airline industry standard, that a Captain rated a single room. However, considered second class Captains at Lao outstations, except at river sites, this item was overlooked. As helicopter pilots who worked and remained in the field overnight, our options were limited and we were not selective as to accommodations. From the early days, whether it was an overnight in a helicopter or a rat-infested thatched hut, a roof over our heads at night to shield us from the elements and a little rice or a can of beans was sufficient to sustain us for short periods of time. With the advent of Company-sponsored hostels, first at Sam Tong and then at Long Tieng, for the first time we "old timers" found ourselves in "Hog Heaven," enjoying actual beds with pillows and clean sheets, hot showers, and decent meals.

However, there were a few spoiled newcomers in our helicopter group who complained about RON housing and everything associated with it. The dissenters should have been with us at Sam Tong, Na Khang, and Phu Pha Thi when huge rats ran rampant at night, procreating, contaminating the area, and disrupting our sleep. Moreover, before the advent of sleeping bags and blankets, they had never suffered the intense mountain cold that, if unprotected, penetrated any light covering. We were not happy with these individuals and attempted to set their minds straight. For those pilots who continued to complain, we were satisfied when, like bad pennies, the dissenters weeded themselves out of the program.

PETER TOWNSEND ARRIVES

On the twentieth, while working a little more than a fuel

load at Na Khang, I was recalled to Udorn. Word had arrived that Tuie was going to give birth on the 20th or 21st. After deadhead flights on Air America Pilatus Porter (PC-6C) N392R to Long Tieng and a Fairchild C-123K 636 to Udorn, I hurried home to pack and find the first available transportation to Bangkok.

Upon arrival, I discovered that Tuie had been in the Bangkok Christian Hospital one day, and when nothing happened, she was released. After seeing her, I was sure the delivery would occur soon, for she was huge. Her size caused me to speculate that the child would weigh at least ten pounds. We waited.

After her water broke early on Saturday the 25th, we hurried around the corner to the hospital. Hours of contractions followed without an appearance from Doctor Lewis. Then at 1520 hours, assisted only by a nurse, all eight pounds and five ounces of Peter Townsend Casterlin emerged into the world. Unlike his brother, Pete looked fine, except that his skin was blue. Like Ricky, he was suffering from a touch of jaundice that the hospital staff claimed was associated with our disparate genes common in mixed marriage births.

Despite long hours waiting for the birth, Tuie appeared in good shape, but she complained about the lack of a doctor's services. Somewhat surprised and upset, especially after the problems incurred with Ricky, I talked to Doctor Lewis, who assured me that most Thai female births in the Christian Hospital were attended by well trained and experienced mid-wife personnel.

Pete's condition soon improved, but observation and final checks were required before his being released. After a few days I left for Udorn to prepare the house for Tuie and the new baby's arrival the following day.

The life-altering event fostered a reappraisal of my status in Southeast Asia. Because of the dearth of flying in the Bell program, I continued to ponder my vocational options should I elect to terminate employment with Air America. In addition, no one could predict how long the job would prove viable. During mid-January negotiations in Paris, North Vietnamese and USG representatives agreed to expand peace talks. Shortly afterward, serious meetings commenced. Should a cease fire be declared, flying in Laos would undoubtedly be drastically curtailed and some of us terminated. I had gone through this frustrating dry spell for several months in 1962-1963, and did not intend to do it again.

What frustrated and deterred me from leaving Air America was that I had no other vocation, and possessed few tangible plans as to any future employment. I seriously considered settling in Steamboat Springs, Colorado, but had rejected overtures to create a helicopter business there, as financially unrewarding or feasible. I could sell real estate, but employment in the area was considered at a premium, and Sunray was still too small and specialized to support another employee. There was no rush, and a further decision could wait.

No one was home when I arrived. Therefore, I drove the Cortina to the airfield to announce my son's birth. That night, sharing my good fortune with others, I celebrated a bit too much in the Club bar. When I eventually returned to the house, I had neglected to inform Gott, our houseboy who was staying in the maid's quarters next to the carport, to clean the house.

I was supposed to retrieve Tuie and Pete at the train station early in the morning, but failed to hear the alarm clock ring. I knew I was in serious trouble when the two arrived by taxi. This was reinforced when Tuie angrily asked why I failed

to have the house cleaned. I had no excuse. Therefore, she went to her mother's house for a short time.

JARINA

After testing Hotel-59, Mike and Flight Mechanic Baccay flew to Savannakhet on 18 January. They worked a little before Mike and other PICs left on a plane to recon the following day's mission site in CASI Beech Baron N1313Z. To fool the enemy and create diversions, these recons covered broad areas.

The next morning, new First Officer Bill Gibbs joined Mike in the cockpit for an area familiarization and a Special Mission. Together with several other aircraft they repositioned fifteen miles northwest to Keng Ka Boa (LS-235), an out-of-the-way site originally used by RLAF General Thao Ma to conduct T-28 operations before his coup attempt and subsequent exile to Thailand. Now we used Site-235 for larger scale missions that required several aircraft, including USAF Pony Express helicopters. Following a final briefing and loading of troops dressed in Vietnamese army clothing and carrying an assortment of enemy weapons, with Ed Reid the leader, the armada flew to the landing zone only specified as DZ-1.

While crossing the badlands at altitude, Gibbs excitedly announced, *"We are taking groundfire from the left."*

"That's alright, we're high enough to avoid damage from small arms."

"The tracers are going above us."

Mike was unconcerned, for he was "tail end Charlie" and the flight was spread out.

After drop-off, the crew of Hotel-59 RTB Lima-39 for the night.

On Monday, during another day of very little flight time, crews flew from Lima-39 to Whiskey-3, one of the SGU camps, to load more troops for DZ-1 and DZ-2.

After a night at the Air America hostel, the crew of Hotel-59 repositioned to PS-38, located on the southeast portion of the Bolovens Plateau. Flying in N1778G, Mike joined another senior PIC for mission recons. Returning to PS-38, the crews flew south to Kong Mi (PS-7) to conduct three late Special Missions east of PS-7. The crews then returned to Pakse, touching down after dark.

Recalled to Savannakhet, Jarina boarded 13Z for another mission recon northeast of Moug Phalane (L-61). After return, troops were loaded at Site-39 and flown to the landing site.

Late in the day, the crew was called back to Tango-8, landing well after dark.

Late on the 24th, Mike and Bill Gibbs deadheaded to Long Tieng on 96W. After relieving the PIC of Hotel-46, the crew RON at The Alternate.

The following morning, with old Punzalan ("Punz") as Flight Mechanic, along with other aircraft, they flew north to Huie Thong (LS-196) located thirty-three miles north-northwest of Phu Cum (LS-50). The Special Mission of the day was located at coordinates TJ3994, ninety-one miles north-northwest of Site-196, deep in Phong Saly Province. It entailed evacuating Nam Houg villagers and troops who, under enemy pressure, had relocated eight miles southwest to the safety of high ground. Two shuttles were conducted between the landing zone and Site-196. A load was returned to Long Tieng, followed by a RON at Sam Tong.

After arriving at Luang Prabang (generically called LP), evacuations continued well north of Lima-54 for two days.

The crew of Hotel-46 RTB at Udorn on Tuesday 28 January. ²⁹

²⁹ Mike Jarina Interviews.
Mike Jarina Email, 09/20/00.

Because of his participation marshalling and supporting refugees during and after the Nam Tha (L-100) raid in late 1967, which roiled a few high-level AID individuals in Vientiane and required a scapegoat, old Lao hand Blaine Jensen's United States Aid for International Development (USAID) contract was not renewed. ¹ Consequently, Blaine spent about eight months on the family farm in Idaho raising crops. Jensen sorely missed Lao refugee work, and when offered an opportunity to return arose, in January 1969 he processed back into AID arriving in Southeast Asia toward the end of the month.

Joe Mendenhall had departed as Vientiane USAID Chief and was replaced by former Chief Charlie Mann, with whom Jensen never had issues. Because of normal attrition and home leave in the AID program, the organization needed experienced personnel. Moreover, legendary Military Region Two Coordinator Edgar "Pop" Buell's continuing heart problems required a man to provide full time stability at Sam Tong.

Mann had a lot of urging from Pop and Chief Health Administrator, Doctor "Jiggs" Weldon, to rehire Jensen. Confirmed by General Vang Pao, Jerry Daniels, and his old crew, other than Pop and Jiggs, Blaine was the only person previously assigned to Sam Tong who gained rapport and respect of his Lao-Meo counterparts plus Vang Pao and all his officers.

In April, Pop suffered another serious heart attack. Even though Pop was still around, Blaine assumed the AID representative mantel. He was placed in charge of all U.S and Thai AID activities in Military Region Two. He answered directly

¹For additional details see Author's book 8.

to the ambassador and received orders from him until he departed Laos on 4 July 1973.

In addition to mounting pressure in eastern Zone Steel, enemy activity was also increasing closer to Vang Pao's eastern flanks.

One morning not long after Jensen returned to Sam Tong, Site-20 received a radio message from Long Tieng. The operator at Padong had relayed that there were many civilian wounded at Pha Peung (LS-21). Reputedly still secure, the elevated site was located twenty-two miles east-northeast of Site-5, on the northwest side of Phou Sao, the second tallest mountain in the region.

After obtaining an H-34 and hopping over Skyline Ridge to the Long Tieng parking ramp, Blaine learned from Agency Case Officers that the site was considered safe. However, rumors suggested otherwise. Mainly, the previous day a fixed wing aircraft, tasked to drop needed rice, failed to receive a correct signal. There was no hostile action, but something about the site did not seem right to the pilots, so they aborted the mission and left for an alternate drop zone (DZ).

Because of reports of wounded civilians, further investigation was required as to this and Site-21's viability. With reliable information that villagers were already on the move out of the area, Blaine had the H-34 pilot fly him to the site to make contact and urge the people to remain in place.

While circling at altitude above the site, two men displayed a correct signal on the landing pad. Still, normal visual cues associated with a friendly site portended danger. Moreover, as normally the case, not many people and animals were visible around the pad. Curious, Blaine told the pilot to commence an approach to a hover while he assessed the situation.

Small arms fire erupted from both sides of the strip on final approach, badly damaging the helicopter. Generally patient to the last, the enemy had been waiting for the helicopter to land. However, the decision to hover and not touch down saved the crew and passenger from certain death or capture.

The pilot managed to fly back to Sam Tong where 128 holes were counted either penetrating or exiting the fuselage. Fortunately, no one was injured, but the Captain discovered a round imbedded in the sole of his boot while undressing to go to bed that night.

When the dust settled, Jensen learned that the site had been captured the previous night with the signal cloth intact. Later analysis revealed that the action was related to Vang Pao's Sam Neua offensive. No one at the time was aware that a large number of enemy units had moved into the area with the objective of threatening Padong-Long Tieng, and Sam Tong. The intent was to force Vang Pao into withdrawing and relocating a major number of his forces from the north to protect the main bases in Xieng Khouang Province. The incident saved the Meo from being caught off guard, and the main enemy force did not reach the Padong area for three days.

Reports of wounded civilians were correct. Within a few days, all these people managed to walk or carry everyone to another friendly position. However, they were not in good health when retrieved and shuttled to the Site-20 hospital. Most survived, with the exception of those suffering abdominal wounds, who died of peritonitis. ²

² Blaine Jensen Letters, 04/04/96, 02/01/97, 03/04/97, 04/08/97. 03/13/98.
Frank Stergar Email, 01/25/96.
Blaine Jensen Information.

MR-3-SAVANNAKHET

With pressure waning in upper Military Region Two, Monday, 3 February, I deadheaded to Savannakhet on Hotel-41. There I joined Ed Reid and Dave Crowell in XW-PFJ to conduct three Special Missions. Cleverly crafted to accomplish the task and save funds, these missions consisted of two infiltrations and one exfil, all performed on one fuel load. Using a combination of H-34s and Hueys, we departed the Lima-39 area for XD565005 in the hills 110 miles south-southeast. The second infil took place three miles south at XC568986 on the Phou Lapheung Range. Located close to the Savannakhet-Saravane Provincial borders, these two landing zones represented the limit of Lima-39 station's road watch responsibilities.

A final exfil took place at XD108180, thirty-three miles northwest of the preceding infil. It was also eight miles south of Mounng Phine (later designated Lima-300), a junction of Routes, 9-23, and 111.

Following a night at the Hostel, we conducted one mission at coordinates WE7304, seventy-two miles northeast of Savannakhet. The landing zone was located on the high ground of Phou Khiling almost equidistant between Routes-23 and 911. We had been doing many of these missions since 1967 and they presented little challenge. After returning to Lima-39 Ed turned the machine over to me and left for home.

THE KING

So far, flight time had been very low and apparently would not improve when I was assigned to fly hereditary king, Savang Vatthana, and his entourage twenty miles northwest to Seno (L-46). Because of the presence of a premier VIP, Ellis Emery would join me in the cockpit. Takeoff was slated for 1300 hours. Until that time, I was grounded.



The two-story Air America crew hostel located at Savannakhet, a Mekong River town. Originally used to house the Volpar Trail intercept crews, helicopter crews later RON here.

Author Collection.



A typical open-air coffee shop located across the street from the Air America crew hostel at Savannakhet, Laos.
Author Collection.



ABOVE
His Royal Lao Majesty King Sri Savang
Vatthana at Nam Tan, Laos. (Pix by ED.)

BELOW
The Royal Lao flag with the Erawan
(three-headed elephant) in the center.

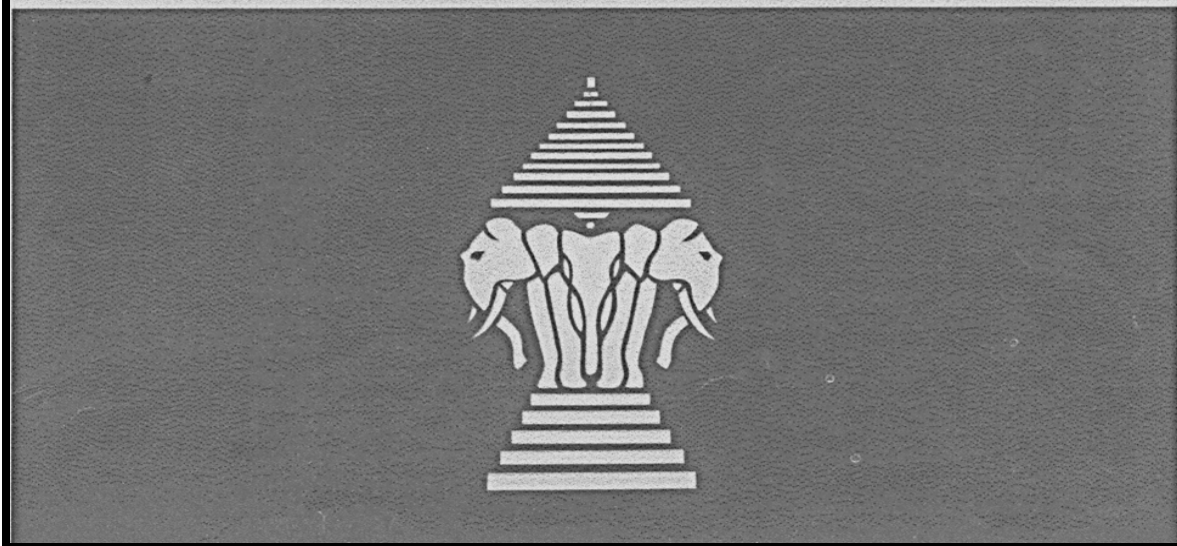


Photo in the *Air America Log*, Volume 5 #6, 1971.

The hostel possessed an open-air Jeep and a houseboy-driver specifically assigned to shuttle crews to the airfield for flights. Before lunch, I checked the Jeep and driver's status to ensure that there would be no glitches, then went inside thinking I had all my bases covered.

With launch time approaching, I began looking for my transportation. Neither Jeep nor driver was present and no one in the immediate area knew where the boy had gone. I could not wait, so Ellis and I stepped out on the street looking for a samlor. Normally, there was never an abundance of traffic on the roads. However, it was now the French-inspired siesta time. It did not take us long to verify that no vehicles were available, and likely would not be for a full two hours. The boy still had not returned to the hostel when we went inside. By then a little panicky, I started feeling a pervasive sense of doom; it was too hot and much too far to walk to the airfield, but I certainly did not want the embarrassment and notoriety of keeping the revered monarch waiting, or never arriving for the flight. The entire situation smacked of a missing movement in the military, an event that had dire implications for the offender.

Out of sheer desperation and lack of options, I dashed diagonally across the street to see if Chief of Station Tom Fosmire was home, and if I could possibly enlist his help. Tom was away, but his comely wife and young children opened the door. Assuming my best manners and charm, I launched into my sad story. Fortunately, as a Customer's wife, she was realistic. Without much cajoling, she understood my plight and the consequences. Therefore, the compassionate lady drove Ellis and me to the airport at a reasonable speed. Because of the delay, I considered us to be already late, and whatever speed she attained on the deserted roads was not nearly enough for me. As



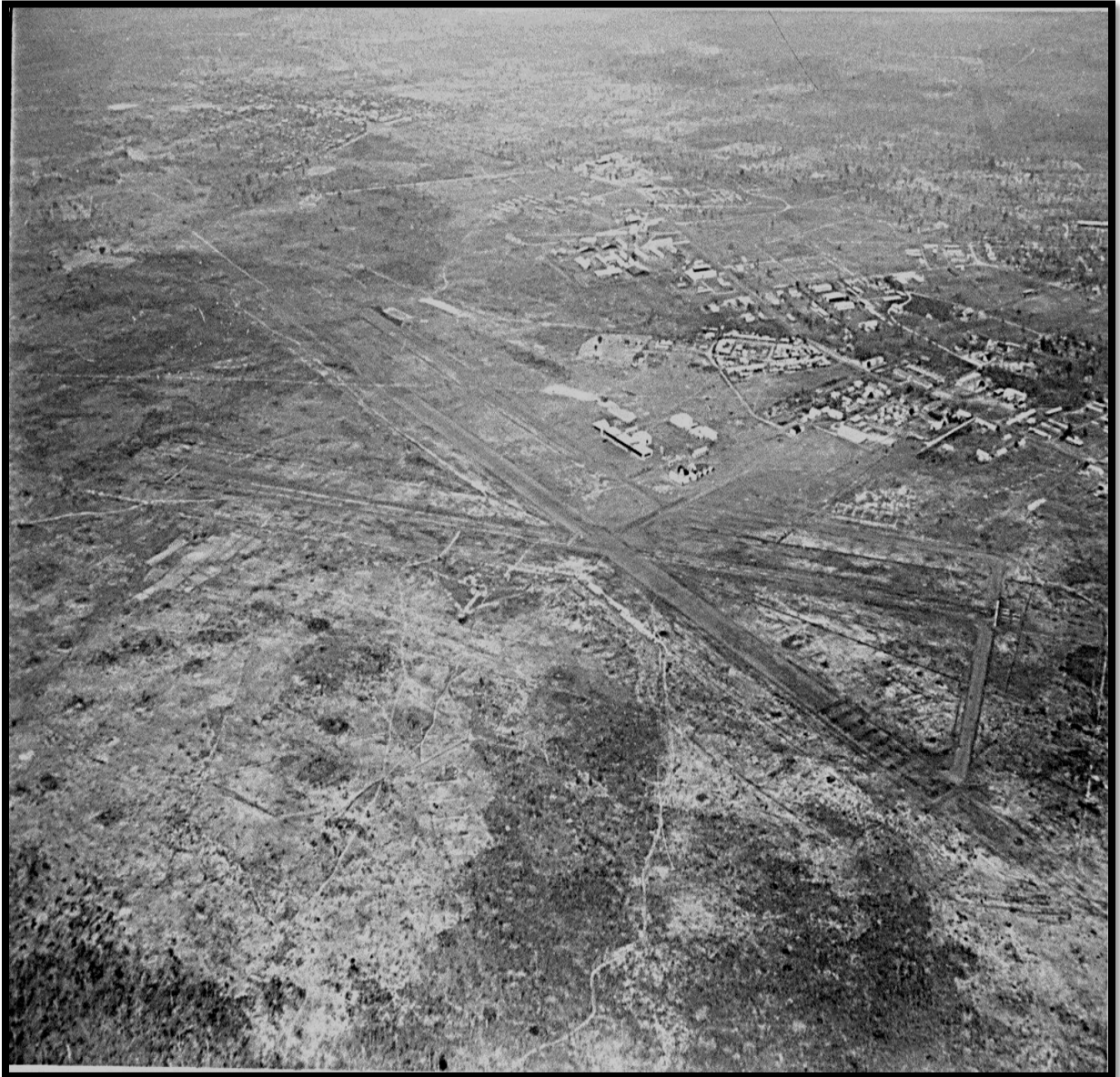
The normal motorized form of civilian transportation at Savannakhet, Laos. As opposed to the bicycle powered samllors in Udorn, Thailand, samllors in Laos utilized a motorcycle with an attached sidecar.

Author Collection.



Main road at Savannakhet, Laos during a period of heavy vehicular traffic.

Author Collection.



Vintage World War Two pierced steel planking (PSP) runways and buildings at Seno, Laos, site of FAR parachute battalions. Allowed by provisions in the Geneva Accords of 1962, French advisors had remained at the site to train Laos parachute battalions.
Author Collection.

our Bell came into view and Dave Crowell was the only soul in sight, I breathed a sigh of relief. It appeared that once again I had been lucky and bested Mister Murphy at his own game.

Dave had departed the hostel for the airfield directly after lunch to ensure Papa Foxtrot Juliet was fueled, reasonably clean, and prepared for the VIP flight. The timing was perfect. Almost immediately after we arrived, the King and his retinue drove up to the aircraft. Some years before, I had met the Crown Prince at an Luang Prabang luncheon, but never his Royal Majesty. Dressed in an impressive khaki uniform with barracks cap, the man portrayed a huge, gross lump of humanity. When we shook hands, his massive, fleshy paw completely enveloped mine up to my wrist. Regardless of his outward appearance, he seemed a pleasant chap and one of his aides distributed complementary red buttons to our crew depicting one of the King and another of a white Erawan (a three headed elephant).

The flight to Seno was of short duration. We deposited the passengers to attend an awards ceremony. Because the King was either remaining at the facility overnight or returning to Savannakhet by vehicle on Route-13, we returned to other duties.

After we arrived at the hostel that evening, I had a few choice words for the Lao houseboy. Although not a completely dull tool, he did not seem to fully comprehend the potential implications of his actions, so I elected not to pursue the matter.

MR-4-LESSON LEARNED

As was so often the case when working south, after Pat Colgan joined Dave and me, on Thursday we relocated to Pakse and PS-22 for two afternoon trail watch missions. Per helicopter mission SOP, I joined other PICs in CASI Porter XW-PFC for landing zone recons. The first infil was conducted to YC335130,

thirty-six miles northeast of PS-22. Located on the foothills of Phou Khong Kring, the landing zone was fifteen miles east of Route-96 and twelve miles northeast of the Chavane complex.

The second infil was assigned late in the day to provide the SGU team time to establish a temporary base camp in preparation for their mission. The landing zone was on a sandbar in a river thirty-four miles east of PS-22 and well east of Route-96. I had never flown that far directly east of the Bolovens, and was pleased to see large fish swimming in the clear water that obviously indicated the absence of unfriendly natives or enemy troops.

We landed at Lima-11 after dark and I was reassigned Bell 204 96W for another mission the following day. Pat remained with me, and my new Flight Mechanic was John Melvin.

We flew north to Ban Khok Mai (LS-171), five miles northeast of Saravane in a grassy valley. Leaving Pat and John with the ship, I left to fly a recon with the CASI Porter pilot of XW-PFD. Upon returning, I was informed by the Customer that our escort planes were delayed. We waited for some time in the steaming environment. When the planes finally arrived, we rushed to start our engines. By then the winds had increased and shifted to our rear, creating a downwind condition. I knew this was not good, for a Lycoming T-53 -1100 engine start was often touchy and required close monitoring, particularly if the wind was not blowing from the front, but we could not turn the aircraft around. In my haste to crank up, and with a stiff wind blowing directly up the tail pipe, after cracking the throttle, the exhaust gas temperature (EGT) quickly soared to 800 degrees (maybe higher). I aborted the start as soon as possible, but the damage had been done--the engine over-temperature squashed further participation in the mission.

Shaking his head, Pat, an experienced former Army pilot, was amazed that I had failed to attempt a start using the manual fuel technique. Bob Hitchman had demonstrated this procedure to me once the previous year when he was in Udorn during his curious witch hunt. However, not fully understanding or comfortable with the off-the-books method, I was reluctant to use it. Moreover, during my initial checkout, neither Robbie nor Wayne Webb had ever schooled me on this downwind start method, nor did our pilot handbook contain anything related to the procedure.

The mission proceeded as scheduled. While we remained on the ground, I contacted Udorn and was told to leave the aircraft there pending a maintenance inspection and possible engine change. When the ship returned, we boarded Hotel-53 for a return trip to Pakse. From there I caught CASI Porter XW-PFR to Udorn. The incident was highly embarrassing, but I had learned something about the helicopter the hard way, and vowed not to repeat my error.

JARINA INTO THE MOUNTAINS

Deadheading with Tim Woosley and Flight Mechanic Campit, on the sixth Mike left Udorn for Luang Prabang in Hotel-45 for Customer- directed double crew missions. He did not fly that day, and foul weather precluded flying on the following one.

After consolidating their win at Nam Bac, enemy forces systematically attacked many outlying tribal sites in Military Region One above LP. As a result, RLG (really the Agency) lost many former road watch and interdiction bases. Consequently, to gain intelligence regarding enemy movement and reestablish a regional presence, the Customer planned and initiated forays into, and relatively close, to former sites.

As per Special Mission SOP, on Saturday, Mike et.al. reconned the intended landing zone located at coordinates TH0178, fifty-two miles north of Luang Prabang and about ten miles north of Tong Too (LS-186). Although weather had not appreciably improved, the Customer was anxious to complete the mission. Therefore, the H-34 crews launched, only to abort halfway to the target.

Taking a break from flying in the south, Captain Boonrat replaced Woosley as Jarina's Co-Captain on the ninth. Having more success compared to the previous day, missions were conducted to three sites located twenty-nine miles northeast of LP. Then, after loading at Lima-45, the helicopter crews returned to the abort target of the previous day. Then low on fuel, they capped the day with a run ten miles east-southeast to the high ground of Ban Long Houay, a prominent and sizeable mountain range containing many tribal villages. This mountain would later claim an H-34 crew.

The initial mission the following day duplicated the one conducted north on Sunday. Other road watch missions included infil and exfils to TJ4814, close to former Ban "Y" (LS-187); then to TJ3912, ten miles north of Ban Pha Thong (LS-169), and finally to LS-247, also named Ban Pha Thong. Located close to Route-19, although tribals still lived scattered in the hills, all former mountain clan sites were then considered unfriendly. The day ended late with a trip to the Ban Long Houay Mountain.

Following one fuel load that involved servicing three teams, Mike was relieved. He deadheaded to Tango-8 on Air America Helio Courier XW-PCD and C-123 555, also called "Triple Nickel."

MOUNG SOUI ACTION

"...communist terrorists on 10 February killed one U.S. military attaché and wounded another during an attack on Moung Soui. this is the second raid in ten months against Americans at this post. there is no evidence that the raid presages a more concerted enemy effort against government forces at Moung Soui..." ³

While General Vang Pao's PIGFAT operation was mired in the last stages of futile attempts to retake Phu Pha Thi, steps were underway at Moung Soui to lessen some of the pressure in upper Military Region Two and other local areas. Furthermore, an operation was planned, intended to stir the pot and test the enemy's mettle in and around the Plain of Jars. Beyond the capability of the generally sedentary Neutralist (FAN) forces, the unusual task was actually performed by the Royal Thai Army and Thai Air Force, aided by American Requirements Office (RO) personnel charged by the U.S. Embassy with supporting FAN. ⁴

On New Year's Eve, elements from the Thai artillery battalion, located two plus miles east of Lima-108 at Ban Khay, towed a pair of 155mm guns and ammunition a grid square⁵ east on Route-7. With a maximum range of over ten miles, the airfield at Ban Ang was taken under fire, along with many other choice targets. ARMA attaché and Texan, Captain Joe Bush, FAN advisor at Moung Soui, taking the place of a sick artillery spotter, flew all night in a light fixed wing Birddog, observing and forwarding information to the forward Thai arty battery.

³ CIA Daily Bulletin, 01/11/69.

⁴ Naturally, because of Geneva Accords on Laos stipulating no foreign troops, Thai participation was never publicized. Of course, the communist bloc and Western allies were aware of the Thai presence, but the world in general was not.

⁵ The aeronautical chart grid square was six statute miles on all sides.

The artillery action was intended to be followed on 1 January by major RLAFF T-28 strikes on selected Plain of Jars targets. However, as with most previous joint operations, strikes were delayed by several weeks in favor of a FAN thrust onto the PDJ. To better coordinate the operation with an overall commander, General Vang Pao was assigned command over Moung Soui's FAN garrison troops by the Vientiane Lao General Staff.

Toward the end of January, in anticipation of the operation's commencement, FAN artillery men pre-positioned four 105mm tubes four miles east of Ban Khay. However, failure of FAN infantry and airborne troops to move out as anticipated caused yet another frustrating delay.

Despite 1962 Lao Geneva Accords protocols that specified no foreign soldiers were allowed to be in the country, American advisors and Thai artillery and defensive units had been operating at Moung Soui in some form since mid-1964, when Operation Triangle was successfully conducted. ⁶

From the early sixties, a Requirements Office (RO) was embedded in the USOM (embassy) mission to circumvent MAAG Laos personnel departure to Bangkok. Staffed with American "civilians," normally retired or "in the black" U.S. Army personnel, the organization was tasked to advise and ensure that adequate supplies reached FAR and FAM armies. With the advent of escalating hostilities, and to counter similar clandestine Vietnamese encroachment, additional personnel, specialists in a myriad of tasks, rotated to upcountry sites.

Since the long, hard-packed Moung Soui runway was located considerably nearer the front lines than Wattay Airport in Vientiane, additional sorties could be conducted flying out of

⁶ For more details regarding Operation Triangle see Author's 1964 book.

the site during the day to counter the increasing enemy pressure on the area. Therefore, depending on seasonal conditions and site security, Thai B-Team T-28 pilots had been flying missions out of Moung Soui for the previous two years. ⁷ There was a downside, however. During the dry, smoky season the runway was very dusty. Consequently, ground crews were limited in working there because of respiratory problems. To moderate the effects, a water truck was constantly busy keeping the dust to a minimum during operational periods.

To support the planned Plain of Jars incursion, substantial amounts of bombs, rockets, and bullets delivered by C-123 crews were haphazardly staged alongside the strip. Therefore, to supplement the few men already on site and help organizing and stacking munitions for the Monday operation, several additional American personnel arrived at Site-108. Included in the group were radio operators and other specialists. Radios were considered the alternative to issuing the men weapons. Mainly, should Moung Soui be attacked, the powers that be did not want U.S. troops engaging in conflict, but to seek concealment should there be trouble. ⁸

To house the fifteen men, a large general purpose (GP) tent was erected on a volleyball court in a declivity between the two

⁷ T-28 pilots were categorized along ethnic lines: Alpha, A-Team pilots were Air America civilian employee volunteers, B-Team Thai Air Force "Volunteers;" and C-Team Lao. "Released" from the Thai military, RTAF pilots were contracted and employed for the work because Lao pilots were in short supply and did not have the technical skills or necessary motivation to achieve good bombing results—at least initially.

⁸ There was also the issue that these men were present "in the black." For political purposes, they were not declared, hence, not there. The State Department's "no weapons" policy, also applying to Air America crews, was the same at Phou Pha Thi. This is incomprehensible to the Author after the manpower losses incurred at that site.

stone houses accommodating U.S. Army and civilian RO and USAID representatives residing at the site.

Despite countering past probes of facilities, Moung Soui's defenses were far from perfect. Just before the FAN operation to invest the western Plain of Jars could be mounted, an estimated thirty-six North Vietnamese Dac Cong conducted a third attack on Moung Soui in as many years. The first two raids were rejected with minimum damage, but the third, during the morning of 9 February, proved costly in casualties.

Sometime after midnight, the members of the attacking force proceeded through the field and town and assaulted the FAN compound. Dividing into small units, well-prepared as usual, except for the Americans sleeping in the tent, from their spies they knew exactly where other personnel lived. Base Commander, Colonel Sing and his family, took the brunt of grenade and small arms fire, but all escaped harm relatively unscathed.

Another sapper team set fires and hit the ARMA "hooch." During the ensuing melee, Captain Joe Kerr Bush, one of two U.S. Army representatives legally allowed upcountry under the Geneva Accords to advise the FAN at Moung Soui, was killed. Bush's Lao interpreter and Sergeant Dan Smokes were wounded.⁹

Bob Parshall, civilian RO representative, lived in the other house. Bob was a very large man, tipping the scales at over three hundred pounds and exhibiting a large girth. He had worked with the Tom Dooley Foundation at Ban Houei Sai as a medic. Undercover with DOD, he was the eyes and ears in that area. While AID representative Joe Flipse was recuperating from

⁹ Joe Bush had arrived in country during June. He was accorded the title of assistant military attaché, and sent to advise FAN officers at Moung Soui. He was posthumously awarded the Silver Star.

Years later, when Mac Thompson worked at the Department of Army Office (DAO) in Bangkok, Smoke's wife was Mac's temporary secretary in the Embassy Refugee Section.

a bout of hepatitis in Vientiane, he obtained a job for Bob with the Requirements Office (RO).

At the first sound of gunfire and explosions, Bob rolled onto the floor, pulling a mattress over himself and rendering himself invisible. When the enemy entered his quarters wildly firing their AK-47s, they failed to see Bob.

After miraculously surviving the attack, Parshall refused to return to Site-108. He considered FAN security nonexistent, and even speculated that the raid was aided and abetted by them. Therefore, Bob transferred to LP after the fracas.

As advised by superiors, U.S. airmen on site to assist in the RLAFF-FAN operation the next day hugged the ground. Except for being excited and experiencing mental anguish, they were generally unharmed. Several dozen automatic rounds passed through the canvas tent. One man was struck by a spent round or ricochet that marked and welted, but did not break his skin. Another sergeant suffered a head injury after colliding in the dark with the center pole. Few people volunteered for duty at Moung Soui after the attack.

After encountering the MK-108 radio Jeep parked about twenty feet from the tent, an enemy trooper placed a satchel charge on the vehicle's hood. The ensuing blast tore the engine from the compartment. Following the raid, radio men checked and repaired the radios, enabling reports of the mayhem to course over the airwaves.

Alleycat, the nighttime (1800 to 0600) Airborne Battlefield Command and Control Center (ABCCC), a USAF C-123 aircraft, was orbiting on station in its northern sector. At 0145, an intelligence officer onboard began receiving an emergency signal over 123.0 megacycles. This was followed by a Mayday voice transmission from an American in the radio Jeep reporting that Moung Soui was under attack.



The strategic Neutralist site of Muong Soui was located west of the Plain of Jars and adjacent to Route-7, which led to the Sala Phou Khoun road junction. From there it continued south on Route-13 to Vientiane, and north to Luang Prabang.

CIA Map, 02/11/69.

Geneva, the Air Attaché (AIRA) office in Vientiane, received an assessment of the situation, and the ABCCC unit acted as a go-between to relay current information.

The Alleycat crew redirected Theater assets with vectors toward Lima-108. Within twenty minutes, a forward air control flare ship and strike aircraft were overhead.

Bombers were not required. Their dirty work complete, leaving behind twelve KIAs and twenty wounded, by 0200 hours shooting and explosions, except for fires, had subsided, and the attackers ostensibly began fading into the darkness. However, it was still considered a dangerous environment, for nervous rank and file FAN defenders continued to shoot at various noises and shadows. After collating information relayed through the ABCCC ship, AIRA Vientiane elected to request helicopter assistance to evacuate eight USAF technicians.

THE MISSION

When word reached the radio room at Long Tieng requesting an emergency evacuation at Moung Soui, the Customer Jeoped down the hill and turned left to proceed up the parking ramp leading to the Air America hostel. There he roused three crews from XW-PFF, N8511F, and Hotel-44 out of bed to form the evacuation fleet.

For years, because the H-34, and now the Bell, were single engine aircraft, and with occasional enemy aircraft sightings, Customer and Company policy normally frowned on helicopter pilots flying in the mountains at night.¹⁰ Besides, bad things happened in dark night air when a pilot could least control a situation (ask Murphy), and it would be no different this night.

¹⁰ Although rare, night flights were performed when necessary. While still a line pilot, CPH Wayne Knight conducted a night flight over flat land in an H-34 from Saravane to Pakse in 1962.

Short night ferry flights in Military Region Two were sanctioned in the past if crews were out of the mountains by dark, permitting flight south over flatland. Usually if there was a nighttime emergency, crews departed at first light (sometimes called "dark thirty), before official sunrise when the sun was six to eighteen degrees below the eastern horizon and provided enough light to distinguish definitive structures like mountain tops. Flight under these conditions still posed an element of risk because ravines, canyons, and river beds flanked by hills were shrouded in darkness and perhaps fog, but the nature of our work as helicopter pilots, in itself connoted risk.

Emphasizing the urgency of the mission, the crews were briefed by the Customer. Electing to launch, senior pilots Charlie Weitz and Robbie Robertson would fly Papa Foxtrot Foxtrot, the lead ship, and perform the evacuation. Charlie asked the PIC of 11F to follow him into the strip. Hotel-44's crew was advised to orbit south of the field and perform the role of SAR.

It was just after 0400 hours and still pitch black when the group launched and joined up in a loose formation in the bowl above The Alternate runway. Climbing to 7,000 feet ASL, to clear obstacles, the aircraft headed north over Sam Tong for the twenty-eight-mile flight to Moung Soui. Visibility was estimated at five miles in haze, with scattered ground fog in valleys. Within twenty-five minutes, aided by flares and embers from burning buildings, the gaggle arrived overhead the runway. Charlie first contacted the control plane for information, established his bona fides, and then the Customer on the ground. The man replied that he had the Air America helicopters in sight. To aid their landing he would position a truck on the runway with the headlights pointing down strip.

Alerting the Captain of 11F to momentarily remain "high and dry," Captain Weitz descended several thousand feet. Then, using the vehicle's headlights for reference and ostensibly line up on Runway-24, Charlie commenced a slow approach to the Runway-24 end of the 5,600-foot-long laterite strip. During final descent, wispy patches of ground fog mixed with smoke came into view.

While decelerating, PFF inadvertently entered a small patch of fog. Both pilots became disoriented. Forward speed decreased below translational lift and the helicopter commenced a rapid plunge toward the ground. At the same time, Charlie told Robbie to activate the landing light. This act exacerbated the already dangerous situation, for reflection off the fog reduced forward visibility to zero. Moreover, the ship began a drift to the right.

The Flight Mechanic, who was looking out the left cargo door opening, observed the aircraft rapidly approaching the ground and radioed the cockpit to immediately add power. It was too late. At this point, PFF's right skid contacted a dirt pile on the south boundary. Rendered almost uncontrollable, the Bell continued another forty feet through a barbed wire fence. After several exciting lateral oscillations and gyrations, the helicopter finally came to rest at the edge of the 110-foot-wide runway.

The Flight Mechanic exited the aircraft and informed Weitz that flames were shooting from the exhaust pipe. Charlie quickly secured the engine and both pilots departed the cockpit through their respective doors.

Before long the evacuees arrived, advising the crew to vacate the immediate area, for unfriendly types were still reputedly wandering the area.

Investigating the reason for the pilot error, Charlie discovered the truck that was supposed to delineate a

theoretical runway center line was actually parked off to the south side. This presented an erroneous sight picture, causing him to commence an approach considerably left of the strip. More than slightly irate, Weitz then had the truck repositioned to a correct position and radioed the PIC of 11F to land. Within ten minutes, the Bell pilot landed, loaded the eight original evacuees, and departed for Long Tieng. The Captain of Hotel-44 landed next to evacuate the crew of PFF and one other individual to Alternate.

From the Bell pilots' perspective, it had been a costly mission in terms of an aircraft. PFF had incurred substantial damage (later estimated at 64,800 dollars). However, on the upside there were no injuries to our people, and individuals were extracted from harm's way.

There were no further enemy attacks on Moung Soui that day. Therefore, after security was re-established, the damaged helicopter was loaded on a C-123, flown to Udorn, repaired by Air America maintenance magicians, and hauled out to the ramp on 27 March where CPH Knight performed an FCF.¹¹

Wayne did not investigate the accident at the site, but attended the Investigating Board inquiry. To him the issue was straight forward: guilty. There was not much pressure from anyone to "whitewash" this type of accident. Findings were pilot error with numerous extenuating circumstances and several contributing factors.

The enemy diversionary attack on the Neutralist base effectively ended FAN's projected Plain of Jars offensive with the troops soon returning to "safer" climes at Moung Soui.

¹¹ FCF: Functional check flight had replaced the original test flight term.

The event also disrupted Vang Pao's plans to reclaim the Moung Heim Valley (LS-48A) on Na Khang's southwest flank. Instead, to protect Long Tieng's immediate flanks, he maintained or positioned several battalions around the southwest portion and continued the clearing action to the east of Phu Bia in the area around the Moung Oum (LS-22) Valley. ¹²

The day following the attack, I deadheaded to The Alternate with Flight Mechanic John Melvin. I did not fly a great deal, and was assigned to work at Moung Soui. While there, I talked to Sergeant Smokes, a very large ARMA type who had his left arm in a sling. I learned that while others present had hunkered down anticipating an end to the assault, Captain Bush stood up at an inappropriate time to shoot at the enemy. Smokes, a Negro, claimed that had Bush not assumed his aggressive stance, he would still be alive. ¹³

That night at the hostel, as Robbie trimmed dead skin off his hands, a lingering byproduct of a fiery Huey crash in Nam, I talked to him at length regarding the Site-108 incident. Obviously, the tall Virginian was not happy over the episode. I was not there, but still could not resolve a crew electing to

¹² Segment Sources:

Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 207-208.

Jim Stanitz, *Mayday, Mayday Moung Soui is Under Attack* (The Thailand Laos Cambodia Brotherhood, Inc-Mekong Express Mail, Volume 7, Issue 3, 1.

Don Moody, *The Great Adventures of Bob & Don: Short Stories from Laos 1961-1975*, Internet, ([//aircommandos.org/BobAndDon/Episode0000.htm](http://aircommandos.org/BobAndDon/Episode0000.htm)).

USAID Representative MacAlan Thompson, Emails, 02/14/97, 12/19/99, 12/20/99, 12/21/99.

Thompson Email from USAID Representative Joe Flipse Regarding Bob Parshall; *Time Magazine, Bulletins from Bad Guy Land*, 03/23/70.

Air America Aircraft Accident Review 05/26/69.

Former Chief Pilot Helicopters Wayne Knight Email, 09/19/00.

¹³ Second and third hand accounts varied as to Joe Bush's demise. One stated that Bush charged out the door John Wayne style. Mac Thompson Email, 2/25/01.

launch in the dark when they could have waited an hour or so until first light. Aware that Robbie was an excellent pilot and Charlie had minor problems with instrument flying, I also asked him why he did not assume control of the aircraft when it was obvious Charlie that was experiencing trouble. Robbie said that he thought Charlie was alright, so he let him proceed. That was Robbie. Mild mannered, the former Army warrant officer normally deferred to rank, or, in this case to Weitz's seniority. Robbie's instructor pilot judgment was also sometimes questionable. Occasionally he had a tendency to allow a pilot to proceed too far during a maneuver and make critical mistakes before he would execute a correction. From prior experience with Robertson as IP, while I was checking out in the Bell at Na Khang, his reluctance to act at the proper time almost caused us serious trouble. ¹⁴

NA KHANG

Tuesday found us continuing to support and help bolster Na Khang's defenses. Since termination of the failed PIGFAT operation to retake Site-85 and repositioning of troops south, with little to prevent another enemy dry season drive, as sites continued to change hands and enemy units conducted reconnaissance of the base, there were increased expectations of an enemy attempt to overrun Site-36.

After Vang Pao's soldiers recaptured Na Khang in 1966, the site never achieved its former troop strength or status as a forward launch pad for USAF military SAR missions in North Vietnam. Moreover, as a rule, security dictated that Air America

¹⁴ In all fairness, at this time, except for the CPH and AHCP, we had no official Company-designated instructor pilots.

crews no longer RON there. ¹⁵ Still, with defenders able to hold the site during two previous attacks in as many years, given sufficient warning, and with the assistance of air power, Vang Pao was confident that his formidable garrison could ward off another offensive. However, generally a realistic commander, he was also aware that North Vietnamese leaders possessed long memories, and had no compunction about expending any number of human assets to achieve a goal. For example, a slightly skewed version of Isaac Newton's third law of motion states, "*For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction.*" Therefore, in retaliation to Thai artillery barrages on their Plain of Jars positions, and T-28 sorties out of Moung Soui, the Vietnamese responded in kind with the recent sapper attack on FAR aggression.

During the 1967 and 1968 offensives on Site-36, Vietnamese and Pathet Lao troops had been seriously bloodied by air and ground forces. In order to save face, these losses required a serious pay-back operation by enemy leaders.

At present there was virtually nothing remaining in the immediate Sam Neua area to prevent enemy movement south toward the Plain of Jars and Moung Soui except Na Khang, friendly air support, listening posts, and thin, scattered forward defensive positions. In fact, almost three dozen sites were already lost or were in the process of falling in the province. This left only fifteen friendly sites still viable, not all able to counter enemy advances. To detect slow enemy progress, or annihilate large numbers, several Thai FAGs (forward air ground) road watch spotters reported on enemy movements, and directed air strikes on LOCs from northern positions.

¹⁵ Because of mammoth-sized rats present at night, terrorizing and depriving crews of sleep, and lack of creature comforts, no tears were shed over this decision.

The main Na Khang base's garrison numbered in the low hundreds, but as the enemy previously learned to their dismay, years of continuing fortification had hardened defenses to a point where a few determined men could exact a lofty toll on any attackers. Furthermore, if time permitted, Vang Pao could rapidly shuttle reinforcements to the site. The USAF-maintained TACAN unit prominently sat in a CONEX box on a hill to the north of the strip. Forward positions were considered strong enough to protect the electronic facility. The southeastern and southwestern flanks were covered by troops to prevent end run or pincer attacks. ¹⁶

After another night at the Long Tieng hostel, we returned to Na Khang. Part of the full day, during which Jay Meyers replaced Melvin, included a trip to Bouam Long (LS-32). As a forward-looking leader, VP attempted to have contingency plans for all situations, including the loss of a major site. Like the siege of Houa Moun (LS-58) during February 1965, with Na Khang as the fallback site, VP had his officers coordinated with village leaders and the commander at Site-32, Cher Pao, ¹⁷ to prepare his garrison for another potential fallback and rally position should Na Khang fail to hold.

LUANG PRABANG

On the thirteenth, Dick Elder arrived at Long Tieng to supplement 96W's crew for a road watch exfil mission north of Luang Prabang. After relocating to the royal capital, receiving a briefing and positive radio contact established with the team by the Customer airborne in a Porter, we launched for TJ493149.

¹⁶ Ken Conboy, 208.
Victor Anthony, *The War in Northern Laos*, 287.
CIA Bulletin, 02/24/69.

¹⁷ Vang Pao's relative by marriage.

The selected landing zone was located seventy-six miles northeast, close to LS-187 and Route-19 where Jarina dropped a team at the landing zone on the 10th. Halfway to the target the Customer unexpectedly lost radio contact with the team and the mission was aborted. After recovering at Luang Prabang, Udorn operations directed 96W and crew to RTB. En route, Elder logged PIC time, but I was only accorded deadhead pay.

FLIPSE

AID personnel Joe Flipse rotated north to Luang Prabang following his stint at Thakhet. Returning in January from Christmas home leave with his family in Oregon, Mac Thompson was initially assigned as a "floater," filling in for people away on R&R or on leave. Mac was also at Luang Prabang temporarily working while awaiting another assignment. He was initially supposed to go to Sam Tong, but concerned regarding Pop Buell's biases, Flipse recommended Mac come to LP and learn another way of doing business. Besides, LP was vastly more colorful and interesting than Sam Tong. Since Bob Dakin was on leave, the two men billeted at his house on the peninsula above the Nam Khan.

Helicopter support dribbled along at a reduced flow, or was almost nonexistent during the period. Therefore, the two men designed and fashioned what they called the "X" parachute from AID and locally available material: plastic rope, slip knots over rocks for ties, and material covering the "refugee" PL 480 cloth. All these items were stuffed into a gunny sack and ready-rigged to a load of five cases of canned buffalo meat for Porter drop. The concept was sound: the parachutes opened with regularity, and worked well with minimum loss. The contents of those damaged could be immediately consumed.

While working at the airport, Mac observed a humorous incident. A helicopter pilot shut down at the AB-1 shack. After

exiting the cockpit, he slammed the window closed and began climbing down using the hand and foot holes on the side of the fuselage. In the process, unknown to the pilot, he had inadvertently lodged his microphone boom in the door jam. The upshot was that the resulting jerk caused him to fall backward, pulling half the helmet off his head. Mac made a mental note never to fly with the spastic individual.

Continental Air Services (CASI) had bid successfully and won the Pilatus Porter contract from Air America at LP. AID was assigned one PC-6 plane and Chief of Station Popovitch two Porters, plus his normal complement of helicopters. Porters rotated in and out, some of these aircraft included ones equipped with Astazou engines. Since engine maintenance manuals were written in French, the two American CASI mechanics were unable to read them. Therefore, bilingual Marie Perry, John's daughter, was often called upon to translate the manuals.

With CASI Porter people, occasionally a Beech Baron pilot, and Air America crews working at Luang Prabang, sometimes there was an interesting group of people gathered at the Phu Sy Hotel roundhouse bar in the evenings. There was always an abundance of suds sipping and canned Beaujolais wine drinking. With the wine cans exactly the same shape and size of beer cans, after quaffing the liquid too fast, many of the uninitiated discovered the wine effects to be particularly devastating.

Because of mixed USAID and Agency Porter usage that would require adherence to a detailed and complicated record keeping policy of cost sharing and budgeting, all three aircraft were launched through ground fog normally present early in the morning with loads of drop rice and salt. None of the loads were drop zone (DZ) specific, and could be delivered to any open refugee or special guerrilla unit (SGU) site north of Luang Prabang. Following one or two trips, and contingent on the sun



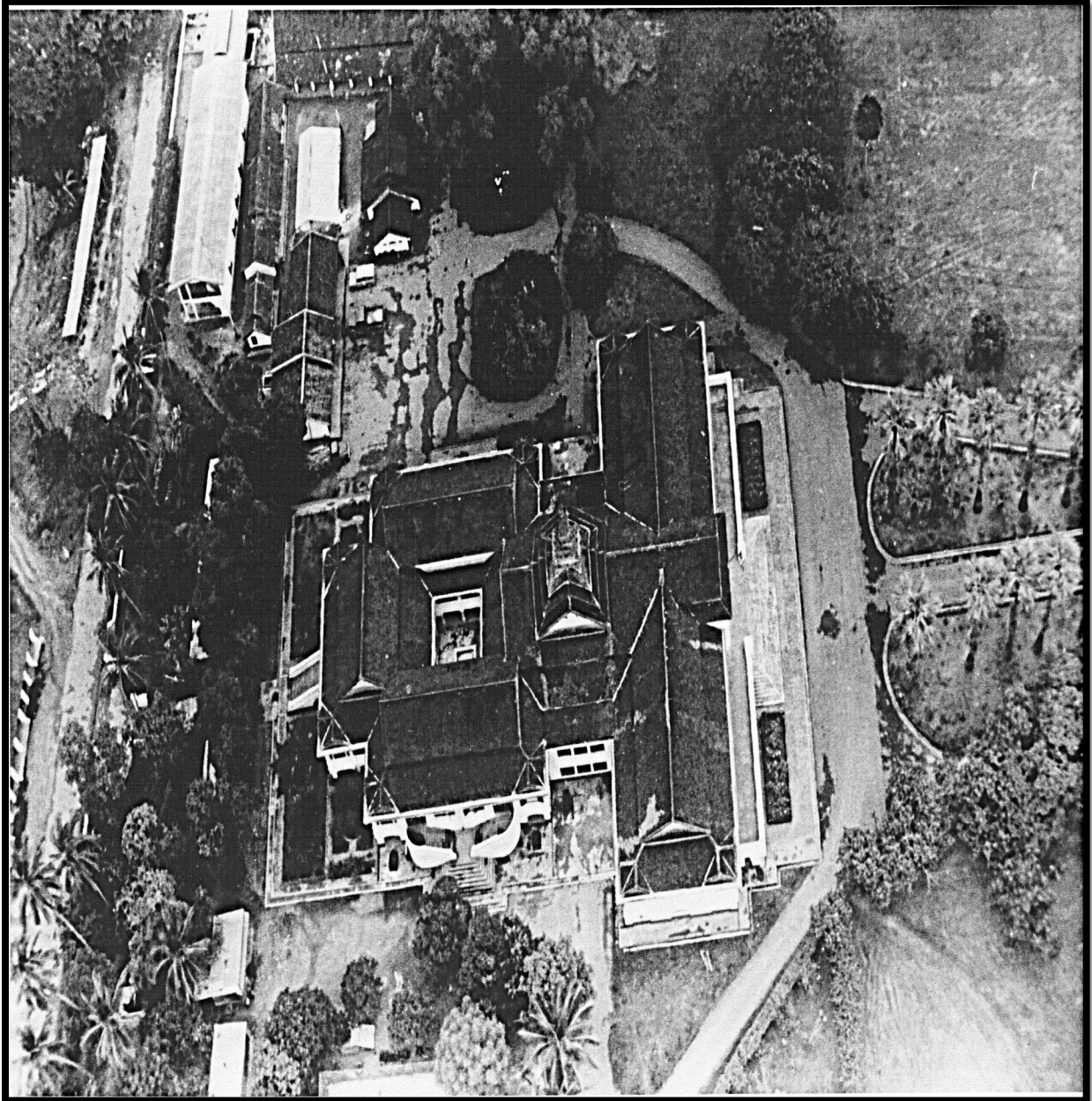
The thatched roof Roundhouse Bar, also called the Treetop Bar, located on grounds outside the Phu Si Hotel, Luang Prabang, Laos. The open-air establishment was patronized by Air America and CASI crews, mechanics, and other Americans working at the Royal Capital.

Jarina Collection.



Scenic view of the Mekong River bank agriculture, fishing boats, and mountains across the river from Luang Prabang.

Thompson Collection.



Overhead photo of the King's palace at Luang Prabang, Laos.
Thompson Collection.

burning off the winter fog, the three Porter pilots could perform DZ-specific drops of ammunition requests, radios, batteries, and the sort. The system worked well. All requirements were satisfied, and pilots were happy with the high daily flight time. A newly assigned Agency air operation man who arrived at Luang Prabang was unhappy that **his** aircraft were working for AID during foggy mornings. Since it was impossible to supply the rice-salt requirements for all the refugees and SGU types, a Caribou was requested to supply larger sites.

To push this agenda, Air America support branch honcho Bill Leonard arrived and spent most of a day trying to convince Joe Flipse that a Caribou would be an improved option to reduce Porter flight time. Joe, a tough, stubborn person, was not convinced that such a large aircraft was needed in Military Region One. He was ill-equipped to handle wooden pallets, and his ground crew was not considered proficient enough to conduct such an operation. Also, the current hostility ensured that Caribous were going to sustain battle damage during round trips over enemy-controlled areas. Joe was aware that Leonard, because of price-load considerations, was saddled with a C-7 no one wanted.

During the course of their dialogue, a frustrated Leonard told Flipse that he knew AID was using planes for personal transport, but he would not say anything. Joe, a person unafraid of confrontations, replied that AID was not joy riding. He was also weary of yet another REMF ¹⁸ attempting to squeeze him for personal reasons. Therefore, he told Leonard to leave LP and remain behind his desk in Vientiane where he belonged.

¹⁸ REMF: An unflattering gutter acronym describing management people who did not work in the field and assume the same risks as those in the trenches.



A daylight view of the Royal Capital at Luang Prabang, Laos and the runway as seen from a plane over the Mekong River. The distinctive loop in the Khan River is visible, as are surrounding mountains to the east and northeast.

Thompson Collection.



Bill Leonard (tie), Air America Air Support Branch Manager and Sam Tong's AID Chief Pop Buell.

Knight Collection.

At the time, Joe was unaware that Blaine Jensen and Tony Cattaruci--called Tony 2 to prevent confusion with senior Agency Case Officer Tony Poe--had commandeered a Porter pilot to take them from Ban Houei Sai to Chiang Mai on a Sunday afternoon jaunt. They were observed, reported, and had to reimburse AID for the trip. This act destroyed all credibility AID had established over the years. Subsequently, Flipse had to constantly justify his air usage.

Despite Flipse's protestations, the decision to employ a Caribou in Military Region One had been determined on a higher level. A week afterward, on 12 February, junior Operations Manager (OM), Robert N. Crone, arrived at Luang Prabang on the replacement Porter. Senior OM, Tom Krohn, had charged Bob with conducting a personal evaluation of area DZs AID employees had selected for the C-7 operations. Stressing security, Joe immediately accosted Crone with the identical discussions he had had with Leonard the previous week. His efforts were fruitless. Bob, a man with a mission, boarded the Porter for the survey. Joe lost track of how many drops Crone witnessed, for he was busy with special drops that Howie Freeman, then assigned to Alternate, was attempting to have AID accomplish.

Later that afternoon, word arrived at team headquarters from radio transmission by a ground team with information that the Porter had gone down at a drop zone north of Luang Prabang. There was another CASI Porter on the ground at the airfield, so Thompson and the pilot departed to either confirm the crash or discover whatever they could. Prior to launching, Mac called Joe, who had left for town, to inform him of the missing aircraft. When Flipse arrived at the airfield, he called the operations manager in Vientiane to ascertain why the plane had not returned directly to Lima-08 for a maintenance problem. Then

he called Area AID Coordinator John Perry with the unsettling news.

Despite attempts to raise people on the frequency modulated (FM) radio frequency, nothing was achieved. Still circling at dark, they heard the CASI Agency Beech Baron pilot depart.

Mounting two engines, the Baron was deemed a far safer alternative for night flying than a single engine Astazou Porter. After establishing contact with the Baron driver, the Porter pilot headed south for Luang Prabang. The runway was not equipped with nocturnal lighting aids, so Jeeps were lined up to provide a little illumination for landing. Mac remained at the airfield to await the Baron Captain's return with a report.

In addition to the pilot, Joe Flipse and Bob Dakin were onboard the Baron. Both talked to team leader Sing Mun on the ground, who confirmed the crash.

Sing Mun returned to Luang Prabang when three bodies--the pilot, Crone, and a local kicker--were retrieved the following day. Joe had first met Sing Mun in the fall of 1963 when he and others returned to Nam Yu from a period of training in Thailand. Therefore, he performed interpreting duties for the CASI investigator. Details of the crash were repeated several times. They were always identical: during the course of operation at the site, the Porter exploded in a great ball of fire and crashed.

Thompson recalled a Caribou arriving at LP to conduct cargo drops. However, this did not last long. With larger DZs being lost, the requirement faded. ¹⁹

¹⁹ Segment Sources:

Joe Flipse Emails, 04/10/97, 04/12/97.

Mac Thompson Interview with the Author at the Long Branch Bar Bangkok, Thailand, 12/29/96.

Mac Thompson Emails, 01/11/96, 02/14/97, 02/23/97, 04/10/97.

Joe Leeker, *Air America in Laos: Humanitarian Work*, 51.



Harsh terrain displaying slash and burn agriculture abutting the Mekong River in western Military Region One.
Author Collection.

JARINA WORKS FAR NORTH

The day Bob Crone was killed, Mike deadheaded to Ban Houei Sai via C-123s 671 and 374. Arriving before lunch, he took over Hotel-63 with Flight Mechanic Tom Cournoyer and flew north to Nam Yu to work for the 713 Customer. Although not having worked in northwestern Military Region One for some time, Jarina was ready to perform as best he could. Assignments varied. Some required lengthy flights to deliver messages or obtain critical intelligence. The first mission was conducted thirty-four miles northeast of Site-118A and seven miles northeast of Nam Bu (LS-125). After recovering at the base for fuel, he drove ninety-nine miles southeast deep into Sayaboury Province to a point Southeast of Phu Hua Moui (LS-67). This was followed by a long trip northwest to a Mekong River refugee village eight miles upriver from the Yao stronghold at Ban Nam Kueung (LS-150) in an area becoming known as the "Golden Triangle."

Mike landed at Site-25 about dark.

Unimpeded by deadheading, weather, or other factors, the next morning Jarina returned to Nam Yu to fly a full day. He was sent southeast to work the Pak Beng area. Since the Chinese Road to Moung Sai was completed in January, activity had increased in the region along with Agency interest in any survey, engineering, or evidence of construction progress of an all-weather road south of Moung Sai along the Beng River toward the Mekong. Mike finished his twenty-one-landing day with trips northwest of Nam Yu to Moung Mounge (LS-93), northeast to Ban Vieng (LS-135) and environs, and forty-eight miles east toward the Tha River to Tong Prang (LS-145).

Because of a lack of definitive landmarks and inaccurate maps, it was often difficult to navigate in the Houei Kong region. Furthermore, one day in the early sixties I discovered that what I believed were iron deposits sometimes affected the

magnetic compass. Taught the area by Scratch Kanach, who Mike considered one of Air America's finest helicopter pilots, he easily displayed his expertise. On one trip, Mike was loaded for a landing zone. After takeoff, he climbed for fifteen minutes, landed on the high pad, and dropped the load. After descending for ten minutes, he landed at Site-118A in twenty-five minutes.

Surprised, the indigenous Customer ran out of the air operations shack wanting to know why Mike had returned. The weather was good; did he have a maintenance problem?

The Customer's question amused Mike: *"What is the problem? No one ever came back that fast."*

Jarina, who had helped Tony establish the landing zone, knew its exact location. Therefore, he replied, *"I do not know why, except that you have a lot of new people now."*

Landing even later in the evening, the crew of Hotel-63 RON again at Ban Houei Sai.

The fifteenth was an even more active day with high time, and one that included thirty-four landings. Starting the day from Houei Sai, Mike flew north to Team-9, ten miles north-northeast of Nam Bu. After returning to Nam Yu for fuel, he continued the previous day's work in the Pak Beng area. On the way back to Houei Sai, the crew stopped at Tong Pa How (LS-250), a downriver site enlarged after the late 1967 Nam Tha evacuation. A trip to Moung Mounge was followed by a mission north. He then recovered at Nam Yu for the night.

Sunday, the fourth day of his RON, Mike flew to Ban Vieng and began eastern shuttles to Site-93 and points north. After taking on fuel at Ban Houei Sai, he returned to Pak Beng and RON at Site-25.

Early on the seventeenth, Mike and Tom were recalled to Udorn in Hotel-63, but made several en route stops at Pak Beng, Hong Sa (LS-62A), Sayaboury, and Vientiane.

JARINA WORKS SOUTH

Because of the dearth of Bell helicopters available for operations, H-34 pilots were called upon to take up the slack for Special Mission requirements in the south. Since this normally involved extra flight time, no one complained. However, the missions entailed additional time in the field and often a great deal of deadheading (During February Jarina was in the field two weeks).

Two days after returning from Luang Prabang, Mike Jarina returned to the field. He deadheaded on Hotel-33, the Special Mission bird, to Pakse and then to Ban Khok Mai (LS-171), the Agency run SGU camp, north of Saravane. As senior pilot, he reconed the landing zone in CASI Porter XW-PFC. Later, he deadheaded to Lima-11 in Hotel-33 to spend the night at the Air America hostel.

The next day, Jarina was tasked to return Hotel-45 to Udorn for maintenance. He and Rudy Serafico, whom he and some other pilots called "Senor," logged two hours and fifty-five minutes en route time.

On Saturday the 22nd, Mike, Phil Jennings, and Flight Mechanic Bob Peterson performed local night training. Training was slightly different from the norm of five landings and an instrument approach, in that it included landing to illuminated night panels in the infield between the runway and taxiway. We did not usually fly at night in Laos, but since a precedent had been established with the Weitz-Roberson crash at Moung Soui, management probably wanted pilots to gain more night experience landing to light sources.

Monday morning, Mike boarded a Fairchild C-123K-636 for an interim flight to Wattay Airport. There he transferred to an Air America Curtiss Commando C-46-N1383N bound for Savannakhet.

After arrival, Mike reconned the Special Mission landing zones of the day in CASI Beech Baron N1313Z. Afterward, he joined Larry Frazer and Flight Mechanic Campit in Hotel-33. Conducted in the late afternoon, to enhance cover and concealment, the missions involved two infils and one exfil.

The first of two landing zones was located at WE6428, eighty miles north-northeast of Lima-39 in the hills just south of the Bang Fai river valley. Overlooking a bypass road linking Route-23 from the west to the east and a prominent loop in the river generically known as "The Boot," the base camp site was well used. A second landing zone at WD8164 lay forty-two miles south-southeast in a large range that had access to northern and eastern roads.

The well planned and executed flight recovered at Savannakhet near dark.

The crews repositioned their helicopters to Thakhet the following morning to conduct two Special Missions for Mike LaDue. The first mission involved an infiltration of a Ban Na Tan (LS-237) team to rough high ground WE3292 near Pha Sanouay, fifty miles north-northeast of the L-40A launch site, and eight miles east of Ban Song Khone (LS-77). The mission was twofold in nature. LaDue considered the area much too quiet and wanted it reconned. The team would perform this task by walking back to Ban Na Tan and reporting all they observed. The second portion involved a test of the group's veracity. For some time, since their reports were making less sense, Mike suspected manufactured reports. After their return from this mission, the ensuing report again hinted of fabrication. Therefore, with their information believed unreliable, the team was expunged from Mike LaDue's list of road watch teams.

Sometime later, when LaDue, his Thai pilot, and an interpreter were "scoping out" the Na Tan area in a Helio

Courier, an incorrect signal panel was displayed at the landing zone. As they turned to depart for Thakhet, a volley of small arms fire was directed at the airplane. The plane was not hit, but with special trust and confidence diminished, that was the end of the relationship with the people at Na Tan. ²⁰

After recovering at Nakhon Phanom for food and fuel, Jarina's flight returned to Thakhet west.

The second portion of the day's work involved a trip north-northwest to New San Soak (LS-126) and Ban Done (LS-28). Although some 12.7mm fire was directed at the flight during the day, all recovered undamaged. Jarina returned Hotel-33 to Udorn after dark. ²¹

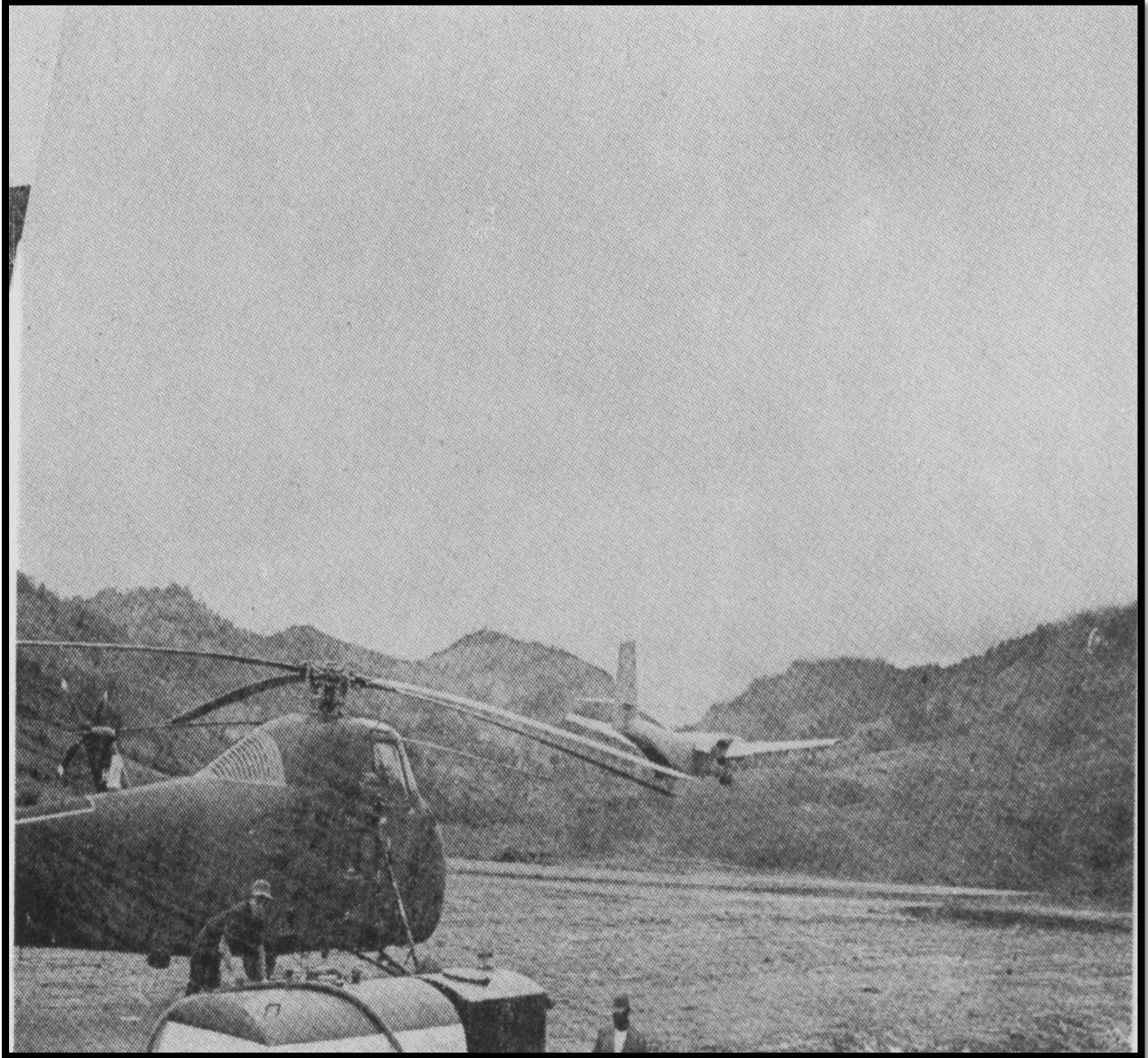
SAM TONG—THOMPSON'S TRAVELS

Working around his numerous assignments, during the first two months of 1969, Ernie Kuhn was consumed with abundant details regarding his marriage to Pythoon, the niece of RLG Xieng Khouang Governor Chao Saykham Southakakoumal. It was a bittersweet time, for the governor's wife had recently been killed in a late November plane crash at Savannakhet. The wedding occurred at Sam Tong on the 20th and was well attended by both Americans and Lao. Following three days of celebrations, the couple departed for Vientiane in preparation for a long stateside vacation slated to commence on 3 March.

Kuhn's more than three-month leave caused a sizeable vacuum in upper Military Region Two, and an important slot for an experienced AID representative in that area. Since Mac Thompson

²⁰For additional information regarding this subject, see Author's Book Eight, 1967.

²¹ Mike Jarina Interviews.
Mike LaDue Email, 06/18/12.



Sam Tong, Laos. A H-34D receiving fuel from a portable tanker, while a C-7 Caribou departs downhill at the Lima Site-20 strip.

Unknown Source.

had not been assigned a permanent job after returning from home leave, he was assigned to Sam Tong during the last week in February, again as a floater to fill gaps created by the sick, lame, and lazy. Despite continuing health problems, Pop Buell was still the functioning AID boss in Military Region Two. While Mac received briefings, he found the division of AID labor generally apportioned as such: Kuhn, in the northern area at LS-32, 36, 86, 184, and other still viable Sam Neua sites; Paul White, mid-section LS-50, and area; Terry Collins, L-108 and the Neutralists; Winn McKeithen, south and east of the Plain of Jars, LS-05, and points east in Zone Steel to LS-46. Along with temporary personnel rotating through the site from Vientiane were medical technicians: Steve Schofield, Stan Monnie, Don Dugan, Frank Becker and Doctors Charles Weldon and his wife Doctor Patricia McCreedy.

During 1968 and early 1969, the USAID refugee relief program in north Laos (MR-1 and 2) had three responsibilities: the care and feeding of refugees, paramilitary dependents, and SGU troops. Support was largely for refugees, but innovative AID leaders claimed that half of their charges were military dependents, therefore, funding was not required from the AID budget. Instead, CIA money, filtered through the Department of Defense, paid for the program. AID also had the responsibility to provide basic food support--not Thai dry rations, but SGU food that included glutinous rice, canned meat, and salt. In addition, logistics were in place to deliver the food either by air drop or helicopter.

According to Thompson, refugee relief work in support of the overall USG effort in Laos was efficient and elicited a sense of accomplishment. While at Sam Tong, Mac never heard discussion of the correctness or wrongness of the war. Such conversation would not have been acceptable with the staff,

American or local. Doubters in the USAID organization were not assigned to the Sam Tong, Luang Prabang, or Ban Houei Sai programs, where agendas were well integrated with CIA and Lao-SGU plans.

Thompson "hit the deck running." Most of his time at Sam Tong was ultra-busy. His initial assignments were to the north in upper Military Region Two, to include Na Khang and Houei Tong Ko. During April through May when Paul White, who later contracted malaria, and McKeithen was absent for some reason, Mac's work area expanded to Phu Cum, Bouam Long, and the Zone Steel area.

Shortly after Mac arrived at Sam Tong, he was given deceased Captain Bush's M-2 carbine. He carried the weapon to the AID-TelCom shop in Vientiane where Tom Morrison sawed off the barrel and braised a front sight onto the front sling and wood hand guard keeper. While scouting the city, Mac discovered a folding stock designed for the M-1 carbine version. Using some woodwork skills, he then mated the stock to the rifle. The rifle accompanied him for many years to outlying sites, but he never fired it in anger. When the war was officially over and it was time to depart, about 23 May 1975 he deposited the carbine, along with other acquired weapons, in a well.

Most of Mac's early work was at still-friendly LS-184. Meo Her Tou was his field assistant. A former AID medic, highly respected Her Tou was considered an honorary "Nai Kong." Mac had a lot of rapport with the man, whose wife was the second most important nurse at the Site-20 hospital.

Because of the large number of individuals located at Site-184, there were thirty AID supply drops a month. A third was reserved for refugees, somewhat less for military dependents, and the remainder for troops. In addition, the troops received

supplemental food directly from the CIA, and the men often had Thai dry rations.

Ernie Kuhn's main area of responsibility, Houei Tong Ko, held the largest number of area refugees. Since the fall of Site-85 and subsequent aborted PIGFAT operation, over time, about 12,000 mixed SGU and civilians either walked or were evacuated by both Air America and USAF helicopters from Houei Hinsa and surrounding areas. Many outposts were developed south and slightly west. They included Hotel, Foxtrot, Papa, Alpha, Lima November, and Foxtrot Hotel pads.

Mac only went to Site-215 once by H-34. The site was still considered somewhat friendly until at least late May, but, except for a few troops, was devoid of civilians. It was the same at Houei Kah Moun (LS-111), where security was in question. He only journeyed to Site-111 by helicopter for the purpose of marshalling and retrieving stragglers, and delivering rice to troops at the Foxtrot and Tango pads. Most of Mac's area indoctrination included area over-flights with no landings.

Along with interpreter Her Tou, he was flown into Na Khang for a portion of a day to meet and visit with the people.

Mac RON mostly at Sam Tong, and only occasionally at Houei Tong Ko. He generally terminated overnight stays in the field when Agency Case Officer Frank Odum (Bag) tactfully mentioned that Mac's RONs made him look bad and asked him to stop. Frank Odum indicated that he would also like to RON, but was constrained by AB-1 restrictions. Furthermore, it would be unacceptable if he was killed or captured, but little consequence if a USAID guy was captured.

Mac stayed overnight at Site-184 in March. During the spring, he met Captain Ly Lao, a Catholic and former Houei Hinsa commanding officer, now commanding officer at Houei Tong Ko. Mac



AID representative, Her Tou (center), MacAlan Thompson's field assistant, interfacing with Meo refugees at Houei Tong Ko (LS-184), Laos.

Thompson Collection.



Captain Ly Lao, Commanding Officer at Houei Tong Ko, Laos.
Thompson Collection.

was inbound in an H-34 with the intention to RON. Since enemy units were reported in the area, Mac called Ly Lao for a current situation report as to the enemy location. Ly Lao replied "gai," which Mac interpreted to mean far away.

Once on the ground, Mac removed his sleeping bag, half a case of obligatory beer, and released the H-34 pilot. After dinner, a few beers, and conversation, the men retired to an earthen bunker that was lined with parachute cloth. During the early morning hours, mortar rounds began impacting vicinity outposts. Ly Lao roused the FAG out of bed, instructing him to request a Spooky gunship from Alleycat, the nighttime ABCCC C-130 to discourage the enemy. After Spooky worked the valley area to the east, and no more fire was observed. Mac was a bit miffed at Ly Lao. Before leaving the site, he asked the commanding officer, *"Why did you tell me the bad guy was far away?"*

Ly Lao laughed and replied, *"No. I said they were near and wondered why you elected to RON. However, being a farang, I assumed you knew what you were doing."*

Prior to this incident, Mac thought he could handle the Lao language fairly well, but now he discovered that he was not good with tones. In actuality, Ly Lao had said "gai" with a high tone meaning close, not "gai" with a low tone that Mac presumed was far away. It was a good object lesson. After that Mac asked specific questions, like how far and how near in meters.

After consolidating gains around Pha Thi, intent on clearing Houa Phan Province's western border area in upper Military Region Two of refugee camps and government troops, the enemy commenced assaults. On 15 April, Watts and Rainbow FAGs reported TIC on a mountain site at UH1938, four miles southeast of the original refugee camp at Alpha. An estimated two battalions of enemy were attacking 200 troops and causing



Built along contour lines, the rough "doglegged" strip at Houei Tong Ko (LS-184), Laos, a sizeable refugee camp in western Houa Phan Province.

Thompson Collection.

refugees to stream nine miles north to Site-184. Despite the Raven-42 pilot working strikes in the immediate area and restricting the enemy to their trenches, six of seven outposts were lost.

Three days later, a Raven FAC worked strikes in support of Houei Tong Ko.

Fighting continued on 21 April. Watts reported TIC to ABCCC, as fifty friendly troops were besieged by two enemy battalions. Strike aircraft were diverted to address the problem.

Within four days, Rainbow reported to Cricket that Houei Tong Ko was under heavy attack. As Cricket marshaled flights, Raven-42 was summoned from the PDJ to direct strikes. Under pressure from the sky, the enemy pulled back.

Mac occasionally took foolish chances. One day, along with Agency Case Officer Dick Santos, and Thai PARU operative Lipo, Mac rode in a CASI Porter to the LS-184 area. During the course of the day, they headed northwest to Phou Saly (LS-178) and then north to look for a team that had been missing for two months. The area in question was north of Nam Bac, where Mac had worked in 1968, and southwest of Dien Bien Phu. After grinding around the sky for some time, Mac began thinking that their penetration so far into enemy territory was not a particularly good idea in a single engine aircraft.

As situations changed and people became sick, left on leave, or took time off, Mac remained busy substituting for individuals and rotating to different areas in MR-2. Later in the spring, he worked out of Padong on VP's Xieng Khouang Ville operation. He also worked at San Tiau (LS-02) helping with refugee evacuations to the Moung Moc (LS-46) regional headquarters for Zone Steel. He did the same in the Ban Muang

Ngan (LS-236) area. ²²

HOME IN UDORN

I had been off the schedule for almost ten days. During that period, I was trying to make amends for my non-appearance at the train station when Tuie arrived with Peter. However, I continued to make errors when I left the baby on the kitchen table to perform a task. Unexpectedly, he rolled over and fell onto the floor. There were no apparent injuries, but I incurred substantial heat from my wife. Pete was already taking the bottle and was going to be a different child from Rick, who was doing fine and gaining a little weight.

I was typing a letter home in the afternoon of the 23rd when a Transportation Department driver arrived in the Company "B" bus (a blue Volkswagen) with a note from the CPH instructing me to accompany the driver to the airfield prepared for an RON upcountry. I was a little curious about such a request so late in the day, but it was not the first time and would likely not be the last this happened. Bell RONs were usually short, so I hurriedly gathered my RON kit that comprised a few uniform changes, socks, underclothes and some cans of beanie weenies and other emergency rations. My heavy vinyl bag, containing the AK-

²²Segment Sources:
Ernie Kuhn, 66-67.
Mac Thompson Interview with the Author at the Lone Star Bar, Bangkok, Thailand, 12/29/96.
Mac Thompson Emails, 10/28/96, 02//14/97 (2), 02/23/97, 12/04/98, 02/29/99, 03/29/99, 12/19/99, 12/21/99, 04/30/06, 04/30/12; 07/26/12. Extracts from ABCCC reports, as recorded by airborne control, are sparingly used to better inform the reader of area actions and present a little color to the narrative. These will be listed throughout this book as ABCCC Reports.

47 assault rifle ²³ and five full twenty round magazines, was kept in my locker at the field and I drew a USAF survival vest from supply that held a radio, flares, mirror, and other items thought necessary if confronted with a survival situation.

DIVINE PROTECTION

As devout Buddhists, many Thai people earnestly believed that images of a favored religious figure worn around the neck on long golden "baht chains" would bring them good fortune and protect them during adversity. This was an integral part of the culture imbued in an individual from birth. The images were fashioned from pressed clay, metal, or other material, and blessed by temple (wat) monks. They could be purchased, but obtaining one from a good friend or another person was considered the preferred method of obtaining them. Whatever the case, commerce in Buddhist images in Thailand was quite brisk and provided a living for many people (and likely still does).

Thai military men, some who wore up to ten or fifteen Buddhist amulets on heavy, expensive gold chains were particularly sensitive to protection the amulets purportedly provided. Sometimes this belief achieved the heights of absurdity. According to past and current lore, this had been evidenced more than once by men, likely in their cups, eager to prove their Buddhas' efficacy. Since Buddha would always ward off and provide protection from any bullet penetrating the skin, the drunken idiots would square away with pistols. The usual result of the fiasco: one deceased person, another with tangible proof of his Buddha's power.

²³ Russian Mikhail Timofeyevich Kalashnikov combined elements from the Browning rifle and the Garand carbine into what would become known as the prized AK-47 assault rifle. The design became the norm in 1947, hence the 47 designation.

When preparing to depart the house for upcountry work, I made certain that I wore my twenty-four-karat gold chain necklace with attached wat-blessed Buddhist images. As my superstitions waxed and waned, and weighed me down from time to time, over the years, the intangible crutch increasingly assumed greater proportions. At the bare minimum the weighty talismans tended to remind me to be careful. Now I had a new addition, a piece of black tektite shaped in the fashion of a sitting Buddha encased in solid-but-thin gold bands. As related to me later by Khun Tha, the unusual item, discovered on top of a mountain, had been formed at some time somewhere in the universe under tremendous temperature and pressure, and been deposited after a meteor impact. During a period of particularly bad luck in Laos, Khun Ta unexpectedly presented me the icon one day. At the time it was offered, I knew that, although I still was, and would always be, a foreign devil in their minds, I had been wholeheartedly accepted into the family structure. Plang indicated that the image was a special military Buddha that afforded the wearer superior luck in war. It was so good that "the bullet just missed you." He claimed the amulet had been in his family a long time. I suppose it was highly cherished, for when I was visiting the Nisagonrungsee family one day, a relative I did not know offered me the baht equivalent of 5,000 dollars for the Buddha. Naturally, even if the man had been serious, I could not part with it. Money was not all that important, but peace of mind was.

In all the years I worked for Air America, I only forgot to wear my chain three times when going to work. Remembering what happened to Colonel Tong when he was not wearing his Buddhist images during our 1965 North Vietnam SAR experience, I felt so uncomfortable without my good luck talismans that when I arrived at the Air America facility and realized I had left the chain at

the house, I implored the driver to return to my house and retrieve it. He clearly understood my quandary and accomplished the task without question. Another time, realizing I had forgotten the chain and how much it meant to me psychologically, my wife drove to the field with it. I only left without the chain once during a weeklong RON to Savannakhet. It was a bad week. Nervous, I was ultra-careful while flying, and it is difficult to describe how uneasy I was working in that hostile environment without my perceived protection.

UPCOUNTRY

An Agency intelligence report stated:

"A few minor bases in northern Laos have changed hands, otherwise the military situation there continues to be quiet. The anticipated enemy push against the key base at Na Khang has still not materialized, although there are fresh reports of enemy ground reconnaissance around the base's defensive perimeter. In addition, substantial numbers of North Vietnamese troops, some of whom have only been in Laos for a few months and have not yet seen action, are still located in the northeast." ²⁴

During late February, the situation worsened at Site-36. Without adequate intelligence available, the primary question those of us who helped defend and support the base asked was exactly when the enemy would attack the base in force. Such a situation demanded that all available helicopter resources be introduced to aid in the site's defense.

Flight Mechanic Andy Anderson and I prepared 96W for the RON, and then ferried the machine to Long Tieng. By the time we

²⁴ CIA Daily Bulletin, 02/24/69. Laos: The communists are still threatening government positions in widely separated areas of the country, but so far there are only a few signs that a major push is in the works.

circumnavigated around developing late afternoon thunderstorms and showers, we arrived too late at Long Tieng to accomplish anything more than to park on the large asphalt ramp and walk upslope to the crew hostel. Since the hostel was opened, beer had been made available for crews. Consumption was left to an individual's discretion and honor to observe the eight-hour bottle-to-throttle rule inherent in the industry. However, this was occasionally abused by a few pilots, who preferred to remain up late drinking and playing poker. Sometimes noise from the activity prevented sleep for those of us who had retired. I am not sure if anyone informed the chief pilot, but it certainly was contrary to regulations, and the problems it caused waxed and waned.

Monday morning, I was assigned to work at Site-36, shuttling supplies and troops to outlying positions. Despite heightened awareness and anticipation of an impending attack in force, no one at the base appeared unduly concerned or panicky, and they were prepared. Moreover, many of the defenders had previously weathered the drill, and with the help of timely air strikes, seen superior enemy numbers turned away with heavy losses. This, plus VP's confidence that the site would hold, bolstered the garrison's morale.

Early Wednesday I returned to Na Khang and worked more than three fuel loads before being relieved on site. The deadhead home involved a flight on Air America Porter N392R to Long Tieng, and from there to Udorn on C-123K 568. During the short month, I ended up with almost fifty-six hours, somewhat better than that accumulated in January.

After enemy forces consolidated and retained control of Phou Pha Thi and the surrounding areas, thus ensuring control of Sam Neua Province in upper Military Region Two when Vang Pao's costly winter offensive failed, Western and RLG planners and advisors logically expected North Vietnamese leaders' next priority centered on driving government forces completely and permanently from the Na Khang base. Accomplishing this feat would deny government forces a formidable launch site for LOC interdiction, road watch team intelligence gathering, and prevent any concerted resurgence to move north and challenge Vietnamese efforts in strengthening its hold on the province. It would also allow unrestricted road building and an opportunity to indoctrinate those souls still living there in communist principles. Loss of the major base would also sever or make difficult a necessary lifeline to tribal sites remaining in the region. With the cork from the bottle leading south removed, except for the Bouam Long, Phu Cum, and Phu Vieng sites, few defensive positions remained to forestall major enemy movement onto the northwestern PDJ from the north. The scenario boded ill for those individuals who were expected to bolt at a moment's notice. Moreover, points further south toward population centers on the Mekong, and even Thailand, might be threatened. Such possibilities had been a concern of both the RLG and the West for years, but in early 1969, with several battalions of enemy forces well stocked and on the move, the future indeed looked bleak for the tiny kingdom of Laos.

Like many airfields in Laos, French forces originally constructed or refurbished an old Japanese airstrip in the large Na Khang Valley during the First Indochina War. Initially taking

a backseat to the forward Houa Phan Province headquarters at Houa Moug (LS-58) during the Second Indochina War, Site-36 was used sparingly by aircraft, mainly as an emergency landing or fueling stop. It did not achieve elevated status until Site-58 was abandoned under pressure during February 1965. When the clay and laterite strip was substantially widened and lengthened to accommodate larger STOL planes to shuttle sufficient bullets, beans, and bandages in order to prosecute a major guerrilla offensive, Na Khang increasingly achieved the proportions of an important and major strategic base in upper Military Region Two. Security was rarely a problem. With this not an issue, Air America and USAF personnel and their aircraft were allowed to remain overnight at the site when Air Force crews used the strip as a launch pad and fueling site for SAR missions in the North.

Well-watered by the Nam Vang, affording abundant wet rice cultivation, the long valley supported people from a few old Tai Phuan villages. For example, Ban Na Kout, located in upper Xieng Khouang Province about one kilometer south of Na Khang, was first established in 1865. The Tai Phuan embraced the Buddhist religion, as evidence of an ancient temple complex portrayed. Beside Na Khang, Na Khout was one in a cluster of Phuan villages stretching six miles south along Route-6 as the artery from Sam Neua Town wound toward Tham La and further south into the Ban Ban Valley. The rice paddy area around Tam La is where H-34 Captain Bill Wilmot lost his life in May 1966, while we worked on a successful operation to retake Site-36.¹ During this period, many Ban Na Khout villagers took to the forest and jungle to avoid the bombing and fighting. They did not return to their ancestral homes until a peace was established in Laos.

¹ Details of this episode can be found in the Author's Book 7, 1966.



Ban Na Kout postwar housing largely unchanged for centuries.
Kuhn

When AID representative Ernie Kuhn entered the Lao scene at Na Khang in the fall of 1965, he noted two large Tai Phuan villages in the immediate area. During his time in the north, Kuhn had opportunity to visit some of the settlements and examine the large, old, beautiful Phuan wooden homes. On one trip, he removed carved wooden end pieces representing elephants from a burned house.

During late 1966, before the 1967 attack on Site-36 when area AID representative Don Sjostrom was killed, while they walked through a Tai Phuan village, the friendly people invited Don and Ernie to spend the night. Not expected back at Na Khang, they elected to accept the offer. As customary with most hospitable ethnic types, a small party followed. At 0900 hours, while the two men prepared to retire in their assigned house, a noise was heard on the rear porch. A village elder entered the house indicating that there were several village girls on display outside from which Don and Ernie could select for the purpose of conducting a little whoopee. Apparently, the customs and mores of the Phuan were more liberal than the Meo as to the subject of sexual activity, which provided a source of nightly pleasure for Lao troops stationed at Na Khang.

Without alienating their hosts or attempting to embarrass the girls, the AID representatives respectfully refused the offer on the premise that the carnal act would do little to enhance the hearts and minds of the local people. At first, the senior man and his buddies were nonplussed, wanting to know the reason the Americans would not partake of their proffered hospitality. Moreover, the elder explained that during the French Indochina War, it was not unusual for soldiers to occasionally enter the village looking for girls, pigs, and chickens. To maintain friendship and the status quo, these items were freely provided. After the French departed for good, the



Photo of the fortifications and a portion of the landing field at Na Khang (LS-36), Laos, looking generally west. The unusual shaped hilltop fort and trench lines were located west of and adjoining the end of the 2,265-foot runway. The USAF TACAN site, outposts, and additional trench lines are seen to the north and west.

Air America Photo Book.

incoming Vietnamese invaders mostly demanded pigs. If they desired a girl, one was provided.

Finally, after continuously expressing their appreciation for the kind offer of young female flesh, normal relations were preserved and the men slipped off to bed. ²

MINI-TET

Elected on the premise of ending the war in South Vietnam with honor, Richard Nixon was inaugurated the 37th U.S. President on 20 January 1969. The North Vietnamese were aware that Nixon was an uncompromising anti-communist with a professed plan to end the war. Despite LBJ's bombing cessation in October, negotiations in Paris, and assurances of no major attacks in South Vietnam, communist leaders still elected to test the new President.

At the end of January, Viet Cong hierarchy proclaimed a seven-day ceasefire between 15 through 22 February for Tet, the annual Vietnamese New Year holiday. However, at the same time steps were undertaken by the enemy to commence sizeable countrywide offensives on 22 February, with primary emphasis against American forces and their installations. Backup priority would be taken against LOCs and the pacification program.

Cognizant and wary of past communist chicanery and subterfuge to achieve gains during cease fire periods, allied forces only announced a Twenty-four-hour ceasefire.

Allied intelligence personnel had previously obtained information regarding the nature of the offensive and disseminated projected targets to field commanders. Violating

² Rik Ponne, International Team Leader GMS Tourism Development Laos, March 2011, as Downloaded from the Internet. Ernie Kuhn, 7, 15, 67.

October agreements, the enemy countrywide offensive commenced on the 22nd, with varying unit size and proportional levels of intensity for several weeks. Despite damage to allied infrastructure and casualties, little was gained militarily by the enemy to deter the allied war effort. Retaliation was not immediately sanctioned by the Nixon Administration, but there was concern that the attacks had violated the principals that led to the original cessation of the bombing halt over North Vietnam.

As the offensive continued, President Nixon indicated that there was no near-term prospect for an American troop withdrawal from South Vietnam. This depended on enemy activity, progress in Paris negotiations, and the ability of ARVN forces to defend the country. Of course, these statements led to flack from some Democratic Congressional leaders with their eyes focused on the next election. ^{3 4}

LIMA SITE-36

During the waning days of February, several enemy units were observed moving toward Na Khang's outer perimeter. It was time for the base's 600 defenders to display their mettle. Most defensive guns mounted on the Site-36 hillside fort complex were bore sighted across the lower rice paddies toward eastern tree lines at previous enemy assembly points, and where attacks in 1967 and 1968 had commenced. Additionally, the same area where

³ The Author concludes that Giap's measures in South Vietnam coincided with, and perhaps intensified activity, in parts of Laos, culminating in the battle for Na Khang.

⁴ Philip Davidson, *Vietnam at War: The History 1946-1975* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991) 587, 589-591. John Bowman, ed, *The World Almanac of the Vietnam War* (New York: Pharos Books, 1986) 219-224.

so much slaughter had occurred was also pre-targeted by USAF tacticians. However, during the late afternoon of 28 February, the enemy fooled everyone in the loop by substantially modifying previous assaults. By employing an unlikely and unanticipated route of advance from the north, they infiltrated close to forward base outposts through tall razor-sharp grass. Since the December Agent Orange defoliant spraying from USAF C-123 planes, heavy ground cover had regenerated sufficiently to provide adequate cover and concealment for clandestine maneuvering. During the initial Vietnamese probe of forward defenses, despite fierce, often hand-to-hand fighting, the defenders lost some forward outposts and the TACAN site.

Decades after the war ended, information provided by elderly Ban Na Kout residents surfaced. If considered valid and reliable, the account may explain the enemy's ability to infiltrate so close to Na Khang's northern boundary without discovery by friendly air or ground patrols:

"...between 1967 to early 1969, North Vietnamese troops were making a road approaching from the north [likely a part of or an offshoot of Route-6 from Sam Neua Town]. This road crossed the Houay Siep stream, located only 2.5 kilometers from Na Khang...The winding road was cut into the steep sides on each side of the stream, turning back on itself some six times on each side of the valley...the Vietnamese cut the road under the cover of darkness without using lights...the Vietnamese hid during daylight hours on a cave/rock ledge."

After receiving information from the onsite FAG Watts, relaying for Base Commander, Lieutenant Colonel Phan, that the base was under heavy attack, Cricket, the Military Region Two daytime airborne command and control (ABCCC) ship aloft, radioed

7th Air Force headquarters for a mix of friendly air assets to respond. ⁵

Reaction was good, with normally nighttime only B-26s and an AC-130 gunship participating in the fight, along with flights of F4 and F-105 jets. However, with the enemy dispersed in small units and well concealed, it was impossible to judge strike results. While enemy fire abated and the situation appeared temporarily stabilized, Pony Express helicopters began evacuating a few civilians.

Flareships provided overhead illumination throughout the night, and no further serious attacks occurred while the enemy retrenched.

FAC-directed airstrikes continued the next day. So many assets arrived, that lacking viable targets, the bombers merely struck "smoking holes," inflicting minimal damage on the enemy. Regardless, VP was confident that the site would hold, especially after insertion of a fresh Meo battalion planned for the second.

During the late afternoon of 1 March, while preparing to launch in order to relieve Cricket, the ABCCC Alleycat crew was briefed at the 7/13 Air Force Intelligence office that Site-36, Watts Station, was under considerable pressure and a major push by the enemy was expected that night. Therefore, standing orders directed the Alleycat commanding officer that as soon as they were en route, contact be established with Watts, one of several Meo-Thai FAGs. This contact should be maintained throughout the night. Watts came on the air briefly, requesting flares and ordnance. Then, at 1850 hours, all contact with Watts was lost.

⁵ Colonel Phan had taken command at Na Khang after Colonel Tong was wounded, while acting as a guide and gunner during a SAR mission into Son La Province in June 1965 with Phil Goddard and George Carroll. (Tong later expired in a Korat hospital Wearing both military and civil hats, Phan doubled as the government's provincial governor.

Further air ground communication established radio contact with Hunter, who confirmed the requirement for flares and ordnance.

The request for assets was forwarded to Seventh Air Force (Blue Chip), after which Blind Bat 04, a combination FAC-flare C-130 plane and Spectre 01, an AC-130 gunship, were dispatched to help. Usually allocated to Steel Tiger in the South, it would mark the first time an AC-130 would work in MR-2. ⁶ Spectre arrived at 2145 hours, Blind Bat about fifteen minutes later. Agency Case Officer, Frank Odum (call sign Bag), forbidden by both AB-1 and Ambassador Sullivan to RON at Na Khang during the latest enemy push, was onboard the gunship to help coordinate the air ground operation. Bag was initially interested in talking to Blue Boy, a trusted Thai FAG who had been instrumental in the original road watch program's success, and had survived a previous offensive. With no contact established with Blue Boy, Bag talked to Hunter. Eventually satisfied with Hunter's bona fides, Bag inquired as to the current ground situation, and where ordnance could be directed without hitting friendly troops. Hunter indicated that during heavy rocket and mortar barrages, Lieutenant Colonel Phan, along with most of his officers, had been killed. Moreover, the enemy had overrun much of the fort, and some of the surviving leaderless garrison had withdrawn to the southeast. They requested flare support to continue the battle and to help egress when necessary.

Another American, who identified himself as Fox-23,⁷ independently contacted Alleycat informing the crew that Hunter indicated all friendly forces had departed Watts Station. Consequently, Spectre was cleared hot. With only KIA and enemy

⁶ Early versions of the AC-130 gunship mounted four 7.62mm miniguns and four 20mm guns.

⁷Likely Jerry Daniels, or another Agency field Case Officer.

believed still at the fort, the pilots began an oblong pattern around the fort to maximize the ship's devastating cannon and minigun fire. At the same time, Blind Bat commenced directing Lizard flight on target.

During attacks, Watts reestablished contact with Bag, saying he was five miles south of Site-36 and the strikes appeared well placed. When asked where and how many enemy were involved in the attack, the FAG replied that he did not know. At the time, he and seven of his men were in a river. He also was not aware of Blue Boy's location.

At 2235 hours, almost an hour after the original time on target (TOT), Spectre radioed Alleycat of the PIC's intention to RTB. With the ammunition dump and fuel storage area largely destroyed, substantial bomb damage assessment (BDA) was reported. Spectre further indicated that there was no need to request additional ordnance or flare drops on Na Khang--the site had been lost.

Alleycat relayed all this information to 7th Air Force. As Spectre departed, Blind Bat loitered to provide Hunter's people flare support, if requested.

AFTERMATH

Throughout the early morning of 2 March, surviving members of four government battalions scattered to the winds, with the majority opting to withdraw to the south and west toward the lower Mounng Heim Valley and the higher elevations of Phu Cum. However, unlike previous years at sites under pressure being abandoned when avenues of withdrawal were allowed, it was payback time for the past enemy losses. Therefore, imitating an Alamo style operation, the enemy allowed no quarter and columns of government troops were continuously and viciously ambushed

while moving along the southern rice paddy corridor out of the area.

As descriptions of the attack, the disturbing losses, and the withdrawal reached Vang Pao and his advisors, all plans to reinforce the site were scrubbed as too costly in men and materiel already in drastically short supply. With pressure building in other parts of Xieng Khouang Province that needed addressing, it was considered more expeditious to preserve the remaining forces to fight another day. Therefore, with most of upper Military Region Two no longer a bastion of Meo forces in Houa Phan Province (Sam Neua), the memory of Na Khang faded into obscurity as yet another blip on the Lao history of the Second Indochina War.

As Vang Pao had wisely planned, the final bottle stopper to the Plain of Jars, the formidable garrison at Bouam Long on the northern periphery of the PDJ, became the new regional headquarters and new emphasis for enemy attention. With a marginal approach, high altitude, and short runway, Site-32 did not afford a good landing strip for any larger STOL planes except the versatile Caribou. Consequently, air drop supply would take precedence.

Since arriving at Sam Tong, Mac Thompson had visited Na Khang to introduce himself, show the flag, and meet the people. He was at Site-20 on the first when word arrived from Long Tieng that an attack on Site-36 was underway. Mac discovered that an Air America Helio Courier pilot was staying overnight at the hostel, so he obtained clearance for and arranged an early morning flight to Na Khang. ARMA Project 404 advisor, USA NCO Carl Kachikis, was also staying at Sam Tong. At the crack of dawn on the second, both men boarded the Helio for the flight north. They arrived on scene long before anyone from Long Tieng,

where the chief of station insisted on first conducting a morning operation meeting before sending anyone north.

Sky (euphemism for CIA operations at Site-20A) presented more bureaucracy issues than USAID. Reports of the previous two attacks on Na Khang were heard on the radio. However, the third time a report was conspicuously absent (as was any future CHECO manuscript).

Embassy Country Team meetings were held daily at Ambassador Sullivan's residence at 0930 hours. Chief principals from Army Attaché (ARMA), Air Attaché (AIRA), United States AID for International Development (USAID), and Chief of Station (COS) attended. AID's Charlie Mann generally outclassed the others, for his information was timelier and more accurate than the other agencies when things became "hot and heavy." The reason for this was simple. Field AID personnel composed rough notes that were ferried to Vientiane by returning pilots. Then someone from the AID office drove to Wattay Airport to retrieve the message, had a couple of beers at Papa Chu's restaurant, and returned to the office to organize and type the notes for Mann's perusal. In this manner, the AID chief was able to intelligently discuss the current situation in question. At the same time, RO, ARMA, AIRA and CIA people were still decoding field reports, and might produce the same information by noon.

Upon arrival in the Na Khang area, Thompson and Kachikis observed incoming rounds splash on and around the site with no apparent defensive return fire. Soon fast movers arrived to complete the job of destroying whatever was left in the fort and attempt to deny any remaining enemy the ability to consolidate their victory.

Na Khang's loss marked a major exodus of friendly civilians in the area between Na Khang and Moung Heim (LS-48A). While

circling and trolling at a high altitude, Mac noted people trailing south and west from the area.

Then the men returned to Sam Tong to report to principals that the final battle for Site-36 was obviously over. At Sam Tong Pop's helpers were already at work preparing sticky rice for delivery by Porters, Helios, and H-34 pilots to refugees and troops moving along trails. Rice and other supplies were placed in bags. Later in the day, Thompson obtained an H-34 and delivered the supplies.

Thus fortified, within a few days most of the refugees walked the relatively short distance to Phu Cum without benefit of air evacuation. Others straggled southwest, south, and southeast to Pha Poun (LS-230), Dons' Strip (LS-291), Bouam Long (LS-32), and Houei Sa An (LS-127).⁸

BATTLE DAMAGE

Case Officer Jerry Daniels (call sign Hog) was anxious and highly concerned about his people's condition and location. Therefore, with Blue Boy, an entire PARU team and other key personnel missing from the Na Khang contingent, possibly evading via trails leading southwest, a three Bell Special Mission was mounted. Alerted for the mission the previous evening, along with other pilots, I boarded C-123 293 early for Long Tieng. I was assigned to fly 96W with Norm Grammer and Andy Anderson. Ed Reid and Dick Elder plus their crews filled out the remaining armada. Since I was junior PIC, I was assigned SAR duty. Daniels briefed us on what little he had observed from a brief recon, during which he managed to identify some of his men.

⁸ MacThompson Email, 02/14/97.
Ernie Kuhn, 67.
CIA Bulletin-3/03/69.

The target area was in a rough area consisting of heavily forested ridges, ravines, and streams at UH3302, a few miles north of Alpha pad on the high mountain, where we delivered troops during an operation in May 1966 to recapture Na Khang. The operation had been costly. On that fateful day I received unnerving battle damage to my H-34, and Bill Wilmot was shot down and killed to the east in an abandoned Tham La rice paddy. A trail, designated 621 teed west off Route-6, wound north around the distinctive mountain and through the village of Pha Poun (LS-230), where it assumed a southerly direction.

While Reid and Elder retrieved stragglers, I remained at a reasonable altitude above terrain, attempting to maintain a close watch on both ships and scan the area for potential trouble spots. Nothing occurred during the first two trips, during which people were moved out of harm's way to Bouam Long. The third trip was a bummer. While the two Captains were approaching the landing zone to retrieve more people, I descended a few hundred feet for a better look. Upon rolling out of a turn, heavy gunfire rattled from a nearby ridgeline and my ship was hit. Initially streaming jet fuel until elements in the self-sealing tank became effective, we recovered at Bouam Long, where Andy discovered five hits, including a fuel tank and main rotor blades. After consultation regarding the risk of moving the aircraft south, we elected to ferry 96W to 20 Alternate.

Much to Hog's chagrin, neither Blue Boy nor the Thai PARU team were among personnel retrieved that day.

The evacuation continued under fire the following day with six UH-34D crews, including one SAR ship. One helicopter contained PIC John Ford, Co-Captain Ted Cash, and Flight Mechanic Rick Sterba.

The gaggle reached a large clearing where three T-28 pilots circled to provide cover. To accelerate the operation and allow

two aircraft to land simultaneously, two groups of soldiers were gathered on the ground in separate locations about 200 yards apart. Seven soldiers boarded Ford's helicopter.

What happened next is reported in Rick Sterba's words:

"We took off and were circling over the trees to gain altitude. [At 1,500 feet], suddenly there was a big bang to my right. Dirt and dust and small bits of paper flew everywhere...

A 12.7 round...had hit the forward tank fuel boost pump housing, missing me by inches. The bullet had travelled up through a [four by eight] foot plywood sheet that was there to protect the cabin floor...Ted kept a small map case on the cockpit floor. The round continued through the aircraft hitting Ted's map case...causing bits of paper to float around and add to the drama. The bullet missed Ted's seat bottom by inches and exited out under the left cockpit window.

Then it got really scary.

When the round hit, John nosed the aircraft over and we headed down with power on. I looked up [toward the cockpit instrument panel] and saw the engine tachometer in the red. As we were flying south, we were losing fuel. It was pouring out in a steady stream."

With the SAR helicopter following at a safe distance, Ford landed at the alternate Phu Cum site. After major battle damage was assessed for a Udorn team to repair, the crew boarded the SAR ship for a ride to Sam Tong. ⁹

On Monday, after conducting a few repairs with indispensable hundred knot blade tape and FCFs at Long Tieng to determine the ship's airworthiness, I ferried 96W home. The Udorn facility Maintenance Department once again performed its

⁹ Steve Nichols interesting book, *Air America in Laos: The Flight Mechanic's Stories*, Rick Strba-LS-36 Evacuation, Published 2013.

magic in a reasonable time frame and the machine was returned to service by 8 March.

Early selling points for using the Bell Huey expressed by our original Army "safety" pilots, was that compared to the UH-34D, the Bell's low profile and high speed presented a significant degree of difficulty in hitting the helicopter either while on the ground or in the air. Perhaps they were convinced, but I was not then, and certainly not after this latest incident. The Bell might have provided a slight advantage over the H-34 when under fire, but the enemy could normally hit anything they fired at. Furthermore, the slapping noise of the two bladed Bell rotor system could easily alert anyone in the area.

Jets continued to hammer Site-36 for a few days to destroy remaining supplies and kill loitering enemy--not that any were still present. The 148 Regiment had accomplished its immediate goal with dispatch, and with total casualties reaching only a little over eighty. Consequently, after a brief respite, they began moving on to the next target. Flies and odors of decaying flesh from hundreds of dead Meo would have been enough to revolt and keep any human at a distance for a time. Probably the greatest beneficiaries of the battle were the huge rats and other Mother Nature's scavengers, which picked the battlefield clean and restored a modicum of normalcy that like processes within our bodies, a homeostasis effect tends to restore our planet. Therefore, as was the case in any part of Laos, whether at an abandoned site like Na Khang or merely a series of bomb craters, climate, abundant water, and ever creeping jungle, like the homeostasis that rules our earth, always reversed man's efforts to modify the landscape and returned it to an original condition.

VP'S CONUNDRUM

According to Agency thinking in Washington, although presenting a serious morale factor to the nation, the loss of Na Khang did not unduly affect the overall tactical situation or foretell a stepped-up communist dry season offensive.

Closer to the innards of conflict, Vang Pao, realizing that he lacked assets to do much more than delay enemy progress into his people's territory, was a seriously depressed individual. He was whipped physically and mentally. The years of constant combat and responsibilities of leadership were again exacting a toll on the man. At the cost of considerable face among his people, he had failed miserably, first attempting to retake Phou Pha Thi, and recently losing Na Khang, considered an important base, one he believed would hold at all costs. Worn down by the constant fighting, his remaining fighters were highly fatigued. Moreover, with additional requirements and battles looming on the horizon, Meo morale sank to a low ebb.

As a respected warlord, Vang Pao's responsibilities included not only military, but also political and civilian issues. Inherent in all humans and phases of life, if people judged times good there was seldom much dissent politically or socially. However, good times were rare now, and the recent reverses fostered much discord among Meo tribal clans demanding answers to their questions: should they continue to resist the enemy, give up the fight and be subjected to a miserable life under communism, or migrate to areas free from hostilities. Moreover, the RLG was talking about relocating dependents to the Vientiane plain, a move that would strip the Meo warriors of their independence and all inducement to continue the fight in the hills.

Attempting to maintain dual roles in balance and keep everyone happy had never been an easy task for Vang Pao. At

times it proved enormously difficult, particularly with corpulent Touby Ly Fong (sometimes referred to as the "King of the Meo") often sniping at him, while attempting to seize power and control over the Meo. As Mike Jarina witnessed at Site-65, sometimes in the past, Vang Pao, as judge, jury, and executioner, had to resort to measures of extreme prejudice to thwart dissent. However, that was years ago. Current problems were not deemed minor. Mainstream people were physically and mentally drained from moving every other year. Clan and village leaders were upset over the downward trend of the war. Too many men and youngsters had died or been maimed. Apparently, no respite was in the offing.

When former AB-1 Chief, Bill Lair, initially proffered the Agency-sponsored compact with Vang Pao to fight the communists in early 1961, there was an unwritten provision included in the details. It intended that should Vang Pao and his people find themselves arriving at road's end, movement to the Thai border in the lower, sheltered mountains of Sayaboury Province would be both sanctioned and accommodated. During previous times of losses, depression, and immense pressure from his people, the general would consider invoking the Lair option, making reference to packing up and leaving for safer climes. However, the Sayaboury alternative was significantly dated, an early proviso when the Meo army and multi-ethnic refugee roles were considerably smaller. Now, any movement to the west or even south to the Vientiane plain as the RLG proposed, which involved hundreds of thousands of souls, was considered prohibitive by higher authorities in both assets and expense. Moreover, VP's mentor Lair was no longer present in Udorn to counsel, support, and ease the way between parties.

Vang Pao was not only a mercurial person, but during periods of deep depression, also subject to exceptionally dark

moods and serious demons, but within a short period he invariably bounced back from a funk. It was no different this time, and within a reasonable period, Vang Pao once again began developing and coordinating plans to thwart enemy advances.

When a Vietnamese defector fortuitously revealed projected enemy plans to commence a no quarter offensive on Bouam Long, Phu Vieng, and Phou Cum on 23 March, VP proposed a preemptive and diversionary assault on the PDJ. Always harboring a desire to restore the Plain of Jars to the King and RLG, the general attempted to convince Souvanna Phouma and embassy personnel to support such movement with air and men. Foreseeing disaster in what was considered a hasty and overly ambitious plan, the Embassy Country Team dissented, leaving the Prime Minister no other option than to do the same. Undeterred, Vang Pao reverted to Plan B and began preparations for smaller diversions to coax the enemy away from his defensive sites northwest of the Plain of Jars. ¹⁰

¹⁰Segment Sources:

Victor Anthony, *The War in Northern Laos*, 287, 296-298.

Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 208-209.

Stanitz, 2.

Ponne.

William Leary 1969 Notes.

Joe Leeker, *Aircraft of Air America*, Bell 204 Aircraft.

EW Knight Email, 09/19/00.

Tom Ahern, *Undercover Armies: CIA and Surrogate Warfare in Laos 1961-1973* (Washington, DC: Center for the Study of Intelligence, 2006) 313.

U.S Department of State Office of the Historian, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976, Volume 6 Vietnam, January 1969-July 1970, Document 56.*

Memorandum from the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon: *The War in Laos and the Significance of the Fall of Na Khang*, 04/08/69, (history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76).

PILOT UNIONIZING

"A [pilot] union has been started here and is about to start leaping off."

Author 03/19/69 Letter Home.

One evening I was invited to Burl King and Ray Jefferie's rental house, two of several fixed wing pilots assigned to Udorn. Rented to them by either a Nisagonrungsee or Musagablert relative, they lived in a one-story green bungalow on an unpaved extension of Adulyadet ¹¹ Road beyond Wattana Road.

Curious to know why I was included in a fixed wing gathering, I arrived at the appointed time. I was surprised to see a room full of nearly all airplane pilots, most I already knew. Not all fixed wing drivers lived in Vientiane. For some time fifteen small and larger STOL plane Captains, First Officers, and Navigators had resided in Udorn to conduct Peppergrinder, special operations, and other work. Others flew the C-130 USAF loaners that contributed so much to the upcountry supply lines. ¹²

The moderator's subject of the evening was formation of and participation in an Air America pilots union planned system-wide to encompass not only Udorn and Vientiane, but Saigon, Japan, Okinawa, and any other Company stations in the Far East. I was flabbergasted. Apparently, ever since the problems over loss project pay in December of 1967 and the one-day industrial action, fixed wing pilots' feelers for efforts to form a union had been quietly underway. Some of the more intelligent pilots had attained law experience, and a few with ties in Washington,

¹¹ Also spelled Adulyadej.

¹² Peppergrinder munition loads were flown from Udorn to the RTAF and RLA. Missions were directed by DEPCHIEF Thailand, and overseen by the Lao based Requirements Office USAID.

along with the work of experienced attorneys, had cautiously researched the legal aspects of an association. Then efforts slowly commenced gathering and processing the necessary groundwork to organize. With much already accomplished, it was now a feeling out time of the principals. The organizers required sufficient numbers of committed warm bodies from all programs to move forward and successfully implement the plan.

Amazingly, the intention to organize had seemingly not filtered down to local managements and the men had previously and cleverly kept details under wraps until now. Naturally, in the process, suspected Company spies and "witted" individuals were identified and avoided. If anyone in management had been privy to rumors, they were either too busy with normal work to pay much attention to "frivolous banter," or chose to discount the possibility of a union as highly improbable. Since I was one of a handful of helicopter pilots asked to attend the meeting, I surmised that Scratch and I were selected as test cases.

Seething with discontent over perceived or actual grievances with the Company, rumblings over the years advocated a glaring need for a pilot union to amicably correct disparities, especially with such a large organization as Air America.¹³ Such an organization would not set a precedent, for most commercial airlines in the States had pilot unions.¹⁴ With the Taipei, Taiwan corporate headquarters far removed from our theater, management had been overly haughty and high-handed in the past, turning a deaf ear to a majority of complaints from the field. For the most part, local managements were not

¹³ Air America was believed to be the third largest airline company in the world in equipment and employees.

¹⁴ This statement needs to be qualified. Although a civilian organization, the nature of much of Air America's work was paramilitary and necessarily secret. Although never actually revealed to the public, Air America was actually a USG entity.

sympathetic toward their employees. They did not question headquarters Taipei, and executed whatever orders were issued.

Additional reasons for pilot dissatisfaction were varied and many. In the beginning, the Company was run much like a regimented military organization. Consequently, many times in the early days, particularly during a flying lull, Company officials treated us like little children. There were mandatory make work projects, including classroom lectures on information we already knew well, writing lesson plans, and attending Chinese and U.S Airplane Transport Rating (ATR) classes on subjects that had nothing to do with helicopters. Policies such as beard, haircut, and hardhats while riding personal vehicles on base did nothing to endear us to the Company. Our leaders had a proclivity to enforce their mandates with the attitude, *"if you don't like it, quit."* During recent years, many employees were annoyed by the way upper management instituted the project pay reduction at a time when U.S military personnel were receiving pay raises and inflation had substantially eaten into our base pay. Moreover, our benefits, never on a parity with stateside peers, failed to keep pace with industry standards or increases in benefits. With rumors of peace in Nam reaching us, and enlarged action in Laos, our daily work was becoming more dangerous. The increased odds of receiving bodily harm tended to exact a toll on our mental health and bodies. Perhaps the greatest catalyst for organizing was the recent death of OM Bob Crone in a CASI Porter crash north of Luang Prabang. Company death benefits were largely a joke, a pittance, and a source of bitterness for affected families and those of us who sympathized with them. There was more. In March, we were informed that our Special Mission pay ("greenies") would no longer be distributed in cash, but by check to our designated bank accounts. There was no reason specified for the change. One could only speculate

that the Agency was required to be more accountable to the Congressional Oversight Committee. Regardless of the reason, because it added to individual gross income, the modification represented yet another reduction in pay.

Organizing a majority of pilots, especially such a diverse group of fifty-two civilian helicopter pilots, was correctly recognized as extremely difficult. We collectively represented a peculiar breed of individuals, who were just that-individuals, and proud of it. The very nature of the one man in the cockpit dictated this quality. Additionally, always divided and contentious regarding issues when more than one man was present, unless it involved the job, helicopter pilots rarely agreed about any common subject. Much of this attitude could be related to our previous flight training, educational, and socio-economic backgrounds. Originally derived from all regions of the country,¹⁵ we also came from three military services with three separate mind sets. Moreover, not all the pilots in our unit were "educated" officers "by act of Congress"; others were just contrary individuals. Beside the job, in the early years most of what we shared in common was age—at least in the beginning.¹⁶

Relating to large aircraft fixed wing pilots, as separate entities during the Lao war, unpublished job descriptions between those who flew high over terrain and those who flew low varied greatly. Until the project pay flap, this was a bone of contention among helicopter pilots. With different risks involved in all operations, we failed to understand why one group was paid identical project pay to fly well above harm's way compared to those of us working in the trenches while conducting dozens of landings and takeoffs a day. The helicopter

¹⁵ At least one pilot, Phil Goddard, was from the island of Barbados.

¹⁶ By 1969, new generations of helicopter pilots had been introduced to the system.

group recognized that we had to add small fixed wing STOL drivers to our lot, as those who shared identical risks and often-unsatisfactory upcountry living conditions.

There was another misunderstanding and a problem to consider. A substantial age disparity and former rank status was present between us younger helicopter pilots and older fixed wing pilots driving larger cargo planes. Not all, but some in this category seemed to exude a somewhat arrogant superiority attitude toward us lesser mortals. Granted, many field grade officers previously had command billets in their respective services and were retired (a majority Air Force types), but we were supposed to be civilians working for the same outfit. We did not feel the same hostility toward the courageous STOL pilots who daily worked the less-than-acceptable mountain strips in Laos. We enjoyed especially good rapport with them and worked well together. In the rare case any of them ever tried to push the subject, intimating that a fixed wing pilot had better overall pilot skills than those of us driving rotorcraft, I would silence them by interjecting, *"Hey, buddy I have an instrument ticket and can also fly single and multi-engine airplanes. Can you fly helicopters?"* Surprised at this revelation, usually the person in question said no more on this subject.

The disparate aircraft programs fostered a contrast like apples and oranges. Despite differences never likely to be resolved, for the common good, the fixed wing boys needed the helicopter pilots' support to organize. Naturally, majority commitment was the key to success.

I left the meeting excited, feeling good, and ninety percent committed to joining the proposed organization. The union concept was appealing, and one we had coveted for many years to deal with, and to counter lack of Company concern

regarding our interests. However, supposedly still in its infancy and not wanting to jeopardize my job, for the interim, I chose to remain a low-key observer.

Within two weeks, after learning that almost all the fixed wing pilots overwhelmingly had secretly affiliated with the union, and considering the pros and cons involved, I joined, but kept the fact to myself. On 26 March, I wrote a thirty-dollar check to the Far East Pilots Association (FEPA) for dues.

However, by then the cat was out of the bag. As expected, with local management's pressure not to join, there was hesitation among many helicopter pilots. This failed to bother me at the time, but I was increasingly concerned about a potential conflict brewing between opposing parties. Never considering myself a Company man or coveting a management job, I now accepted the fact that I would never be offered a management slot in the Company organization. In addition to alerting the people in Steamboat Springs that I would need a job if I came home, I continued tentative plans to leave Southeast Asia should the union concept fail and result in mass terminations.

My Father, a very perceptive person, forwarded a letter with his philosophy relating to unions.

"A union can be good in certain circumstances, but in my humble opinion, they can take initiative out of a job. One just becomes a member of a common herd. The just and unjust are one in the same."

Most of the time I loved my job and continued to be ambivalent regarding the doubtful chances for success in the formation of an association. In December, the Udorn group was adamant about sending senior men to represent and negotiate for the union. I was asked to participate. However, recognizing that I would be entirely out of my element, and still not convinced that it would work, I respectfully declined. JJ McCauley was

selected instead. At first, Scratch Kanach was elected Vice President of the Udorn chapter, but over time, except for his name and reputation, Scratch contributed absolutely nothing to FEPA.

By late April, apparently a pilot union was becoming more acceptable by the Company. However, upper management was still hoping to forestall one, and I began hearing scuttlebutt regarding a diversionary or countering pay raise. We had not received a base pay raise since 1965, and had experienced reductions on former perks. When asked, the Company, fearing fallout from the AB-1 Customer, refused to publish a helicopter pilot roster.

CJ Abadie later stated the obvious regarding the union:

"There were some pilots who wanted to form a union and some others who were not in favor of it for several of their own reasons."

Ab personally believed union organizers conducted themselves quite well in their efforts to form the association. However, as in all the activities in the active work environment, local management always was concerned regarding the effect on employee performance during the period of organizing and on the "spread effect" on other Company groups:

"Because Air America was operating in Thailand, there were other concerns relating to the host country's laws governing unions and the main concern of how the Customer would view that activity...locally in Udorn, management was disappointed the pilots felt they needed to take that step to get representation and fair treatment...locally in Udorn, we were disappointed that

the pilots felt they 'needed' to take that step to get representation and fair treatment." ¹⁷ ¹⁸

¹⁷ Although stated years after the fact when his memory was either fading or highly selective, CJ Abadie's view regarding FEPA tends to cause the Author to question where he was all those years not to be cognizant of the Udorn pilots' problems and grievances. Granted, as a member of upper local management and mainly a bricks and mortar individual, he was rarely in close contact with line pilots. This was purely a CPH office function. Of course, it was common knowledge that Abadie was a hundred percent Company man, who rarely or never sided with an individual pilot or the group over conflicting issues. This was generally the case from the time he had assumed a management position in the early sixties.

¹⁸ Segment Sources:
EW Knight Emails, 09/19/00, 09/21/00, 09/23/00, 10/11/00. Years later, Wayne claims he was totally in the dark on the subject of a union. He further indicated that there was no union until he returned from school in 1972. This is erroneous, for a contract was signed with the Company in the spring of 1970.
Harry Russell Casterlin 04/02/69 Letter.
Author Letter of 05/04/69.
CJ Abadie Email, 02/21/00.

The unusual presence of so many enemy troops, and the loss of Na Khang did not bode well for the few remaining friendly sites in Houa Phan province (Sam Neua) and inhabitants in locations to the south and west. ¹

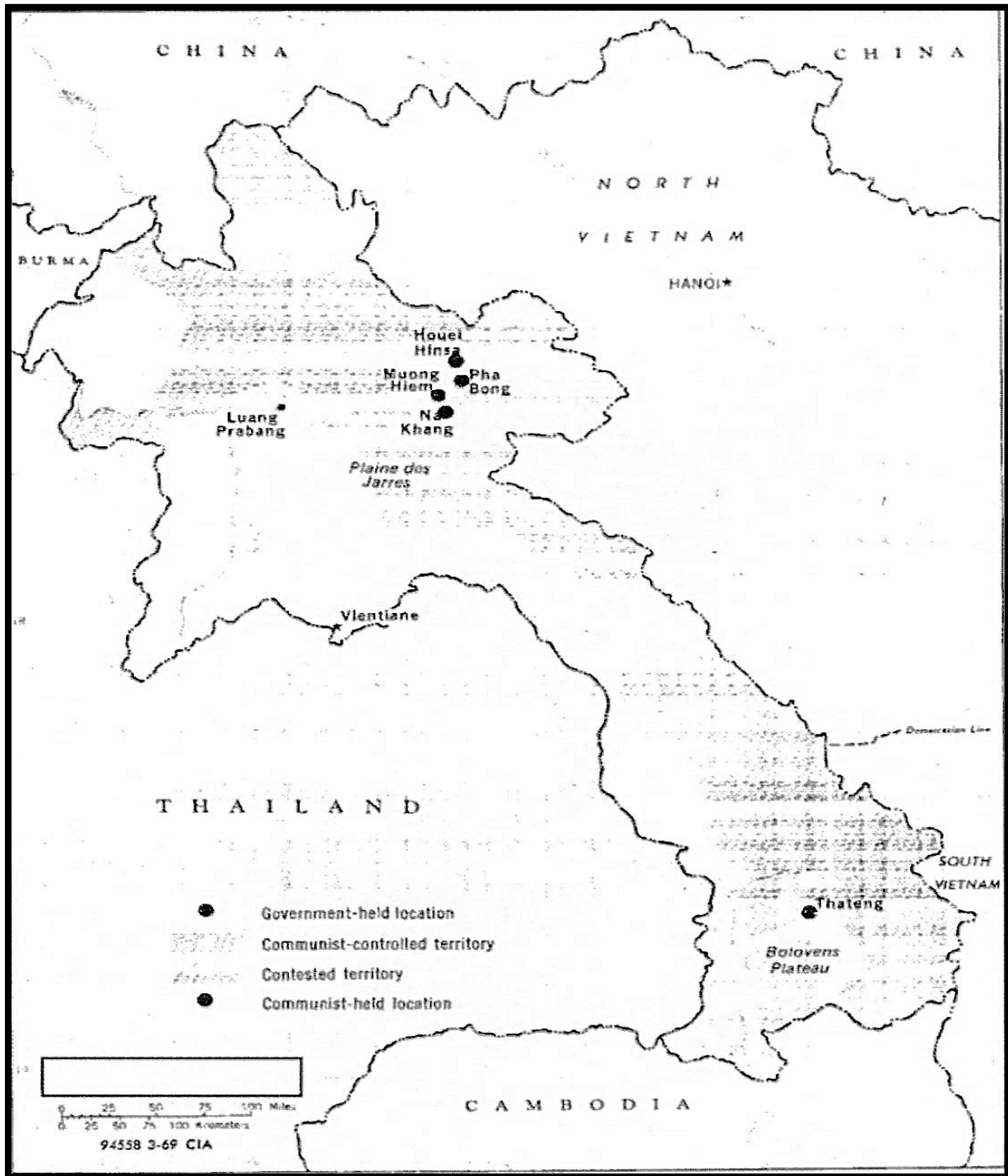
An Agency Bulletin stated:

"In the area north of Na Khang, North Vietnamese troops have moved back into Houei Hinsa, a guerrilla stronghold captured during the government's summer offensive last year. There are also reports of an increased enemy threat against the bases at Mount Heim and Pha Bong. Farther south, Pathet Laos forces have overrun a small outpost just north of the Plaine des Jarres (Fr), and now threaten other positions in the immediate area. Government military leaders hope to use these positions to anchor a new defensive line.

Efforts to blunt the North Vietnamese are becoming seriously hampered by large numbers of tribal refugees who are flocking into the bases still under government control. In addition, government personnel and equipment losses in the recent fighting appear to be very high.

The unhappy turn of events has also cast a pall over the leadership in Vientiane. Prime Minister Souvanna interprets the attack against Na Khang as evidence that the Soviet ambassador's recent trip to Hanoi and the Pathet Lao's upcountry headquarters has not had a restraining influence on the communists. Souvanna had hoped that the trip would result in some lessening in the

¹According to the Air America Air Facilities Data Pamphlet, Laos, (distributed by the Flight Information Center Vientiane) as of late May 1969 some unfriendly or closed sites in upper Military Region Two included: LS-85, 86, 107, 111, 205, 215, 58, 36, 27, 29, 48, 48A, 33, 233, 220, and Site-59.



Areas north of Na Khang either contested or lost to the enemy in March.

CIA Map, 03/06/69.

fighting and would generate some movement toward early talks between the contending factions.

*Souvanna also fears the North Vietnamese will exploit their recent gains by moving southward into an area between Vientiane and Luang Prabang from which they were driven several years ago..."*²

"North Vietnamese and Pathet Laos troops are applying pressure against some of the remaining government positions in Sam Neua Province, but they have failed to drive the government guerrillas from any important base since capturing Houei Hinsa on 3 March. At Houei Tong Ko, a transit point for thousands of Meo refugees who are fleeing southward, a communist attack was recently beaten off with the assistance of tactical air support. For tactical reasons, however, the guerrillas have evacuated a number of smaller positions west and north of Na Khang.

Meo leader Vang Pao has drawn up an ambitious plan for a series of attacks by guerrillas and regular troops against communist positions in Xieng Khouang and Sam Neua provinces. Designed to forestall a major communist offensive which Vang Pao believes will follow the recent fall of Na Khang, the plan includes attacks on communist towns east of the Plaine des Jarres that have been free from harassment...

Prime Minister Souvanna and government military leaders have approved Vang Pao's plan, but it is uncertain to what extent the guerrillas can carry it out. That the government is now thinking in positive terms about what can be done to retain a presence in the northeast suggests that morale may be on the mend. The plan also is a sign, however, of the alacrity with

² CIA Daily Bulletin, 03/05/69. Laos: The communists are moving against other government positions in the northwest following the capture of Na Khang.

which government leaders are ready to believe the worst about the scope and objectives of the current communist offensive." ³

BOUAM LONG

To the northwest, after hostilities, the situation at the reinforced Houie Tong Kho (LS-184) military and refugee camp stabilized somewhat and remained fairly quiescent. For many years old Phu Cum (LS-50), new Phu Cum (LS-50A), San Pha Ka (LS-33), Phoung Sam (LS-114), and Ban Lee (LS-233) west of the Moung Heim valley periodically accommodated Meo military, their dependents, and refugees during movement away from hostile action. Now with an influx of new refugees from the Na Khang area joining those previously relocated from the north, AID was obliged to improve old strips and create new ones to accommodate hordes of people.

As one of three government sites in the mountains on the fringe of the northwestern Plain of Jars capable of causing their plans and men problems, Vietnamese military leaders did not want to completely bypass and leave Site-32 in their rear during the southern push. Consequently, the formidable Bouam Long garrison became the Vietnamese next goal. The 5th North Vietnamese Army Battalion from the 148th Regiment, as it had at Na Khang, was presented the initial task of probing Meo defenses for weakness, to inflict casualties, and to reduce the site's defensive perimeter.

As efforts to bolster defenses at Bouam Long proceeded at a rapid pace, Case Officers Jerry Daniels (Hog) and Frank Odum

³ CIA Daily Bulletin, 03/13/69. Laos: The pace of the fighting continues to quicken, but there is still no firm evidence that the communists are trying for a major expansion into areas controlled by the government.



A STOL fixed wing pilot's view of the 1,300-foot Runway-14 final approach path to the Bouam Long (LS-32), Laos, bowl. Because of surrounding hills, once committed to landing there was no go around available.

Air America photo album.



The Author departing north-northwest in Bell Papa Foxtrot Foxtrot from the Bouam Long, Laos airstrip.

Author Collection courtesy of the LS-32 Customer.

(Bag) were assigned to advise the tough site Commander, Cher Pao Moua. Watts was the common FAG call sign.

Bouam Long was an old established position, one that had never fallen to the communists. In 1962, the site was known as LS-88, with a short strip located on the western ridgeline overlooking the present runway. Because of adverse winds flowing up all sides, downdrafts, and degraded condition in the wet season, the 800-foot strip was fairly treacherous for all but the most experienced Helio Courier and Porter pilots. As requirements for larger STOL aircraft increased, a longer and wider strip was developed two hundred feet below in the 4,000-foot ASL bowl.

As a First Officer in the fall of 1962, along with Vang Pao and his party, I had flown there with Bob Hitchman to attend the annual Meo New Year celebration. It was my initial contact with Meo people north of the Plain of Jars, and my first handshake with diminutive village leader, Cher Pao Moua, a passionate anti-communist and also one of Vang Pao's numerous fathers-in-law.⁴

The trip was both interesting and educational. During festivities, without really understanding the culture or significance of the act, I tossed a cloth ball to young ladies lined up across from young men. Later, I learned this "game" represented an ancient traditional courting rite whereby opposite genders were allowed to engage each other away from elders prying eyes while mixing and selecting future mates. During later trips to the site, I watched Meo ladies in the fields gently slice the sides of poppy pods with a three-pronged knife and collect congealed sap to barter for supplies scarce to

⁴ Always a cagey political animal, using a time-honored method, Vang Pao accepted many multi-ethnic wives to cement tribal loyalty among regional leaders.

the mountains, particularly salt and sugar. The opium balls also provided hard currency in the form of small silver ingots or French piasters. Village metal smiths then worked the silver into various shapes to fashion the beautiful silver necklaces that Meo ladies wore as a show of wealth on special occasions like weddings or the Meo New Year.

I would work at Bouam Long many times in the future, often encountering considerable peril to my machine and crew. ⁵

UPCOUNTRY

On the eighth of March I deadheaded to Thakhet on Hotel-64 via Nakhon Phanom for a Special Mission (we often called greenies). Once there I joined Norm Grammer and "Ski" Olkowski in Bell 205 XW-PFF. After the crews of PFF and 96W were briefed by Mike LaDue, we were loaded for an infil to WE527533, in rough terrain forty-eight nautical miles to the northeast. The landing zone was eighteen miles west of the dreaded Mugia Pass, and six miles north of Route-12. Enemy forces were spotted at the primary landing zone, so a secondary or alternate site was selected to drop the team.

Upon return to L-40, I boarded 96W for the return to Udorn.

On the tenth I deadheaded to Long Tieng on C-7A Caribou 392. I joined Flight Mechanics Dave Crowell and trainee Acelar in PFG. During a time of sensitive road watch missions, the Agency allowed only American Flight Mechanics to crew on the Bells. This was acceptable with me, for in addition to eliminating annoying language problems, normally without being instructed, Americans showed more initiative, generally reacting

⁵MacThompson Interview, 12/29/96.
MacThompson Email.
Ken Conboy, 209.
McDonnell, 49.

more rapidly and far better during questionable situations. Of late, some of the younger, more competent, and English-proficient Filipino Flight Mechanics were being fed into the Bell program.

I arrived late in the morning, while Vang Pao stewed and considered his options, and the Military Region Two situation was still being evaluated by Raven FACs for air targeting. I worked locally for just short of seven hours. With large numbers of refugees having moved south, there was more slash and burn agriculture generated resulting in increased heavy smoke and haze. Added to imbedded thunderstorms and weather fronts, it was not a fun time for aviators to fly in Military Region Two.

Tuesday fostered additional problems. My cabin crew switched to Jay Myers and Filipino training Flight Mechanic, Acelar. A three-hour standby for area bombing by T-28 and USAF pilots, and a perceived maintenance problem, limited my flight time and caused me to question the Bell helicopter's reliability.

BELL ENGINE PROBLEMS

One afternoon while flying just south of Phu Cum Mountain at altitude, I noticed the N1 needle on the inner portion of the instrument, a close measurement of internal gas producer turbine engine efficiency, fluctuating one percent or more. Usually rock steady, the needle oscillation was shocking and disconcerting, an event so unusual that I made a note to query everyone and the CPH if they had observed a similar occurrence. Granted, by then I was vastly more comfortable flying the machine, understood and was attuned to a lot of its intricacies, and was certainly cross-checking instruments more frequently.

The majority of our Bells had been factory fresh when delivered in 1967, and we enjoyed a relatively engine trouble-free period-until 1969. Former Army pilots in our program had assured us the T-53-1100 Lycoming engine, although a bit underpowered for our high-altitude operation, was an excellent power plant. Fuel controls and governors rarely caused problems. However, there were elements involved in our operation with which military pilots never had to contend. We always worked our machines extremely hard at altitude, and components were wearing out (called hysteresis) from constant usage and environmental factors like metal-scouring dust. It was now obvious that after an initial respite from maintenance problems, our originally new, pristine Bells were beginning to exhibit wear that could possibly cause us grief. This dovetailed with my policy that it was rarely evident items, normally correctible during a thorough preflight, that would kill an aviator, but rather those hidden and not discernible.

Before securing for the evening, I called Udorn to discuss the problem and register my concern. Maintenance agreed to send a governor and ground technician the next day to install the unit and check engine operation (fuel control units-FCU-were expensive and in short supply). That night during dinner I launched into a discussion with my peers regarding the gas producer fluctuation, its implications for us, and possible hazard in the medium intensity conflict. Bill Hutchison, a far more experienced Bell pilot than me, offered the explanation that altitude likely had something to do with the condition. Naturally, I agreed with Hutch that this could have caused what I saw. However, after some consideration, I came to the conclusion that altitude was not a factor. Most of our operations were conducted at altitude, and thus far, apparently, I was the sole pilot to observe, question, and mention the

unusual sighting. Therefore, I was not convinced. Certain that the instrument glitch would occur again, I vowed to alert the CPH and other pilots to what I had seen.

I did not fly the following day. Using the time off to advantage, for exercise and to assuage curiosity over a rumor, I conducted an area walkabout. Around noon, I rounded the long karst adjoining the eastern portion of the combination loading-parking ramp. This was also the location of the "hole," a deep three-tiered holding pit created to contain military prisoners and those civilians committing serious infractions in the Meo society. Normally, once incarcerated, a prisoner never again saw the light of day and died soon afterward from isolation, hunger, and thirst.

A male and female were staked out Indian style outside the "hole" in the hot sun for all to view. I learned that they had been caught committing an adulterous act while the female's husband was in the north fighting the enemy. The spread-eagled couple on display would now serve as an object lesson, a warning to others, and a deterrent to further licentious activity. I felt some compassion for the couple, but some of the Meo customs and mores were far beyond my ken. The pair was slated to be placed in the "hole" at the end of the day.

I never saw them again.

AID representative Blaine Jensen also saw the same couple and a number of other similar cases. He recalled another man and woman judged adulterous who were stripped naked and tied to the top of two poles next to the airstrip, where they remained for a week.

In retrospect, Jensen observed that we not only used the hill people as surrogates to fight our war, but we destroyed their traditional system and created a dependency on us. Moreover, the mass dislocation of villagers resulted in a

breakdown of the traditional village elder system of justice. Long Tieng had become such a melting pot of humanity that the problem was particularly bad there. Vang Pao was being severely criticized and the population was demanding that something be done. Therefore, he convened a large meeting for almost a week with everyone who was influential. During this period, they fashioned a new legal-social system. In the final analysis Vang Pao's harsh methods did not mark a cruel man; they were the only way he had to convince people that the new system was replacing the older traditional one--and it would be enforced. ⁶

After the governor unit arrived and was properly installed,⁷ I conducted several ground run-ups, hovers, and airborne test flights. There were no further fluctuations observed, although, still on standby status, we did not fly outside the bowl.

REFUGEES

Following a three-hour standby on Saturday, we launched for Bouam Long. Based on reliable information from spies as to enemy movement and the impending pressure on Site-32, a decision had been made at embassy level to commence evacuating the daily swelling number of Meo and Lao Theung refugees to safer climes before such an option became invalid. Because of the unpredictable nature of Neutralist troops and their tenuous hold on Moung Soui, the Meo site at Phou So (LS-57) was selected as the initial refugee shelter.

Old Site-57 was located six miles north of Moung Soui, nestled in a notch at 4,600 feet on the northern slopes of Phou So. Phou So was an outstanding listening post and intelligence

⁶Blaine Jensen Letter.

⁷There were not many experienced Flight Mechanics available to perform this at the time.



Meo site at Phou So (LS-57), Laos, located in the mountains north of Moung Soui.
Jarina Collection.

gathering point for the area. It also provided VP a springboard for area recruiting of fresh manpower. From the early days when we could no longer transit the low ground of the western Plain of Jars directly north to Phou Vieng and Bouam Long, we circumnavigated to the west, using the Phou So strip as an initial navigation checkpoint after crossing Site-108. Site recognition became all important during VFR flight in the smoky season, when both horizontal and slant range visibility were reduced to almost zero, and gazing straight down at the ground for known landmarks was the only way of navigating at low level.

The evacuation proceeded without incident with a daisy chain of helicopter and small STOL aircraft shuttling to and from the site.

The long war had created a more cohesive upland society, to include inter-marriages and mixing of clans with separate peoples. This tended to moderate some genetic and congenital abnormalities, such as albinism, caused by producing offspring from close relatives. However, except during times of extreme stress, diverse cultures were not normally compatible. Therefore, separation of the people was the norm. This led to formation of separate refugee villages in the eastern and southern regions of Sam Tong. Even at Site-20 separate villages existed for different peoples.

After receiving AID support and resting, unaccustomed to the high mountains, many lowland refugees elected to walk south to Moung Soui, and then twelve miles southwest to Xieng Dat (LS-26), located north of the Nam Ngum. Because of Moung Soui's recent problems and often unstable status, Xieng Dat was already overflowing with refugees. A few miles further west, using bulldozers and other heavy equipment, AID was improving the new Xieng Dat (LS-117) strip to support the anticipated additional refugee load and enhance Vang Pao's northwestern flank

straddling the Nam Ngum. This defense line included old sites at San Luang (LS-41) and Houei Kha Nin (LS-38), which were accorded special emphasis in the early days.

Pop Buell had promised recent arrivals grass thatch for their new roofs. This proved to be quite expensive, because the product was delivered from the Moung Soui area by H-34 crews. Hauling grass could also be dangerous. While eating at the Air America hostel one evening, Mac Thompson recalled an upset H-34 Flight Mechanic relating a hairy tale. His pilot held a lighted cigarette in his left hand, which was also on the collective. During the process, burning ash dropped below into the full cabin section. It went undetected for a time until the Flight Mechanic saw smoke. Fortunately, the smoldering grass was ejected before it fully ignited. ⁸

Evacuation continued the next day. After working one fuel load, I returned to Alternate for more juice. I was ready for another two-to three-hour run when my relief pilot arrived. Later in the day I deadheaded home on Hotel-63. It had been a disappointing RON, but that was the nature of the work. ⁹

BELL ENGINES

1969 marked a sour year for the Udorn facility Bell engine components. The conversation I had with CPH Knight regarding my unusual N1 observation was the beginning of a long investigation relating to the frequency of Bell engine malfunctions that

⁸ I disliked carrying grass. With slip-stream air pouring through the helicopter (more so in the Bell where two open doors provided increased airflow) the fine white hairs on the grass had a tendency to detach and fly around until landing on one's skin. This caused itching that was difficult to resolve. Dried chili peppers caused a similar problem.

⁹ Mac Thompson Email, 02/14/97.
Ernie Khun, 71.

continued to occur. In a reversal from complete confidence in a product, flying the Bell became a period of "fly it, but watch it."

At first our observations and conclusions were not believed or accepted by maintenance supervisors. Saigon never reported such problems. Of course, there was an underlying reason for the non-reporting. Those in top echelons at Udorn, Tainan, and Washington failed to realize that the Udorn and Saigon Bell programs represented two completely disparate operations; any comparison was not feasible. Unlike us Udornites, Saigon pilots usually conducted strip-to-strip work. They rarely, if ever, conducted landing and takeoffs at altitudes ranging up to 5,000 plus feet. Moreover, since the Saigon operation was in the heart of the South Vietnam War, CPH Bob Hitchman and his maintenance cronies, many who recently served in U.S. Army aviation, enjoyed close connections to friends in the parts pipeline and could readily trade for selective or critical components ¹⁰ Much of this under-the-table business was effected from the USS *Corpus Christie*, an all-purpose Army maintenance repair ship docked in the Vung Tau harbor. In general, off line and backdoor arrangements such as Hitchman's, while convenient at times, did us no favors in rectifying our own peculiar problems.

In contrast to Saigon machinations, the Udorn Maintenance Department had no similar trading or loan outlet. Instead, the department was relegated to commercial purchases of engine components, and repair or overhaul at the Air Asia Tainan, Taiwan facility. As we began swapping FCUs and governors to pin point and eradicate engine problems, we discovered that Air Asia repair station components were often defective and we could not trust the viability of the Tainan system. This came to light one

¹⁰ In the USMC such swapping of equipment was called a cumshaw operation.

day while I was assigned to FCF a machine with a recently-installed overhauled FCU. I lifted the Bell to a smooth five-foot hover and observed a three percent N1 fluctuation. Repeated hovering operations, with a maintenance person observing, duplicated the malfunction. The component was changed and the information forwarded to Tainan with little or no comment filtering down to the rank and file.

As engine malfunctions continued, the CPH agreed with many of my comments regarding engine component malfunctions and Air Asia Tainan's blanket reluctance to admit anything was wrong with their techniques. Most of the time Wayne considered that we represented different teams: Tainan never admitted a shortcoming. Wayne journeyed to Tainan a number of times over the years, usually having a short audience with top Air Asia maintenance leaders, George Stubbs or Al Wueste. It seemed to Knight the men never attempted to cooperate in solving some of our common problems. Supervisors merely sat behind their desks *"smirking at the kid from Udorn who dared challenge the upper echelon status quo."* Additionally, he always felt this attitude was transmitted down the line to Udorn Technical Services Chief, Jack Forney.

During my protracted crusade to apprise all hands of our problems Wayne informed me that an Air America Australian engineer by the name of Ken Hopkins, disbelieving my accusations, reputedly indicated that the pilot in Udorn was crazy. ¹¹ Despite the fact that all pilots who flew helicopters with all their complexities and moving parts had to be a bit crazy, I knew differently. Therefore, to preclude operational disaster and pacify disbelievers, I established a maximum allowable thumb rule to my sacrosanct go-no-go list (aviation

¹¹ Of course, when I was later vindicated, no apology was forthcoming.

was full of these rules) of one percent N1 fluctuation. No one intervened to question my decision.

Jack Forney, who worked closely with Hopkins many times, failed to believe that Ken indicated that I was crazy in context with anything relevant. Forney considered:

"Hopkins was right when it came to a technical argument, provided he had complete and accurate information. However, in this case he was frustrated at the lack of definitive information and the quality of [this] information being provided from the field and the tone of recrimination in feedback on repaired items. Ken was a direct speaking Australian and would not have minced words about that [subject]."

*Hopkins was a well-educated repair engineer with many years of experience. It would have been logical to compare two fleets of similar aircraft as to types of discrepancies and to try and determine cause for one fleet being abnormal and the other normal. From Tainan's point of view, both fleets operated in Southeast Asia and the "subtle" differences of operational factors Saigon vs. Udorn were not obvious to anybody until the analysis was made."*¹²

Years later, Jack Forney weighed in with technical information, gut thoughts, and justifications from a maintenance standpoint regarding our Bell engine problems. His observations were poignant, but not always unbiased. Jack noted that Bell Lycoming T-53 engines were equipped with first generation particle separators that were expected to perform miracles filtering the abrasive Southeast Asia laterite dust from the intake air flow. The separators failed in this endeavor and their installation caused a slight reduction in overall

¹² "Subtle differences" in this context probably is an inaccurate term, as previously explained by the Author.

available engine power, which was already impacted by compressor blade degradation. Largely for this reason, they were removed from the machines.

Compressor surges [we were informed to use the terminology, oscillation] were associated with two considerations.

One: "Compressor and component wear were expected and allowed for in the Bell repair and overhaul specifications and were degradations in power. Repaired units and engines were not tested to the same standards as overhauled/rebuilt items, nor will they operate to new standards unless they have been rated from some higher rating.

The problem was repair specifications [that] were largely based on [operations within the United States], mainly at Fort Rucker, Alabama, a huge U.S. Army training facility. Training can be hard on aircraft but not so demanding in terms of the heavily loaded operations in Southeast Asia; new specifications had to be developed, as we learned from experience."

Second: "In maintenance there is a term, *Congruent Limits*, which refers to the stack up of repair limit tolerances in components and between components forming assemblies which can result in performance problems. An engine or gearbox contains hundreds of piece parts, each with repair limits and tolerances. If a FCU is repaired and assembled with two or dozens of related bit pieces at maximum tolerances, the assembly is correct according to the specifications as written (specs the bench worker is using) and will probably meet repair test requirements. But the unit may not perform under maximum loading as required or may degrade in performance more rapidly than a new item."

Attempting to explain our problems, Forney added a third element--egos mixed with chicanery--but noted that the Bells and their particular problems were not the only cases of this:

"These problems had to be learned and appreciated and acted on in the midst of a war. And in the midst of the crossfire of management, flight crew, ground crew, overhaul crew criticism, blame, claims, and counterclaims.

On the one hand, you had Tainan [personnel] repairing and overhauling parts and components (new to them) according to specifications developed on the basis of operational requirements different from those [employed] in SEA. The SEA maintenance contingent trying to use those parts to rectify operational problems that were not always consistent and to clear discrepancies not regularly occurring.

On the other hand, flight crews, operating under very difficult and often frightening circumstances were ready to distrust the equipment and those responsible for seeing it worked correctly at the first sign of something irregular. ¹³

Lastly, Forney cited know-it-alls in all three camps who jumped into whatever forum served their special agendas, or who just generally crafted an issue of a problem in the bar or on the flight line. ¹⁴

To assist with our problems and add years of Bell, experience to our program, Bell maintenance man Jimmy Schultze was assigned to us from Saigon. Over time, he was joined by other outstanding and capable ground mechanics: Bob Hohmann, Stanley Shim, and Gary Neufield. All added their particular talents to our well-being, but character, personality and agendas varied considerably. Bob Hohmann was a case in point. Claiming to have inadvertently struck his head into a Bell rotor

¹³ This element was not new, especially for old timers. We had served our time in hell with the mid-decade R-1800 H-34 engine and carburetor problems, during which three crewmen had been killed.

¹⁴ The reader may correctly infer that Forney was often a difficult person to deal with.

system in May while working on the transmission deck of N8535F at the Saigon parking ramp, he said that he had a metal plate in his head. The Air America XOXO offered a different version. It stated that while installing a transmission cowling, Bob slipped from the engine deck, fell and struck the back of his head on the left passenger step. Stanly Shim, built like a tank, was a roly-poly sort who might have been a former football player at school in Hawaii.

When I was assigned more frequently to FCF Bells, I talked to Schultze about the Tainan-overhauled FCU problems. An avid talker, Jimmy indicated that while still working in Saigon he had carried a newly overhauled FCU to the *Corpus Christi* to obtain a bench check analysis, a capability Tainan lacked at the time. The unit's parts were considered so far out of tolerance, they were condemned and chucked overboard.

FCUs were considered akin to gold bars in those days, and just as scarce. They were serialized and tracked virtually day-to-day. The expertise of the U.S. Army maintenance ship was well known. Since the Army personnel were believed experts in Huey maintenance, Air America did send items to the ship to calibrate and verify tests conducted at Tainan. According to Jack Forney, in general the Army results and Air America's were similar. It was no surprise since both worked with similar repair specifications. One difference was that the Army station had more parts and tended to change assemblies like engines, rather than troubleshoot and replace components. They could easily afford to do this since their parts pipeline was full. However, despite a plethora of parts and resources, the U.S. Army lost an estimated 3,000 Hueys in country, not all related to enemy action.

While conversing about the Bell problems, Jimmy and Wayne often talked about how great it would be to have such a maintenance facility at Udorn.

After some time and little resolution, we heard a story regarding a Chinese worker at Tainan assigned to Bell internal FCF/governor rebuilds. Thinking he was saving his organization money, he reputedly changed only parts out of specification and left borderline parts in the unit. Consequently, the mixed parts, some new or reworked, and those marginal ones not replaced, caused weird things to occur to our machines.

Forney had an opinion about this revelation. In the Chinese Tainan workers defense, he concluded the shop worker was performing his job and what the repair work specifications required; changing the parts that were out of tolerance and reusing those within tolerance. *"Attributing his actions to parsimony was out of line unless one wanted to believe he was less professional than the rest of us."*

Changing parts always required a judgment factor, but it was the manual specification that determined whether the item was useable or not. The shop mechanic could not divine out of thin air the need not to adhere to repair specifications in one instance and not in another. If we wanted the mechanic to work to a policy different than specifications, involving component bit parts, then the specs had to be changed.

In the final analysis, T-53 N1 twitches and compressor surges were "cured" by tightening the compressor overhaul and repair specifications to the same as overhaul specs, and by also changing some maintenance field adjustment actions, originally introduced by Jimmy Schultze, that placed the turbine/compressor relationship on a fine line too close to the performance limit

for either. ¹⁵ The field adjustment worked after a fashion for a time, but a better solution was to tighten the physical limits so the field adjustment was not necessary. ¹⁶

GUNSHIPS FOR THE BARREL

Spooky, the USAF AC-47 gunship, came of age in South Vietnam toward the end of 1964. Before long the weapon achieved a fearsome reputation. Because of the awesome firepower generated and a proven ability to turn around apparently hopeless nighttime situations at remote bases in Nam, AIRA Vientiane requested AC-47s to be stationed at Udorn for use in Military Region Two's increasingly difficult situations where enemy night attacks needed to be thwarted. ¹⁷ There were also requests to convert four Lao C-47s to gunship status, and stage a plane at each major river town for nighttime support of bases. The RLA program was approved in early 1969, and the first class of Lao aviators and mechanics were sent across the river to Udorn for training.

However, aircraft conversions and trained Lao crews would not be ready for several months, and the urgent need for nighttime support, particularly at besieged Bouam Long and contiguous sites, could not wait.

Consequently, in lieu of the much-preferred AC-130 gunships, Seventh Air Force elected to send four AC-47s from the Fourth Special Operations Squadron South Vietnam to the Udorn Air Force base for immediate combat use and training.

¹⁵ Jimmy Schultze knew how to adjust a nut on the fuel control unit to increase engine performance.

¹⁶ Jack Forney Emails.
EW Knight Emails, 07/01/00, 10/14/00.

¹⁷ Also called "Puff the Magic Dragon," the ship mounted three 7.62mm miniguns that had the capability to spit out 6,000 rounds a minute.

A pair of planes arrived on 11 March, with two more to follow. Two days later one was employed to address a situation in the rapidly-deteriorating eastern Zone Steel region. Spooky-01 was headed north when an Alleycat controller contacted the PIC for a mission. FAG Kneecap, located in the Mung Ngai (LS-01), area was experiencing severe troops-in-contact (TIC) situation with the site's outcome in doubt. Kneecap requested immediate normal bombs and napalm support. When Alleycat indicated that Candlestick-40, a C-123 FAC-flare ship, was inbound with Spooky-01 to follow, a concerned Kneecap was not sure the base would hold.

Marking a first, Kneecap had never previously worked with a gunship. With the only support available, Spooky was directed to the target area and cleared hot. Because there were no expected explosions and fire normally visible during a night strike, the FAG was not initially impressed. However, when Spooky-01 called Winchester and departed to RTB, it was apparent that the enemy offensive had failed and the situation stabilized. At daylight, when the friendly troops exited their fighting holes, they were amazed at the extensive slaughter Spooky had inflicted on the attacking enemy.

Word of the gunship's uncanny ability to achieve a miracle out of the jaws of defeat spread quickly among Vang Pao's warriors, hence, FAGs regularly sought Spooky planes for primary nighttime support.

The value of the newly introduced aerial artillery was further enhanced on 20 March when elements of the 5th Battalion attacked Site-32 in force. Three AC-47s in nighttime support saved the site from being overwhelmed, in the process killing an estimated 175 enemy and wounding uncounted numbers. Attacks were also thwarted in April.

In order to wean the Lao military off reliance on American assistance during hairy nighttime attacks and provide a gunship arm to the RLAF, five AC-47 aircraft were targeted for delivery to the Lao government, some from the Vietnamese Air Force inventory. This number eventually morphed into eight, then twelve ships. Five C-47s were delivered to Bangkok in July for gunship refit by Thai-Am. The first was soon ready.

To man the first ship, existing C-47 pilots and crew were trained in tactics and weaponry of the minigun, instead of the installed .50 caliber gun. The first crew was graduated at Udorn on 1 August, but their ability to conduct nighttime operations was believed moot: an instructor pilot considered the Lao Captain deficient in radio instruments, unable to read a map, and failed to speak English. Handlers were recommended.

The first RLAF C-47 was flown to Wattay Airport and then to Luang Prabang. Mechanical problems there caused a decision to relocate the machine to Vientiane, where a better maintenance infrastructure existed. During the missions conducted at LP it was noted that inexperienced Lao pilots, never having worked at night before, harbored an unnatural fear of night flying in mountainous combat areas.

RLAF AC-47 program growing pains continued. During early September problems operating the guns were noted. Crews fired long bursts that melted the gun barrels.

One plane and crew were sent to Savannakhet for evaluation. However, inoperative radios and cranky weapons still presented a stumbling block to efficient operation. In November, USAF technicians arrived Wattay Airport to correct problems and train the Lao personnel in operation and maintenance of the weapons.

About the same time, additional AC-47 aircraft were programmed for the RLAF. Problems continued. Some planes arrived without cockpit instrument panel night lighting. Lao pilots

rarely flew using instruments, or at night. This required a jury rigged retrofit to illuminate the attitude indicators. The FM radios also needed tuning. Parachutes were uncomfortable to wear and with backpacks unavailable, cockpit crews flew without benefit of the devices. The malfunctioning .50 caliber guns would eventually be replaced with a more efficient minigun system.¹⁸ As with any new mechanical device, the switch to more easily maintained armament presented the same initial problems. In addition, three more ships required more pilots for the strapped C-47 program. Therefore, the lack of qualified pilots required transferring experienced T-28 pilots to the program.

With improved gun systems installed and with more experienced confident pilots flying missions, by the end of December the RLAF gunship had come of age and was considered a lethal addition to the RLAF inventory. Spooky aircraft crews were providing acceptable support to various military regions.¹⁹

JARINA AT LP

On the ninth of March Mike spent the day on the scorching parking ramp with Joe Galulais and Campit, testing (FCF) Hotels-44, 63, 48, and 62 in preparation for Special Missions.

The next day, Monday, he flew deadhead with John Fonburg and Flight Mechanic Bill Goodwin on Hotel-48 for two road watch missions out of Luang Prabang Intelligence regarding status of and movement on Route-19 was still of prime interest to Agency

¹⁸ The .50 caliber machine gun required some expertise in that it required proper adjustment of the head space to correctly operate.

¹⁹ John Pratt, *CHECO*, 93-99.
Gallacher & Ahmann, Jesse Scott Interview #663 United States Air Force Oral History Program, 33-33: Booklet Obtained by the Author at Maxwell AFB, Alabama, 08/31-09/02/94.
Victor Anthony, *The War in Northern Laos*, 296-297, 318-319.
Stanitz, 2-3.
Ken Conboy 209.

people. Therefore, fighting smoke and haze, the first mission was conducted to UMT coordinates TJ2800, sixty miles north of Luang Prabang and six miles west of Route-19, the main enemy logistic road out of Dien Bien Phu. After recovering at LP, the second trip was scheduled nine miles further north of the first landing zone to TJ3013, again west of Route-19. This mission did not escape enemy detection, and the H-34s were fired at, but all crews returned to the royal capitol unscathed.

Consistent with the general stand down while area bombing was underway, the crews stood by at Luang Prabang for three days until Friday.

Jarina was recalled to Udorn on the 14th. He managed to obtain a quick flight of less than an hour on C-130 605.

Two days later, Mike joined designated Company training IP, Wayne Webb, on a local six-month proficiency check.

DICK LISTER

Former U.S. Army pilot Dick Lister, another Bell helicopter pilot fleeing Saigon and Bob Hitchman's dictatorial rule, recently arrived in Udorn. After Jim Campbell, Hitchman's assistant, died in a freak training accident, Dick had assumed Jim's training duties. However, he did not interact well with Bob, and when a chance arose, he opted for a transfer to Udorn for the same reasons as had most other Saigon pilots.

Normally, when a helicopter pilot transferred from another station without necessary seniority, he was initially assigned to the UH-34D program. However, since there was such a desperate requirement for qualified personnel in the Bell, and Dick was reputedly highly experienced in both instructing and maintenance, local management assigned him to the Bell program. Because of the seniority problem, a dispute arose among the

pilot force. Issues such as this were fodder for grievance, enhanced the appeal of a union, and likely stimulated some formerly reluctant pilots to join the association.

Regardless of the issue, Dick was well liked and easily fit into our group, particularly the Club Rendezvous. However, it was in the adjacent "Animal Bar" that he excelled, referred to as "Champaign Dick" after his proclivity for the bubbly after other snorts.

Chief Pilot Knight first flew with Lister on 17 March in Bell 205 PFH. Dick would later become part of the office team in 1970. Wayne considered Dick a good guy, but his actual piloting ability was far removed from his reported reputation, and he did not provide as much help as envisioned. An eight-to-five o'clock individual, he showed little initiative, and there were more accomplished people in the program.

MR-2 HEATS UP

While Knight and Lister were conducting a local FCF, Jarina returned upcountry in Hotel-15, one of our oldest H-34s still in the Udorn inventory, with the ambassador's son, Bill Goodwin. During an almost ten-hour day that included forty-seven landings, he was assigned to move people and supplies in the Khieu Manang (LS-192) area in the hills east of Phu Bia, and in the most remote northeast portion of the Moung Oum and Moung Cha Valley.

Following the loss of Na Khang, enemy units from the dreaded Vietnamese 316 Division began moving onto the Plain of Jars. Before long, their patrols were reconnoitering and probing Vang Pao's defenses for weak points. Rumor was rife at Sam Tong concerning potential attacks, causing some individuals to seek nighttime safety in the woods outside the bowl.

Since the old Momentum site at Ban Na (LS-15) was situated relatively close to the Plain of Jars, and lowland refugees were already making their way south to the site to escape the current wave of USAF bombing, Vang Pao instructed that those individuals who wished so, be relocated thirty-four miles southwest to Phong Sai. Because Site-211 was located in the Nam Leuk Valley at 1,000 feet above ground level (AGL), the move was calculated by AID and Vang Pao to complement similar ethnic people and avoid cultural conflict. Before landing at Sam Tong for the night, Mike finished the day conducting these shuttles.

Tuesday found Mike again moving refugees out of harm's way. Both Site-32 and Site-50 were experiencing considerable pressure. Consequently, he and other H-34 pilots began moving people south to Thong Kheun (LS-191) into the already-saturated southwestern Moug Cha Valley.

As enemy forces tightened the noose around Bouam Long, a high state of anxiety and panic prevailed at the site. Therefore, to forestall civilian losses, AID elected to evacuate recently-arrived refugees and other dependents to safer areas. CASI, Air America Porter and helicopter pilots were tasked to stage the people south, some to Phou So (LS-57), where they could rest and then walk to either Moug Soui or Xieng Dat.

Mac Thompson was assisting the refugee movement during this busy period. To help outstations maintain contact with Sam Tong and Vientiane, AID had received several single sideband HF radios. Mac had one at Site-32, with the antenna strung along the runway by the loading area. Waiting for another aircraft to land, he could see the northern approach end of the strip through which an aircraft had to approach and depart the site. He was aware that there were not many friendly troops located in that direction.

Suddenly, all the refugees stood up. Spooked like a herd of buffalo, they began movement to the left. Mystified, and with adrenaline pumping, he wondered what had occurred, for he did not hear shots or see any bad guys. Still, something must have happened. As a precaution, Mac severed the SSB antenna so he could carry the set out of the area. The people walked for five minutes and then everyone sat down. The movement had been good practice for actual trouble, but in this case constituted only a false alarm.

Sometimes Mac had to act as the local sheriff. During one civilian and dependent evacuation, a Meo trooper attempted to climb onboard an H-34. During the process, he discharged his rifle. Mac subsequently clobbered him beside the head with his .45 caliber pistol. When the H-34 pilot departed, fearing that he might have overstepped his bounds, Mac chose to forestall potential problems and reported to Commanding Officer Cher Pao Moua with his version of what had transpired. The diminutive leader indicated that he should not worry. The unfortunate soldier was installed in a cage near the loading ramp for three days. With the enemy shooting and creating havoc at night, his incarceration could not have been a pleasant experience.

Refugee work and intelligence gathering continued on the 19th. Covering wide areas, Mike began with a local trip north to San Louang (LS-41); then he moved a few miles further north to work the Moung Soui area. Subsequent trips took him to Phu Cum, and then the Houei Tong Ko (LS-184) area. Later in the day, after topping off the fuel tanks and being recalled to Udorn, he drove south to Vang Vieng (L-16) and Wattay airport landing well

after dark.²⁰

PLAIN OF JARS TARGETED

The expected loss of Na Khang, with barbarians at the gates of Bouam Long, and enemy units surging largely unhindered toward and onto the northern Plain of Jars, fostered negative political ramifications in the RLG and Meo camp. As a result of his failures, Vang Pao was again pressured to withdraw from the war by Meo clans and political adversaries, causing a drastic transformation in the mind set of both the U.S. Embassy Country Team and Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma. Because of the seriousness of the situation the Prime Minister requested American bombing be shifted to the Plain of Jars, and ROEs abrogated to include striking previously untouched enemy administrative points, long in the targeting inventory. This operation was begun during the final weeks of March.

CHANGING THE GUARD

Further muddying the waters, the Nixon Administration was replacing William Sullivan with new Ambassador, George McMurtrie Godley (Mac), who had served a two-year tour in the Belgian Congo from 1962 to 1967 as ambassador. Generally considered a hawk, Mac graduated from Yale University in 1939 and served in the U.S. Navy during World War Two. He joined the Foreign Service in 1941. He would remain in Laos as the head honcho directing the war until 1973.

Leaving Laos and a powerful position as the civilian military commander in Laos that he had overseen for years,

²⁰Mike Jarina Interviews.
EW Knight Emails, 09/19/00, 09/21/00, 09/23/00, 11/15/00.
Mac Thompson Email, 04/26/07.
Joe Leeker, Humanitarian Work, 55.

Sullivan was busy packing his bags in anticipation of a welcome break and less intensive tasks in Washington. In the interim, Robert Hurwitz, Sullivan's deputy, would assume his duties (15 March to 15 July) until Godley arrived.

Before leaving his ambassadorial post to assume a slot at State relating to Southeast Asian affairs, Sullivan, a man in position to know, understand, and prognosticate regarding the situation, painted a dismal picture for his superiors in Washington regarding Laos' future. Although broader in nature, including most of his tour since 1964, his thoughts tended to mirror near-term CIA analysis of the Lao war that covered the period until the rains commenced. Agency officers despaired of any current ground force strengthening from scarce in-country assets. Consequently, only better trained and led soldiers could remotely stem the advancing communist tide. So far, allied tactical air had managed to delay, but not thwart, the Vietnamese offensive:

"...some improvements-political stability, in the spread of economic benefits, and in the provision of social services. But the fundamental, overriding problem of the war has not been resolved. Until it is, the survival of Laos as a sovereign and independent nation remains in peril.

The war is a vicious cycle. So long as it continues, the country must maintain a large military establishment...[in the meantime] the budget will remain hopelessly out of balance and revenues will never suffice to permit economic independence of progressive development.

...military establishment...has done better than we expected, [but] it has built up institutionalized privilege, corruption, and law-evasion, which in turn, alienate the villages from the government which the military represent...while intended to defend the central government and advance its interests, the military

end by corrupting its rule and corroding its prestige. Thus the enemy, merely by posing a threat to the government, succeeds in weakening the authority of that government.

...hoped, when the Paris negotiation began, that peace would be restored in Southeast Asia before the current dry season...this hope was dashed and little stomach [remains] for the fight this year. Hence, they gave up more terrain this season than was truly taken from them by force of arms [read abandoned]. It remains to be seen how much more will be lost in the six or seven weeks which remain in the dry season.

...The Lao have suffered enormously under all these years of war. Among the Meo, for example, for example [always the prime fighting force in the country], practically an entire generation of fighting men had been wiped out...

...a miracle that the Lao have fought for so long and that the fabric of their primitive society has not totally collapsed prior to this time...

...If the North Vietnamese push as heavily next dry season as they have this year, and if they abandon their political restraints, I doubt that Laos could successfully weather another offensive without losing some vital areas of its territory and without severe strain on the stability of the current political leadership...the period between and now and next November is critical..."

Sullivan

MODERATING ROEs

Since the commencement of allied reconnaissance and bombing in Laos in 1964, USAF and Thai T-28 pilots' rules of engagement (ROE) were necessarily highly restrictive. They specified that unless otherwise clearly affirmed by an accepted authority,

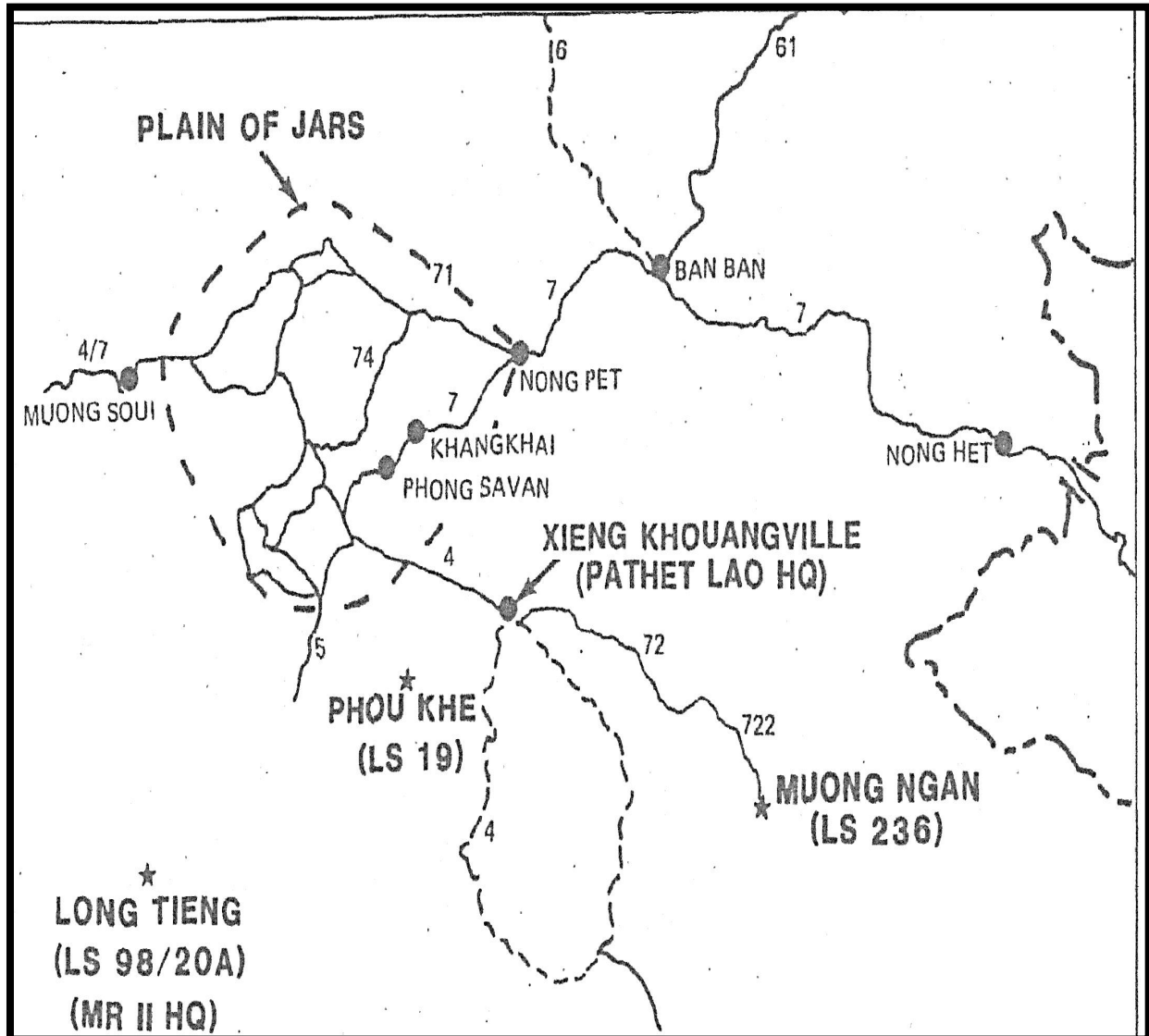


Diagram of the March-early April 1969 concentrated Allied bombing campaign targeting Route-7 and the eastern edges of the PDJ (long dash lines). Smaller dash lines depict General Vang Pao's early spring diversionary movement against Routes-4 and 42, and the Xieng Khouang Ville Valley.

Anthony.

occupied villages were off limits to air strikes, particularly larger PDJ population centers like Xieng Khouang Ville (L-03), Phong Savan (L-21), and Khang Khay (L08). The RLAF was not similarly constrained by hard ROEs, but both Lao and Thai pilots respected enemy AAA and rarely sought trouble or were not overly aggressive. Moreover, AIRA controlled external stores and could cut off supplies at any time. Occasionally, 'B" Team Thai pilots disregarded established rules, as was the case at Khang Khay in earlier years. Incidents such as this were rare since they were politically damaging and always required profuse apologies from the RLG.

In other regions of the country, particularly the Ho Chi Minh Trail areas in the eastern portions of MR-3 and 4, since the Americans were so predictable, the enemy quickly learned how best to avoid air strikes. They subsequently took advantage of ROE by staging men and munitions in protected villages or outside designated trail boundaries. Restrictions were about to change on the PDJ, but certain modified limitations continued in place. Several hundred targets, many enemy sanctuaries formerly immune from air strikes, were jointly developed by military and civilian planners along major LOCs and on the PDJ's eastern periphery.

To complement air attacks on enemy infrastructure, VP was preparing to commence movement on dissent Neutralist forces in the Xieng Khouang Ville Valley and along southern portions of Routes-4 and 42. Another operation was tailored to harass parts of Route-7, and to encourage enemy units to withdraw to protect the LOC and abandon thoughts of moving further onto the Plain of Jars. The combined operations were also calculated to divert enemy attention from Site-32, other positions blocking major incursion from the north, and also discourage continued movement toward Moung Soui.

Supported by dozens of USAF and RLAf daily sorties, many controlled by Raven FACs from Long Tieng, the bombing operation was slated to commence on 17 March and continue for three days. With weather cooperating to a degree, initial attacks were considered outstanding, resulting in numerous secondary explosions. Previously off limit ammunition caches were largely unprotected and considered easy targets. So successful were the air strikes that the operation, thought to disrupt the enemy timetable and cause delays or outright cessation of further offensives, was extended for several days, and the former restrictions on major towns was lifted. With the gloves finally coming off, it seemed at long last, the good guys would be moving in the right direction. ²¹

"An intensive air campaign has been launched to disrupt communist offensive capabilities near the [PDJ], and present plans call for at least three more weeks of heavy strikes..."

The communists have moved cautiously since capturing Na Khang over three weeks ago, and the recent loss of a number of government positions in the area has been more a result of the

²¹Segment Sources:

Mac Thompson Email, 11/10/99.

Mac Godley Obit.

Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 209-210.

Bill Leary 1969 Notes.

Tom Ahern, *Undercover Armies*, 314.

Victor Anthony, 298-300 to Include the Rain Dance Bombing Schematic.

U.S. Department of State Office of the Historian, Foreign Relations of the United States 1969-1970 Volume 6, Vietnam January 1969-July 1970, Document 43, Telegram from the Embassy in Laos to the Department of State, 1714, 03/18/69-

(<http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v06/d43>).

Ibid, FRUS Document 56, 04/08/69.

John Pratt, *CHECO*, 102.

CIA Bulletin, 03/24/69.

CIA Bulletin, 04/02/69.

staging morale of government troops than of enemy ground assaults.

The air strikes may upset the enemy's timing, or cause the communists otherwise to forgo offensive actions in order to defend their rear areas. On the other hand, the heavy strikes, directed against positions that have been inviolate up to now for political reasons, could trigger a sharp enemy response." ²²

UPCOUNTRY

Because of the recent aggressive phase in Military Region Two operations we were evolving toward, double crews were more often required for Bell aircraft. Moreover, because of the increased military air activity in our area of operations, there was also anticipation of possible SAR requirements.

On the afternoon of Thursday, 20 March, Pat Colgan, Wayne Knight, and Flight Mechanic John Melvin and I ferried PFJ to Long Tieng. Wayne's purpose onboard was to conduct route checks with me and others, obtain some flying time, seek information regarding the current situation, and perhaps evaluate if what I had said about the gas producer fluctuations had any validity. Pat and I completed a short-day moving men and materiel to the Padong (LS-05) staging area in preparation for the envisioned move toward Xieng Khouang Ville.

That night the Air America hostel was brimming with Bell crews participating in the mission. We slept soundly as the slaughter ensued at Bouam Long.

On Friday, Colgan transferred to 96W to double up with Bill Hutchison. At the same time, Wayne and I were again dispatched east to Padong, assigned to support the Site-03 diversion attempt. Supplementing the resounding success of the allied

²² CIA Daily Bulletin, 03/25/69. Laos: The government is taking steps to blunt moves it expects the enemy to make in the northeast.

bombing campaign to date, Meo units north and south of Route-7 were preparing to move down from the hills and cut the road.

Like most of Vang Pao's operations, the plan to move on Xieng Khouang Ville was pragmatic in nature: go as far and as fast as possible. This was dependent largely on reliable current intelligence and the troops' ability to move swiftly and seize predetermined objectives. As we had controlled much of the area in the past, Meo leaders knew the terrain well and the routes leading toward goals. Moving off the mountain assembly point at Padong, the battalion would move overland to seize Ban Pha (LS-239), that had been lost during February. The site was located in the Nam Pot Valley, eleven miles south of the secondary objective, Phou Khe (LS-19). Further support for the operation would come from units converging from Khang Kho (LS-204) and, to a lesser extent, from Ban Pha Phai (LS-65), sites that were generally configured in a crescent pointing toward the ultimate destination.

Once Ban Pha was secured, patrols would be dispatched seven miles east to interdict and disrupt enemy traffic on soft segments of Route-4. Other ADC troops from sites still existing on the eastern side of Phou Sao would attempt to control weakly defended portions of alternate Routes-42 and 72.

With minimum resistance envisioned and overall success assured, units would then move forward onto the heights of Phou Khe, which overlooked the Xieng Khouang Ville Valley. Since Site-03 was garrisoned by mostly Lao Deuanists, called dissident Neutralists, who for various reasons broke away from Kong Le's Neutralists to join the Pathet Lao movement in 1963, VP had aspirations of disrupting enemy operations and eventually

chasing them out of town. ²³ From the elevated vantage point on Site-19, manning crew-served weapons, the Ville and immediate area could be shelled with impunity. Then teams could be dispatched into the valley to harass and hopefully divert attention away from Site-32. Neither the plan concept nor the site involved was new, for they both had been previously employed in offenses, with varying degrees of success.

Late in the day, Mike Jarina deadheaded to Sam Tong on Hotel-15 to assume control of Hotel-62 the following day with Flight Mechanic Bill Goodwin.

Scratch Kanach had arrived from Tango-08 to join me in the cockpit on Saturday. Knight transferred to 96W to conduct what he referred to as spot checks with Pat Colgan and Bill Hutchison. His methodology allowed him hands-on upcountry flying and did not diminish line pilot flight time. ²⁴ Working until nearly dark, we flew in support of the Xieng Khouang Ville operation.

Even with sizeable offensives underway, AID work did not suffer. Following initial flights from Alternate to Padong and Pha Phai, Jarina returned to Sam Tong to commence refugee work. Conducting over twenty landings, he journeyed to varied sites at Ban Nam Feng (LS-223), east of Moung Cha (LS-113); Pha Kha (LS-51), twelve miles west of Site-20; and Tha Tam Bleung (LS-72),

²³ In 1969, the Deuanist Neutralist dissent faction that had defected to the Pathet Lao was estimated to have more than 2,500 troops on the Plain of Jars: seven infantry battalions, one AAA battalion, one field artillery battalion, one armored battalion, and one engineer battalion.

²⁴ Company policy dictated that managers could fly only necessary line work outside the local base areas. This included semi-annual upcountry proficiency or line checks. When neither of these was due, the CPH legally skirted the Company restriction by logging spot checks as a valid excuse to perform some upcountry flying. In this way, Knight kept somewhat abreast of the situation in Laos.

seven miles northeast of Sam Tong. The efforts were not only refugee related, but also to accumulate information from villagers related to rumors of unusual enemy activity in the region.

As the massive air campaign continued in earnest around the Plain of Jars, and despite increased helicopter requirements to support Vang Pao's northeast operation, intelligence gathering missions were continued. On Sunday, to assess enemy reaction to the bombing leading to increased vehicular traffic from North Vietnam into Laos, we were briefed on a deep penetration mission to VH1245 in Houa Phan Province. The landing zone, one previously used and which would continue to be used in the future, lay in the Phou Pha Lang Range one mile south of and overlooking Route-641, an east-west artery running between Moung Soi (L-60) and Sam Neua Town. The less developed road also paralleled the major northern Route-65.

Despite heavy smoke and haze, which actually helped contribute to mission safety, an en route fueling stop, and some circumnavigation, there were no problems encountered for our ships or escort aircraft. Time in the denied area was one hour and thirty minutes. ²⁵

After fulfilling the double crew requirement, Scratch left for Udorn, while I continued to support operations northeast of Padong Ridge. Although I enjoyed flying with, and felt safe with, the proficient and talented Kanach, I also preferred to fly by myself.

Jarina's day included forty-seven landings working the northern phalanx of friendly sites along the Nam Ngum and the Moung Soui area. He also worked the Ban Na (LS-15) area.

²⁵ Within three years this same area would become a major focal point during our Military Region Two clandestine Special Project night operations.

MEO T-28 PILOT LEE LIEU

While again working east on the 24th, I was recalled to Alternate. Vang Pao was waiting beside the runway. Highly animated, he indicated that while returning from one of his numerous Plain of Jars bombing sorties, Lee Lieu had experienced a problem, successfully bailed out of his T-28, and now required rescue. With the general strapped in the left seat directing me, we proceeded north to TG853331, a semi-wooded ridgeline two miles south of Ban Na. Lee Lieu was there as briefed and the legendary hero was waving awaiting rescue. Fortunately, it marked one of my less eventful SAR missions.

It was the second time I had extracted the affable Lee Lieu from the jungle in less than a year. Both incidents occurred without incident.

Back at Long Tieng, recalling the "three strikes you are out" maxim, I gently chided the Meo pilot, indicating that he should be more careful, for according to the odds he might not be so lucky next time. Ever the inscrutable Asian, he peered at me and smiled. Vang Pao was ecstatic and waved a well done at me as the two walked off toward his house to discuss the incident and plan further missions. Near term events would establish that Lee Lieu was not always so lucky.

As always, after an event like this, I immediately went back to work.

I was not the only person to recognize a disturbing pattern in Lee Lieu's combat flying activity. Soon after this latest bailout, the Assistant Air Attaché counseled Lee Lieu that he was:

"...flying too much and he was going to kill himself. He was flying too low, taking blast damage all the time...He was doing

*things that no pilot should be doing..."*²⁶

CONTINUED OPERATIONS

While working the 713 contract, Captain Jarina flew east to the Moung Moc regional headquarters in Zone Steel with officers to alert ADC troops there of the current situation, and to garner their support for the Xieng Khouang Ville operation with intelligence gathering and possible interdiction of Route-72 leading west toward the Ville. Along with his new Flight Mechanic, Tom Nery, he conducted tens of shuttles in the area (fifty-seven during the day), including Phou Ngieu (LS-232), a few miles northeast of the Moung Ngan Valley. After returning to Long Tieng, Mike was sent north of the Ban Ban Valley to alert ADC troops there to prepare for movement south off their hilltops to create havoc on Route-7.

I was relieved on Tuesday and deadheaded home on 93R, an Air America Porter.

Before departing The Alternate, I had occasion to witness an unsettling event that was a first for me. The Meo were meat eaters when the product was available. I recalled little actual beef or buffalo meat served at the dinners I attended; the fare was mostly duck, chicken, and pork. Occasionally, to placate evil spirits, psyche up the troops when military fortunes were waning, or to herald an upcoming operation, a water buffalo was slaughtered for feasting.

A medium sized buffalo was staked beside the runway. Several soldiers surrounded the gray beast. One man armed with a M2 carbine patted the animal on the nose and then shot it twice in the head. The hulk dropped on its knees as two soldiers in

²⁶ John Pratt, *CHECO*, 103.

the rear hacked at its rear legs with machete sized knives to sever ligaments. Along with two other men energetically chopping at the front legs, another man, also holding a large knife for the coup de grace, plunged his blade deep into the buffalo's chest, twisting it and searching for the heart. He had obviously performed this act before, for his continued thrusts soon produced a gushing spurt of blood as the organ was penetrated. While the men retreated a few paces to observe, the animal collapsed on its belly.

I thought that was the end to the brutal killing. However, miraculously attesting to an organism's quest to survive, the mortally wounded animal stirred and then struggled painfully to its feet, its life blood still pumping out of a hole in its chest. Within a few seconds the buffalo, now obviously in its final death throes, shuddered vigorously, and dropped to the ground dead.

The spectacle was the most inhumane act I ever witnessed perpetrated on an animal, and I should have left at that point. The killing was gory enough, but the rest even more bloody. The men moved quickly to butcher the flesh. They appeared experts in dissection. Within a short time, they had cut and bagged the choicest pieces. Others attacked the belly, exposing the intestines. After slicing them open longitudinally, the contents, a mess of partially digested grass and weeds, was preserved as a delicacy for someone's table. The episode tended to slake my desire for local Meo color and I never attended a similar event.

Jarina's 713 work continued. After shuttling troops forward in the Padong area to support Vang Pao's operation, Mike moved further east to the Moung Moc area. He made a run to New San Soak (LS-126) in Khammouane Province.

On the 26th, bypassing Phu Cum to the west to avoid overflying enemy-controlled territory, Mike took Mac Thompson to Houei Tong Ko to assess the situation there and tabulate requirements of the people. After returning to Sam Tong, he conducted one trip to Moung Soui before returning to Udorn.

Despite heavy allied bombing and diversionary attempts to thwart movement against and preserve Phou Cum, Bouam Long, and Phu Vieng, dedicated enemy regiments continued offensive measures. Generally lightly defended, Sites 50 and 50A had been attacked and temporarily abandoned on the 14th. The sites were retaken later in the day. On the 26th, they were again lost.²⁷

Jarina, who was also experiencing a very active month, returned to Sam Tong with Tom Cournoyer on the 27th in Hotel-47. During a fifty-two-landing day, he shuttled refugees from the Moung Soui area to Phu Khan Hua (LS-251), a new village a few miles southwest of Ban Nam Moh.

The next day, Mike left for home on Caribou 430 to Wattay Airport, and by C-123 568 to Udorn.²⁸

CONSTRUCTION PROJECTS

North Vietnamese continuing success in upper Military Region Two, movement south, and unknown intent as to how far they were willing to proceed south, created a requirement for additional fallback areas to accommodate large numbers of displaced refugees, and dependents. New Xieng Dat had been refurbished as a temporary refuge, but was considered too close to Moung Soui, a site recently attacked by sappers and defended by FAN soldiers, who were, at best, questionable fighters.

²⁷Victor Anthony, 300.

²⁸Mike Jarina Interviews.

Because of these two negative factors, the site appeared particularly venerable, hence, a fallback concept was implemented. Plans went forward to create a safer strip further south that larger STOL planes like C-123s could supply or quickly move large numbers of people from harm's way. If Moung Soui was not considered operational, it also might serve as an alternate T-28 launch or emergency landing site.

The strip chosen to expand and accept refugees was at Ban Na Then (LS-249) a straight, level area few miles south of Moung Kassy on Route-13. Kassy would continue to function as a forward blocking entity for this site, Vang Vieng, and movement further south along the Nam Lik toward the Vientiane plain. AID contractor Pacific Architects and Engineers provided earthmoving equipment presently located at Site-108 and hired local labor to achieve the work.

Because Air America possessed no heavy lift helicopters, a U.S. Army Chinook squadron at Phu Bai, South Vietnam, was solicited to relocate a machine to perform the work. A CH-54 was also required from Da Nang to accomplish lifts deemed too heavy for the Hook.

Heavy lift helicopters like CH-47 Chinooks from across the fence were no strangers to the Lao war, but were generally requested, introduced, and employed on an ad hoc basis to carry large aircraft, TACAN units, artillery guns, and the sort.

Toward the end of March, a Chinook, a Sky Crane, and crews were dispatched from Nam to perform the job. Since most of the triple-"A" was active at night, they crossed the enemy trail system during early morning daylight and landed at Ubon AFB without incident. Following a comprehensive briefing and a swap of a leaky engine fuel control on the Chinook, the ship's crews launched for Luang Prabang.

After spending a night at the Air America hostel listening to war stories, crews and ships relocated to Moung Soui, using care to avoid hostile areas to the east. First loads were a grader, compacting machine, and a large generator. Departing up strip, the helicopters flew fifty miles southwest, where timely radio contact and a smoke grenade helped to define the drop site. With only two additional cargo net loads planned for the afternoon, the crews ate lunch.

At this point in the operation Murphy entered the equation. While the Chinook's pilot performed a hover check, as a prelude to hooking up a sling load, the number two engine, the same one that had been repaired at Ubon, failed to spool up to full RPM. Nothing corrected the condition. Advised by the Customer that it was not wise to leave the machine there overnight, the PIC elected to perform an uphill rolling takeoff with an engine and a half. Depending mostly on pilot technique, takeoff was effected, but the reduced power proved insufficient for a climb to clear higher terrain. Consequently, the helicopter was nursed back to the strip. Largely because of the flight engineer's magic, using scavenged parts from the offending fuel control, he employed an unauthorized field expediency and reinstalled the formerly leaky FCU. The fix worked and the crew returned to Luang Prabang.

Since most essential equipment had already been moved from Moung Soui, indicating the Sky Crane and an Air America Huey crew could complete the move, the AID contractor released the Chinook crew.

The following day, the crew relocated the machine to Udorn, after which they returned to their home base. ²⁹

²⁹ Nevling and Ailes, Vietnam Mission Report Information for A/159 ASHB 101st Airborn Division, 03/25-04/03/69- (www.vhpa.org/info/panel/battle/69032520.HTM) .

PHU CUM

Compared to previous months, March continued to be busier toward the end. On the 27th, deadheading on Caribou DCH-4A 851, I returned to Long Tieng. I did not fly that day, but joined Frenchy Smith and Dave Crowell the next day in Bell 204 11F. Because of adverse weather that included not only prevailing heavy smoke and haze, but also nasty and largely invisible embedded thunderstorms, we flew only half a day.

As was my custom after supper at Long Tieng, I strolled up the western hill where a complex of SKY headquarters, housing accommodations, bars, and a large, stout iron cage housing "Ralph" the honey bear's perched overlooking the runway. By now Ralph had a mate.

When available, to pass the time, I enjoyed relaxing and viewing a movie with the Customers and Raven pilots. Of course, there was a dual purpose to this, for I was also able to discuss the current situation on and around the Plain of Jars with the Air Force pilots who, because of their low-level capabilities and FAC activities, had a knack of obtaining a broad view of the region. As enemy movements were highly fluid, and one never knew where he might be asked to fly, this information was becoming increasingly important.

During the course of the evening, Zack, the Assistant COS at Alternate, unexpectedly pulled me aside with a request. He needed to move a battalion of Meo troops north to recapture Phu Cum the next day. Marking a rare occasion, I was the senior Bell pilot at The Alternate. Therefore, as per established SOPs, I would plan and lead the flight.

Zack's briefing regarding the enemy situation was necessarily sketchy, since exact circumstances on the mountain

were largely unknown. However, from photo and visual recon, and villager accounts, it was believed the enemy had moved on. Moreover, the landing zone had been supposedly chosen with care, and was considered devoid of enemy. In a grab-bag of hastily assembled Special Missions, that sounded about par for the course.

Our flight would consist of a mix of three Bells, several H-34s, and four USAF CH-3 Pony Express helicopters. Hobo A-1 pilots would constitute our escort. The Air Force helicopters and crews would be arriving the following morning and I would be tasked to brief them. Because of the Pony Express crews' previous mediocre track record, Zack was unsure if the pilots would even agree to participate.

After talking to Zack, a really nice individual, I walked back to the hostel to alert and brief those individuals present for the mission. My spiel was short and lacked detail, for I had to wait until the next day to determine what assets would be available from Sam Tong and Udorn. To minimize problems and aid the troops, we planned to load the battalion at Alternate in the morning and deliver our charges to Phu Cum in one lift. We would fly in three groups. Our three faster Bells first, the slower H-34s next, with the Air Force Ponies bringing up the rear. Because of anticipated poor visibility en route, two Skyraiders would meet us at the mountain at noon and provide close air support if required.

The following morning after breakfast several double-crewed H-34s arrived from Site-20. Mike Jarina flew up from Udorn in Hotel-59 with Ivar Gramm and Flight Mechanic Joe Siaotong.

After the Pony crews arrived, Zack and I drove down strip to the lower parking ramp to brief them. Not entirely enthusiastic about the mission myself, I was not looking forward

to this task, and actually did not expect much help from the Air Force types. Because of past incidents and USAF recriminations against our pilots and organization, I had absolutely no rapport with Air Force helicopter pilots who I considered inexperienced and lacking in the will to conduct a job. Most of us considered them inexperienced, with little familiarity with combat and field work, and lacking the will to perform a job. I am sure my opinions and disdain were equally mutual, for we earned several times the pay of an Air Force officer.

Our feelings were not the same for Raven pilots. We depended closely on each other's expertise, shared the same daily risks, and we were always available as a mechanism for a quick rescue.

After Zack introduced me as the overall mission commander, I did not observe many smiles on the frozen faces. These guys were afraid. Sensing general coldness in the group, I assumed that they had preconceived notions regarding the mission, little or no confidence in me, and certainly did not want to be there. Naturally, the perceived animosity intimidated me a bit. Perhaps I should have told a joke to relieve the tension, but I was never talented along that line. The sour, constipated-faced group reminded me of my standing before another captive audience, the one I addressed at a penal institution gathering while president of my church's Westminster Fellowship group. I noted captain and lieutenant bars on many shoulders. That was good, for it placed us in about the same age group. I launched into mission details as I knew them. It did not take long, for the operation was simple and uncomplicated; shuttle X number of troops from A to B in one lift.

At the end of my short talk, I solicited questions. From the initial silence and blank look on their faces, it was



Looking northeast at the semi cloud and haze-shrouded Phu Cum complex (LS-50), Laos. Displaying a characteristic spike, the sites were located on the mountain to the right side of the photograph.

Author Collection.

obvious that the group collectively did not approve of me, or of Zack's mission. Speaking for the contingent, a senior captain, an arrogant, snot-nosed individual, whose aggressive attitude reflected a superiority complex, informed me that for various reasons he disapproved of the mission. He did not refuse to participate, but allowed that he and his pilots would probably drop their loads off at Moung Soui. That was about what I expected. As Lima-108 was about halfway to our target, the offer was better than nothing. I disliked the man and his tone, but was not willing to challenge the captain's masculinity or valor. While attempting to suppress and keep my true feelings in check, I thanked the group and departed with Zack for our parking ramp to brief the mixed group of Air America pilots.

I designated Mike Jarina leader of his H-34 group. Having participated in many similar missions, and with most individuals familiar with the Phu Cum area, the men voiced no problem with either the planned lift or the odds.

To ensure adequate separation between the Air America contingent, our faster Bells departed a little after 1100 hours to meet the A-1E cover and arrive at the target about noon. Cargo compartments were heavily loaded with troops carrying combat loads and provisions. We proceeded in loose trail formation to permit maximum maneuvering in the smoky conditions. Moung Soui was a large enough complex to be visible and identify through the smoke and haze from altitude. As we continued slowly past Phou So, visibility dropped to an eighth of a mile or less in places. Therefore, taking up a standard heading, I continued north-northeast toward Phou Cum. The outline of the mountain did not come into view until we were very close. The overhead sun filtering through the smoke helped with general site identification. Skyraider pilots were already circling overhead, but were barely able to see the mountaintop or us. For this

reason, they remained high and dry. At the same time, I heard the Pony Express pilots talking. As expected, they were in the process of depositing their loads at Mounng Soui and were preparing to RTB. Good riddance.

The proposed landing zone was located on the east rim of the long north-south range, north of Sites-50 and 50A. Because the landing zone appeared small, I radioed the rest of the Bell flight to orbit just to the east while I landed with the pathfinder team, and determined the viability of landing in the zone. Then I conducted a last-minute briefing with my crew, particularly Dave who carried a weapon, to keep their heads swiveling and eyes moving for anything unusual during approach and on the ground. On final approach, just prior to termination, I observed something that made my heart jump a beat. While clearing the rim, I thought I saw a flash of groundfire off to the right. Too late to abort, I continued to the ground and hoped for the best. As the troops debarked and disappeared into high grass to establish a defensive perimeter, I observed a pool of water. I had been fooled by the overhead sun intermittently glinting off the water's surface.

As number two commenced his approach, I lifted to a hover, turned 180 degrees, and departed for Lima-108. We continued to march, completing our lift in one more gaggle. As every man was required for the operation, Jarina picked up additional ADC troops at Houei Ki Nin (LS-38) and delivered them to Phu Cum.

The immediate area was soon secured and a clearing action begun. However, it would have been a far better operation and minimized risk for all involved in the lift had all the troops been deposited in one trip. If the enemy had actually been present in the area, with marginal A-1E participation expected and the Pony Express out of the picture, our operation might have encountered serious problems.



Houei Ki Nin, Laos. Located deep in the bowels of a ravine seven miles south of Moung Soui, Site-38 had been in the Royal Lao government site inventory since the beginning of the Second Indochina War.

Jarina Collection.

N A M E	EMP NO	LOC	DEPT	ACCT	POSITION	DATE	CONT	ACFT TYPE	BLK. T	PROJ T	NITE T	U/H T	AREA T		
CASPERLIN	H-H	05942	51	670	2301	CAPTAIN	11764	9713	C123	16	+	+	+	498	+

							03764	0001	2048	40	16	2	+	+	+
								0001	205	42	2*16	+	+	+	+
								0028	H34	81	+	+	+	3*25	+
								9713	DHC4	08	+	+	+	1*	+
								9713	PC6	16	+	+	+	1*	+
								9713	C123	16	+	+	+	2*17	+
								9713	2048	40	12*8	8*2	+	2*40	+27
								9713	205	42	31*34	25*22	+97	+	+25
								9713	205	48	23*51	20*45	+35	+	+

* SUB-TOTAL *										73*2	57*49*	1*35	10*28	*45	

REG PAY	ADD PAY	P.A.	J.S.A.	A.A.A.	P.S.A.	DRR PAY	PRJ PAY	NIGHT	U/H	WAIVER	C.G.S.	P.UICH	GROSS		
1380.00					180.00	52.02	578.17	5.94	89.44				2329.80		
RETIRE	FICA	INSUR.	C ALLOT.	MISC.					35.91 7/8						
94.30	89.18	2*12	1						133.67	NET DUE	W/L C				
										2,144.20	1				

30 APR 1969															

March 1970 representative pay stub showing various categories of Block, Project, Night, and Deadhead time produced by the Chinese Air America computer wizards in Hong Kong.

Author Collection.

During the after-action debriefing, Zack was obviously pleased with the overall result, but not with the Air Force helicopter crews' non-participation. I am not sure if he sent a blistering message through AB-1 to Seventh Air Force, delineating their reluctance to complete the mission. I was not totally unhappy with their performance, for these were the same individuals that upper Company management had threatened to replace us with if we were terminated because of union activity, which never happened.

That evening, with Jarina deadheading, I flew 11F to Udorn. The day completed my month with slightly over seventy-three hours.

HAMMERED

By 25 March, over fifty-five percent of the selected targets in and around the Plain of Jars had been damaged or destroyed. Initial success of the PDJ bombing, and subsequent extension of the campaign, had caused dire problems to enemy infrastructure and communications. Therefore, they withdrew to previous areas of refuge in Xieng Khouang Ville and Khang Khay. Although encouraging, the development did not fulfill the intended result of the operation, which was to encourage the enemy to cease its pre wet season offensive and withdraw its regiments north of the Plain. Noting this scenario, except for a portion of the Chinese Cultural Mission at Khang Khay, Souvanna Phouma sanctioned removal of all previous bombing restrictions. He passed this decision on to Deputy Chief of Mission, Hurwitz, who was standing in for the departed Ambassador Sullivan. State Department Washington, D.C. concurred. Thereafter, large towns housing troops and equipment instantly became cannon fodder for major interdiction.



Phou Khe, Laos. The high ground of Site-19, located in defilade, allowed Meo and FAR troops maximum protection and access to Xieng Khouang Ville and Route-4.

Author Collection.

With little resistance encountered to slow or stop Vang Pao's troops advance north toward the Ville, by the end of March our little, stouthearted guys once again stood on top of Phou Khe (LS-19), a site many of us "old timers" remembered well during previous Xieng Khouang Ville operations. After completing defensive positions--many still existing from previous occupations--consolidation, and supply of the base camp, a siege of the Ville by fire and then infantry incursion was considered next on the agenda. 30

³⁰ Ken Conboy, 210.
Victor Anthony, 298, 300.
Tom Ahern, 315.

Residents of the United States occasionally received information regarding activity in Laos, but it was derived from freelance stringers and major news bureau reporters attached to Vientiane, and who rarely or never actually ventured into the field. Consequently, reporting on the war was well dated, rumor generated, erroneous, rehashed, or merely gross speculation (called creative writing in the trade). Of course, a majority of information was filtered through U.S. Embassy and RLG spokesmen, who disseminated exactly what the situation dictated.

The *Washington Sunday Star* reported:

"The U.S [is] slowly losing the 'quiet war in Laos.' Laotian forces have suffered a series of small but significant reverses. Some 40,000 NVA troops are permanently based in Laos. [The] current NVA drive [is] aimed at Moung Soui on [the] western edge of [the] PDJ. Moung Soui is defended by former Neutralist troops, now merged with [the] FAR.

[The] most dramatic defeat during the current dry season offensive came at Na Khang, near the western border of Sam Neua Province. It was held by several battalions of Hmong (at the time, an uncommon term for the Meo) and was the last significant government outpost in the province. [It was] a symbolic defeat.

[The] government hopes to stop [the] communist offensive before it reaches Sam Tong.

While the enemy grows stronger, the government forces grow weaker. Hmong troops now commonly include 14 and 15 year olds.

Until recently, during the rainy season, the government always recaptured what it lost in the dry season. But the government has never quite recovered from the loss of Nam Bac, north of Luang Prabang. According to one observer: 'the battle

of Nam Bac was not significant by itself, but it was the straw that broke the camel's back.' The government did not try to recover its losses during the last dry season, so they entered the current wet season in a worse position than ever before.

The enemy has also consolidated its position in the central and southern provinces." ¹

An early April Agency intelligence bulletin regarding operations in Military Region Two's Xieng Khouang Province stated:

"Designed to forestall a major communist push south of the [PDJ] that Lao military leaders still believe is imminent, [VP's] operation has so far resulted in the capture of two strategic positions near Route-4, an important communist supply route east of the Plaine. One of the positions is Ban Pha, a government base that had fallen to the enemy in February; the other is located on Phou Khe mountain, from which the guerrillas will be able to place artillery fire on Route-4. The communists offered little resistance to the assaults.

Other government ground actions have not fared as well, although harassing attacks along Route-7 have probably caused the enemy to divert troops to protect the road. The government's ground offensive is being conducted in conjunction with an unprecedented aerial campaign against communist positions near the [PDJ]. Although it is still too early to assess the results of these actions, the recent movement of a North Vietnamese battalion out of the Plaine area suggests that the government may be achieving its tactical purpose.

If the offensive continues to go well, it may do much to repair the shattered morale of government troops. There is also

¹ Professor Bill Leary April 1969 Notes including the 04/20/69 Article from the *Washington Sunday Star*.

a possibility, however, that the communists may react sharply to the threat to their rear areas in the northeast." ²

THOMPSON AND BYRNE

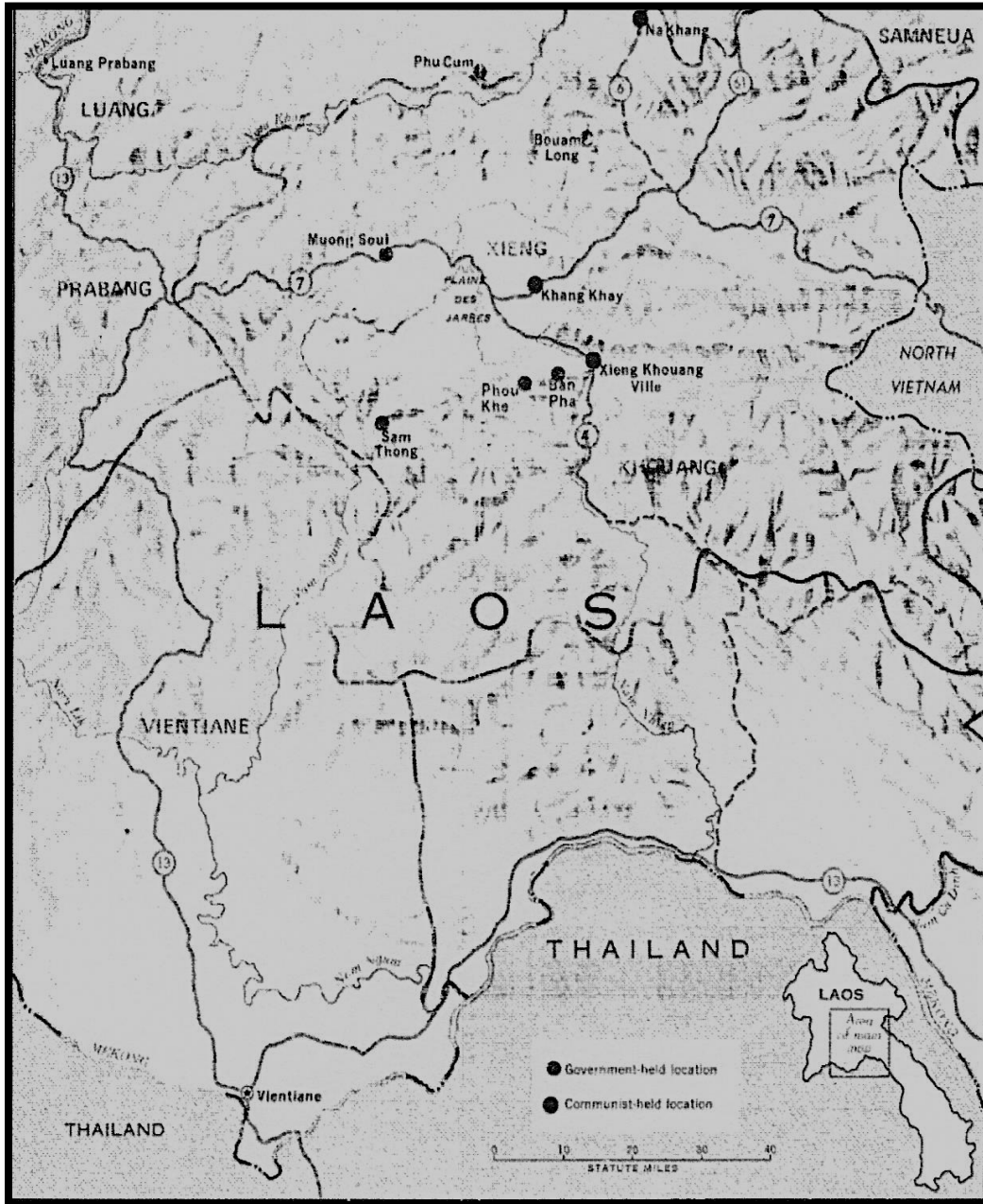
On 1 April, not long after Phu Cum was recaptured, Mac Thompson was en route with Captain Tony Byrne to LS-184 in Hotel-66, a factory new UH-34D delivered to Udorn in February. Since he journeyed to Houei Tong Ko frequently, Mac was up to date on the en route enemy situation. On the way he explained to Tony that Moungh Heim was to the northeast, Site-33 north. Ban Lee (LS-233), located in the valley three miles east, was considered controlled by the enemy. If a pilot had not flown in the area for some time, Mac recommended that he fly a little west of Site-50. Because of heavy smoke and haze, this precaution allowed adequate clearance from both the mountain and enemy groundfire.

They arrived at Site-184, completed daily tasks, and then left in the afternoon for Sam Tong with a load of people.

Mac was easily bored flying long distances from point A to point B. Therefore, like some of our early helicopter pilots, he carried paperback pocketbooks to read. That afternoon on the way back to Site-20, instead of keeping track of their position, he was sitting in the left seat engrossed in his book. The inattention almost cost them to "buy the farm."

Suddenly, he heard the characteristic pop-pop-pop of groundfire, and the whining pings of rounds striking and penetrating the helicopter. He looked out the open window and through thin layers in the smoke, saw that they were flying directly over Site-233. Horses and cows were running from the

² CIA Daily Bulletin, 04/02/69. Laos: Government guerrilla troops are making some early headway as they open up a counteroffensive in the northeast.



General Vang Pao's early April operations in the vicinity of Route-4 and Xieng Khouang Ville.

CIA Map, 04/02/69.

spot of the groundfire. There was no helmet or head set available for communication, so he yelled across the cockpit over the roar of the engine and transmission whine to Tony, pointing down and to the left where the ridge descended and they could quickly avoid the shooters.

At that moment, Mac was not a happy camper, for Tony, who was caulking up additional hits to enhance his moniker as the H-34 program's "Magnet Ass," had disregarded his explicit instructions to fly west of Site-50. A check of the instrument panel revealed no imminent danger to components, so Mac asked Tony if he was going to continue to Sam Tong or stop at Moung Soui. Discovering that Site-50, having been retaken the previous week, was currently friendly, Byrne chose to land there and inspect the aircraft. Once on the ground, Filipino Flight Mechanic, MA Baccay, began a check and discovered nine .30 caliber bullet holes in various areas. Despite this, no one onboard had been hit. Mac observed two holes in the turtleback cover. In addition, there was a stream of oil pouring from the lower left side. More unsettling, because it was close to the occupant's head, a bullet lodged in and jammed the upper rail of the sliding window. Tony obtained pliers from the Flight Mechanic's toolbox and removed the bullet.

Damage to the main rotor blades and left tire was such that Byrne elected to leave the helicopter on the ground for repairs. Radio calls revealed that a Huey pilot was in the area. He was empty and agreed to ferry them to Sam Tong.

Later, Thompson sent Bill Leonard a letter once again requesting headsets for a passenger Customer. Citing the current battle damage (BD) incident, he reiterated that it was sometimes

urgent to converse with a pilot. As a result, fifteen to twenty headsets entered the system and were distributed to principals. ³

AIR ACTIVITY IN XIENG KHOUANG VILLE

With the concentrated allied bombing campaign extended another week to accommodate the growing lists of targets generated by Raven FACs, many towns on the PDJ simply disappeared. Xieng Khouang Ville was not exempted during the process. On the third, dozens of F-4 and F-105 pilots hit one of the region's major storage and supply sites. Results were outstanding, and over time much was destroyed, including scores of the town's buildings.

Taking advantage of his success, Vang Pao had a 105mm howitzer slung to Phou Khe for a coup de gras to the Ville's airborne destruction. This was not the first time Phou Khe had been used as a fire base. In the past, the site had hosted two 105mm howitzers and a Soviet 85mm gun (Long Tom) to complement the smaller crew-served weapons. Strictly as terror tactics during the dirty tricks era, Tony Poe, the Long Tieng Customer, had also used the site to launch rockets off jury-rigged launchers.

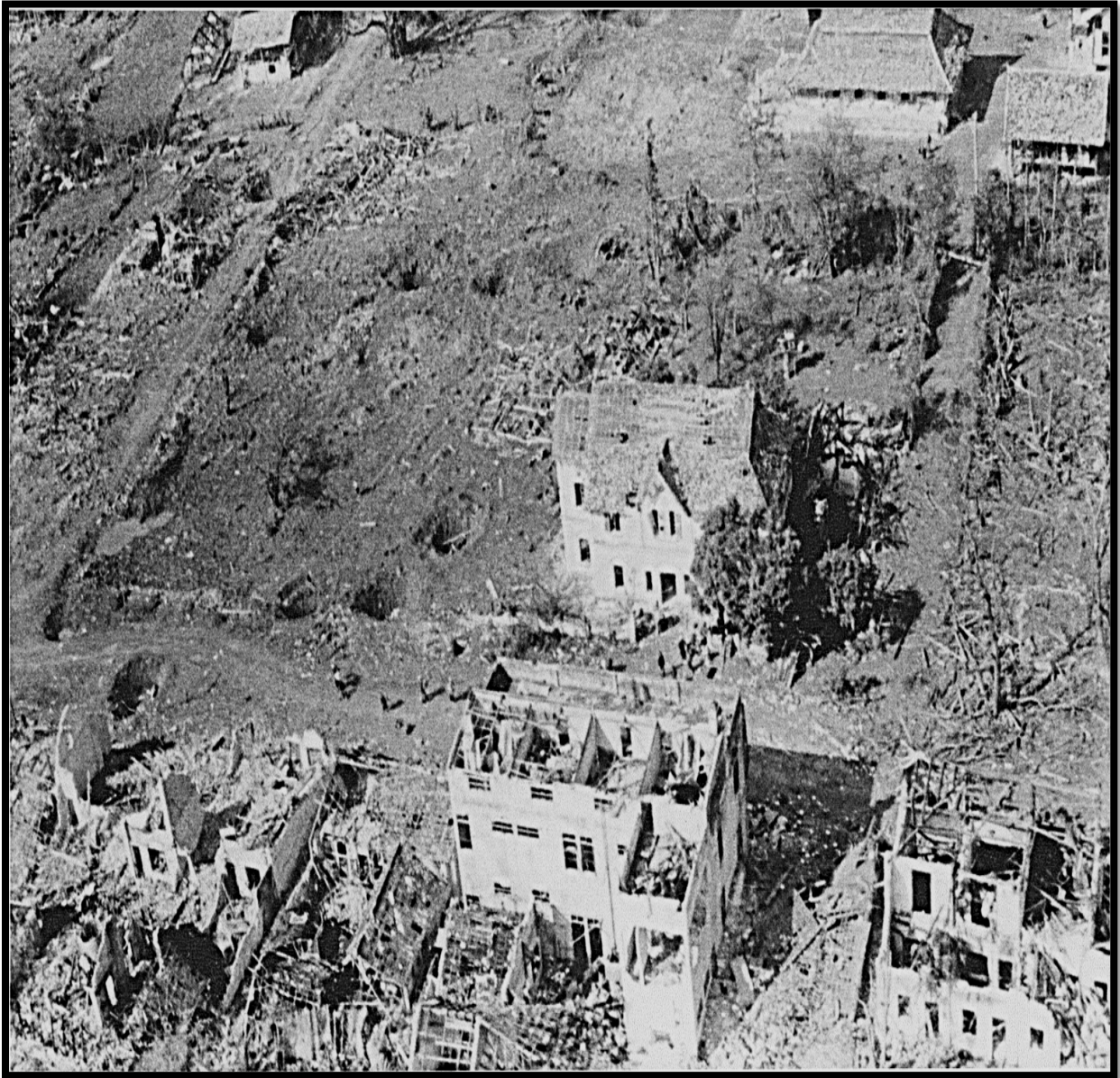
Envisioning eventual movement off the mountain into the Ville and the Route-4 valley leading west toward the PDJ, General Vang Pao requested the FAR General Staff send him a crack paratroop battalion, 103 BP from Military Region Three. Of all the FAR army airborne units trained at Seno, this BP was considered one of the best and most motivated unit in the kingdom. On Friday 4 April the battalion was flown north to

³ MacThompson Interview, 12/24/96.
Joe Leeker, The Aircraft of Air America, Hotel-66.



A portion of Xieng Khouang Ville (L03), Laos, following USAF bombing. The town was built around Route-4, an unimproved dirt road leading east from the Plain of Jars through the Xieng Khouang Ville Valley and plunging south toward Paksane on the Mekong River bank.

Author Collection.



A closer overhead view of the 1969 destruction of Xieng Khouang Ville, Laos.

Thompson Collection.

Alternate on large cargo planes. After mustering, they were shuttled to Padong (LS-05) by Caribou and then by helicopter to reinforce Phou Khe.

Additional troops moved into positions just south of Route-4 to interdict enemy troop and vehicular movement south of Xieng Khouang Ville. Thus far they had encountered only minimal enemy resistance.

In contrast to operations around the Ville, FAN and guerrilla troops southwest of the Plain of Jars were preparing for action. With many enemy forces concentrated in the area, it was believed that government troops would encounter stiff resistance and have a more difficult time.

Harassment operations on the southern fringes of the Plain of Jars had not measurably reduced pressure on northern government sites. Enemy probes had occurred on the newly installed troops at Phu Cum. To the southeast, shelling of outposts continued at Bouam Long, but no major enemy push had materialized. ⁴

"Our war has picked up and we are in the middle of a small offensive.

The smoke this year is the worst ever as it is mixed with rain clouds, which make flying extra hazardous."

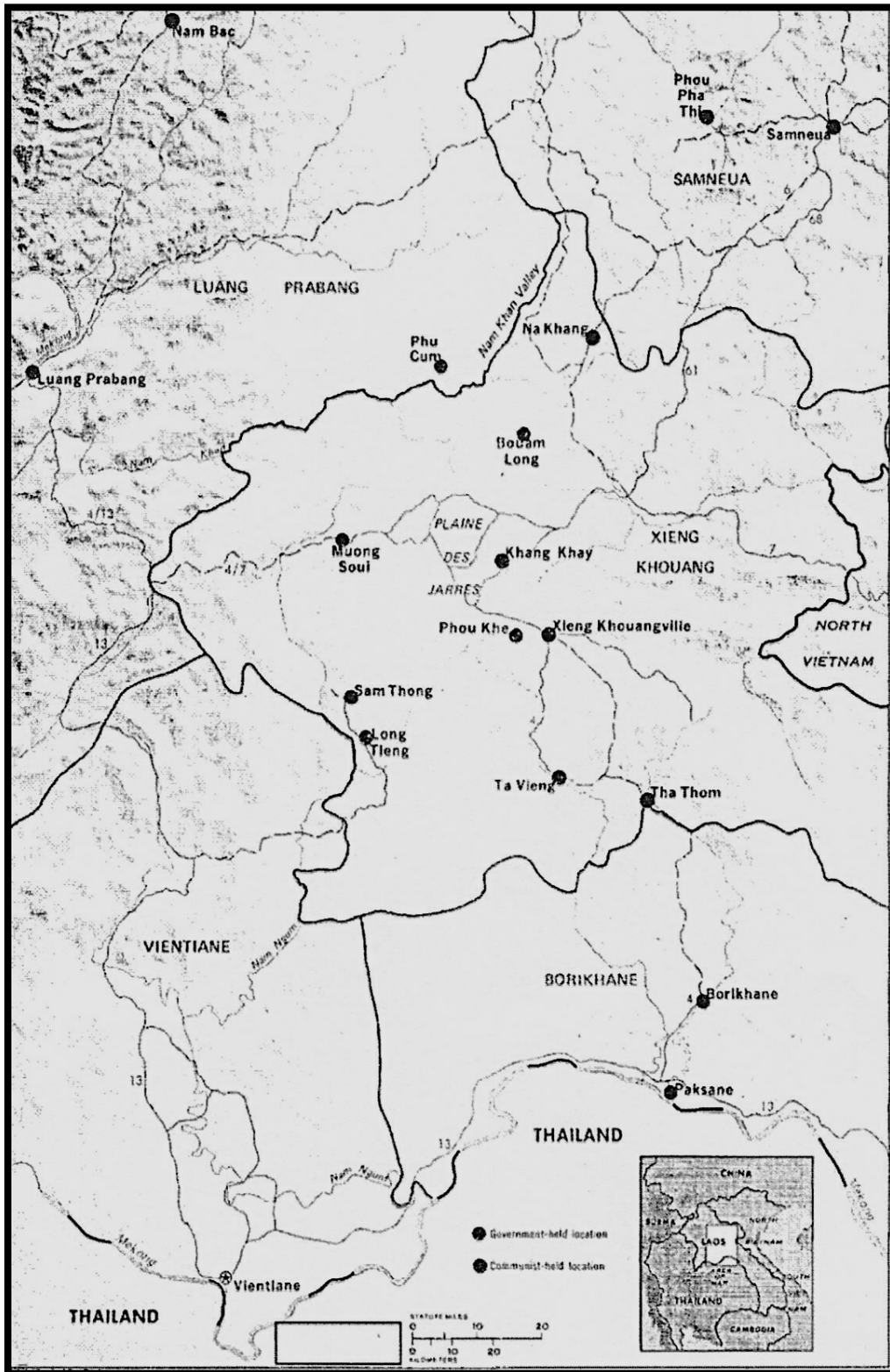
Author 04/02/69 Letter to Parents.

⁴Victor Anthony, *The War in Northern Laos*, 300.

Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 210.

John Pratt, *CHECO*, 102.

CIA Daily Bulletin 04/11/69. Laos: Enemy forces have so far reacted cautiously to the government counteroffensive in the northeast.



April area of contention in Xieng Khouang Ville Province.
CIA Map, 04/11/69.

UPCOUNTRY

On the same day as the arrival of the Military Region Three airborne battalion, I departed Udorn late in the morning for Long Tieng in PFG with Bennie Shaffer. We completed the day moving troops into and out of Padong to participate in the Xieng Khouang Ville operation.

Except for flying a little over an hour, Saturday was a weather day. Although much improved from the weather days spent in the thatched operations-supply building alongside the original runway, these non-flying periods were usually grim times in the damp valley. Moreover, chiefly because of boredom, a person had a tendency to eat and drink too much sweetened Ovaltine.

Flying a little more than seventy-five percent of a normal day, we resumed movement of men and supplies from the Padong airstrip into the Phou Khe site on the sixth.

Despite attempts to divert the enemy away from friendly positions north of the Plain of Jars, their probes and assaults continued.

The following day, the weather improved. As we prepared to move over to Padong to continue working on the Phou Khe lift, a couple of us were assigned to participate in an emergency exfil of seven wounded from Phu Cum. Early in the morning, using the benefit of heavy mortar fire, the enemy moved up the east side of the mountain to attack troops we had infiltrated the previous week. Apparently, the assault had been equally costly for the enemy when a Spooky gunship arrived to strike the advance with devastating minigun fire. As evidence of the slaughter, while on the ground, an officer showed me a splintered AK-47 rifle butt embedded with blood and pieces of flesh. The weapon had been obtained from the blood-spattered side of the mountain.

We delivered the wounded to the 110-bed hospital at Sam Tong and then returned to support the Phou Khe operation.

The seventh marked an official end to the massive allied bombing campaign on the Plain of Jars and in the Route-4 Valley. Seventh Air Force leaders were pleased, for the operation had resulted in an estimated eighty percent of the selected targets destroyed. That was not the end however. Raven FACs continued discovering and plotting fresh targets for destruction. Also, from all outward appearances, the bombing seemed to be creating an adverse effect on enemy plans and progress on the Plain. That and the ability of the Bouam Long defenders, with the help of nighttime air support to ward off defeat by superior numbers, served to stiffen the spines of all Meo warriors. Confidence was returning to the FAR camp—at least temporarily. ⁵

Tuesday, flying until almost dark, we continued supporting the Phu Khe troops with bullets, beans and bandages.

The danger always involved in helicopter operations was grimly evidenced at Ban Na when a careless soldier was instantly killed while walking into the whirling rotor blades of Hotel-46.⁶

On the ninth, I worked one fuel load before being relieved at Alternate. I deadheaded to Udorn on CASI C-47A XW-PFT.

Mike Jarina's month commenced on the first when he deadheaded via Vientiane on C-123K's 658 and 636 to 20 Alternate. Assuming command of Hotel-41 with "Moon" Centeno, he supported Mounng Soui, where diminishing enemy pressure and an addition of a fresh battalion from Vang Vieng allowed FAN to slowly branch out into the hills from the strip's perimeter

⁵Victor Anthony, 300.
Ken Conboy, 210.
Tom Ahern, *Undercover Armies*, 315.

⁶Joe Leeker, Hotel-46.

confines. Mike also shuttled refugees southwest to Xieng Dat (LS-26).

Tuesday, a twenty-landing day, Mike was back at Lima-108 moving people to Site-26. He also hauled people from the Phu Cum area to Pha Kao (LS-14), a training and prisoner interrogation center where questionable methods were used.

In addition to Vang Pao's plans for retaking Xieng Khouang Ville and the surrounding area if the situation allowed, the general also wanted to capture the eastern Moung Ngan Valley to prevent enemy movement west toward Site-03. Success depended on accurate intelligence gathering along the border area for signs of enemy movement. Since the enemy had plans to survey and build new roads to the west toward the Plain of Jars, there was some action in the remote area. Consequently, on 15 April Raven-42 reported troops in contact (TIC) at Ban Keng Sai (LS-84), ten miles east of Moung Ngan. The C-130 ABCCC ship diverted four flights to the area. ⁷

Along with Flight Mechanic replacement, Tom Cournoyer, Mike worked 713 on the third. Together with one of Vang Pao's officers, he was sent far to the east to Zone Steel's regional headquarters at Moung Moc (LS-46). While the general's plans were relayed and discussed, another officer familiar with the area boarded Hotel-41 to help navigate and interpret.

In order to disseminate Vang Pao's battle plans far and wide, Mike left Site-46 for Ban Done (LS-28) to alert the troops and instill enthusiasm for the impending operation. From there he moved on to New San Soak and then a few miles southwest to the Pha Ka area. Then he flew twenty-five miles north-northeast to Moung Tiouen (LS-91), where he shuttled people to Ban Done. He worked late, arriving at Sam Tong at dark.

⁷ Extracts from ABCCC aircraft Cricket and Hillsboro, (fac.com/ravens/articles/extracts-from-abccc).

The following day Jarina returned to Moung Moc and Ban Done to continue the Moung Tiouen shuttles.

The weather pattern on the fifth prevented flying in both the Long Tieng and Sam Tong areas. Not quite as large or as damp as the Long Tieng bowl in adverse weather conditions, Site-20 provided a more comfortable hostel for crews to relax during down days.

SAM TONG

Pop Buell's Lao assistant, Tongsar Boupha, went to work for hostel manager, Bill Yarbrough, in April. Pop still worked at Sam Tong, but he had suffered two heart attacks and was spending a lot of time in the Vientiane Xieng Khouang AID office to be close to his medical provider and good friend, Doctor Charles "Jiggs" Weldon.

Tongsar had married a Lao lady, and his wife and three small boys lived with him at Site-20. Over the years, Tongsar had experienced a fair share of hairy battle incidents at outlying sites. One evening Blaine Jensen overheard Tongsar inform Pop that he no longer wanted to face danger and overnight trips that removed him from his family. Pop understood Tongsar's concerns and desired to reward his good and faithful friend. Therefore, the following morning, Pop talked to Yarbrough regarding a job for Tongsar. The current help fulfilled all needs, and although no position was warranted, Bill said he could create a slot. Armed with this information, Pop journeyed to Vientiane to arrange Tongsar's hiring with Air America.

Several pilots resented Tongsar working at the hostel. From the early days he had been labeled as kind of a benevolent



Tongsar Boupha wedding reception. Thong Sar far right, Mrs. Boupha left, Unknown, possibly Jack Williamson, FAR colonel, and bearded Case Officer Jerry Daniels far left.

Thompson Collection.



Lao civilian, Tongsar Bouphe, standing beside the Air America hostel sign at Sam Tong, Laos.

Photograph appearing in the *Air America Log*, Volume 3, #6-69.

crook.⁸ Many pilots asked him to obtain Meo artifacts for their personal collections. Tongsar, only too willing to comply with their requests, for the kip equivalent of a few U.S. dollars, purchased flintlock rifles, crossbows, silver necklaces, and other items from tribal villages he visited. Then, despite a decided conflict of interest, he sold them to pilots at greatly inflated prices, always creating enormous personal profit for his side business.

Naturally, when discovered, the chicanery caused a lot of bad feeling and confusion, particularly since the man had been touted as a Buddhist monk prior to working for Pop. In addition, protected by Pop, he had an arrogant demeanor that grated on people. The bottom line was that pilots could have asked American AID workers for native items and received their goodies at cost. Also, Father Bouchard would perform the same courtesy, withholding only a small amount for the church.

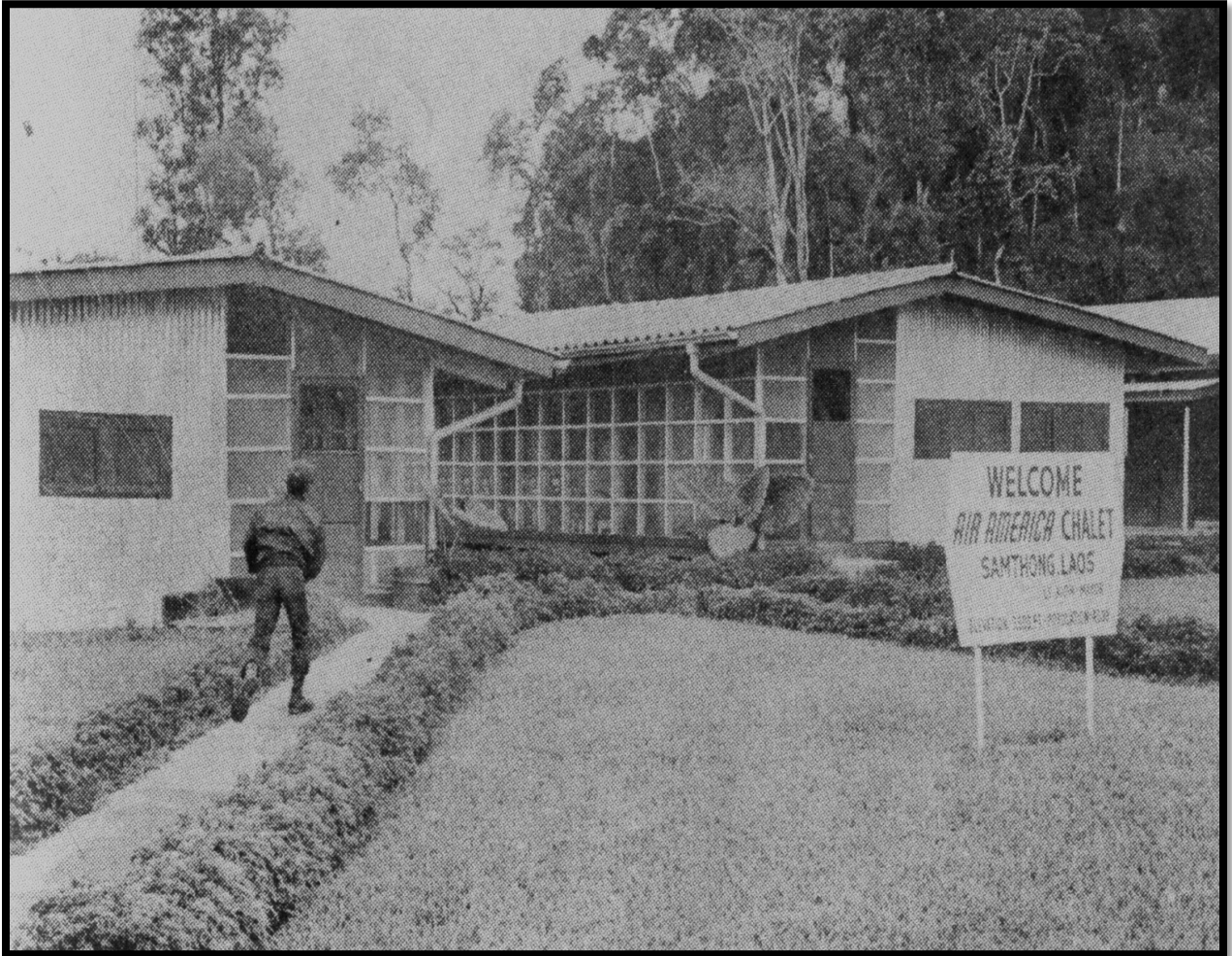
After Tongsar received the hostel slot, if AID was short-handed and requested help, he would journey to outlying villages. Having good rapport with AID Sam Tong, Yarbrough understood this requirement and fully cooperated.

In 1969, Bill Yarbrough provided an abbreviated, sanitized article of Sam Tong for the *Air America Log*:

"[Then] Major Vang Pao determined the location of Sam Tong seven years ago...Four years ago, Air America established this forward operating base in support of various United States civilian AID programs. The existing short strip was lengthened to an almost 2,200-foot dirt runway capable of handling Caribou and C-123 A/C.

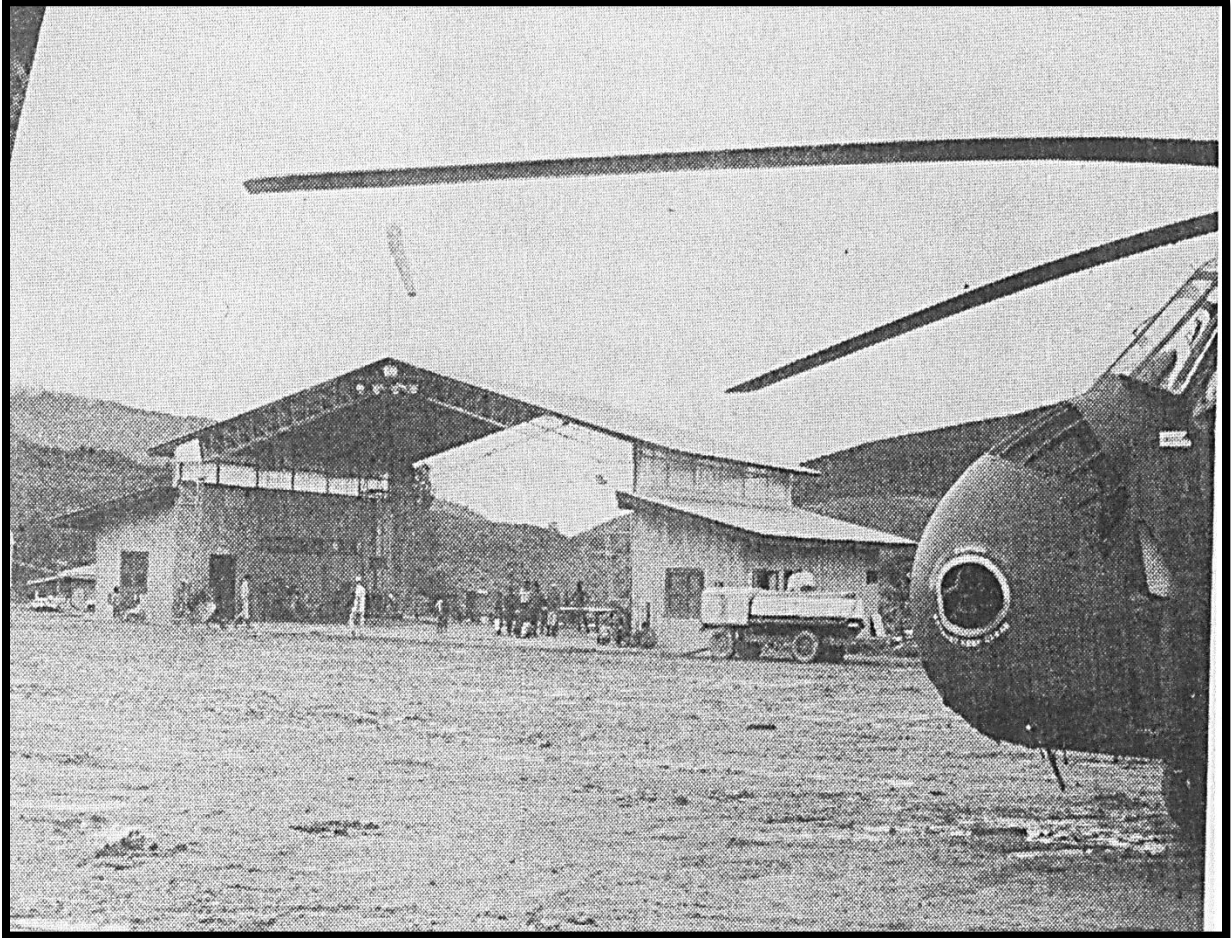
Surrounded by lofty sky piercing pinnacles and karsts, which present a rugged and awesome spectacle, the rough terrain

⁸ Some more liberal types might consider Tongsar simply an exceptional business man taking advantage of choice opportunities.



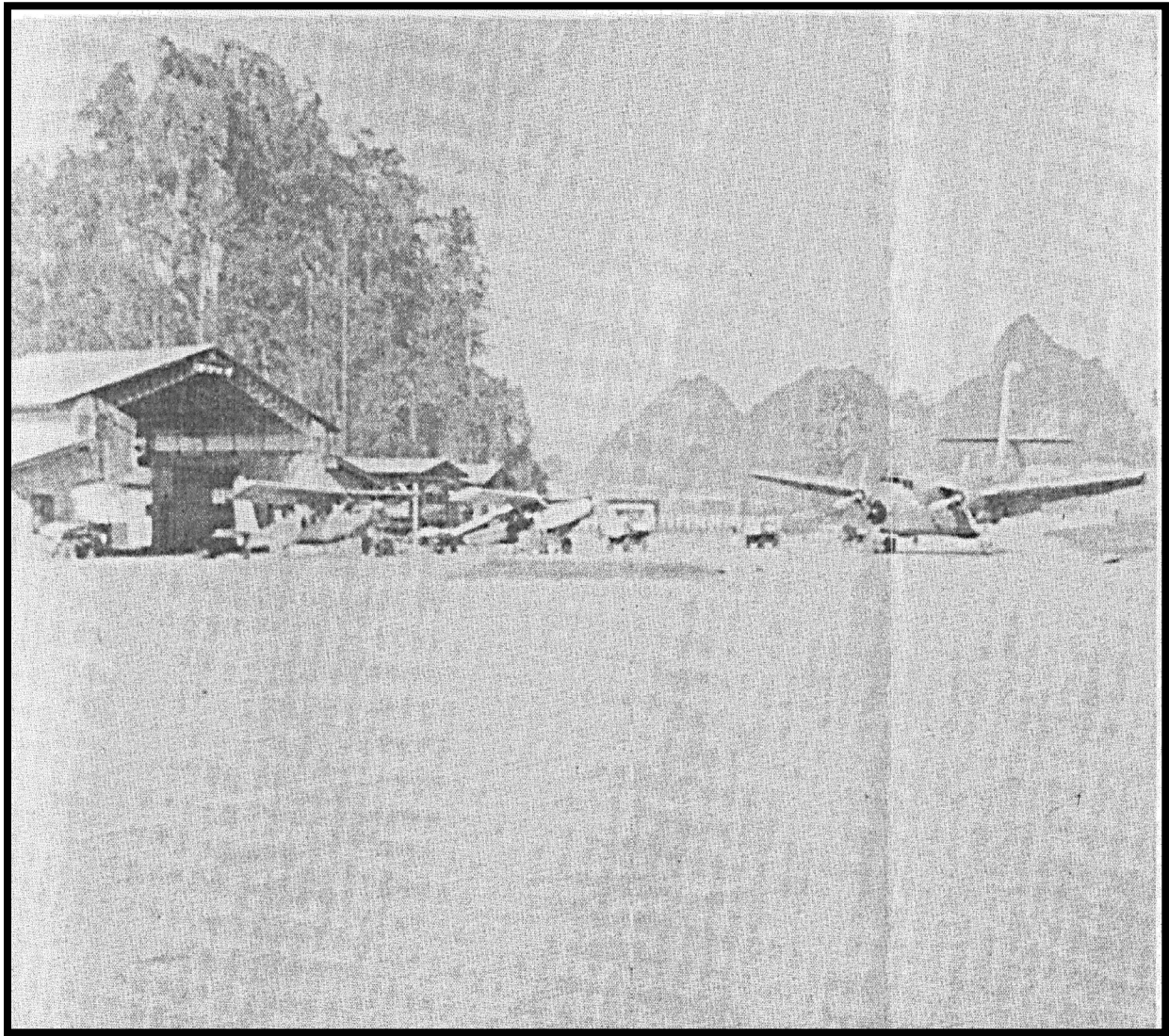
Path leading to the Air America dining hall and crew lounge at Sam Tong, Laos. The definitive, heavily forested 500-foot karst defining the Sam Tong bowl soars to the center-right side of the photograph.

Air America Log, Volume 3, #6/69.



In 1965 the short Sam Tong strip was lengthened to accommodate larger STOL aircraft like the C-123 and maintenance facilities were built. Saving ferry time and money, instead of returning to Vientiane or Udorn for maintenance, light inspections and minor work could be performed at the outstation.

Air America Log, Volume 3, 6/69.



Air America hangar and various planes at Sam Tong, Laos.
Air America Log, Volume 3, #6, 1969.

is often mist-shrouded. Sam Tong is probably the busiest dirt-strip airfield in Southeast Asia...It handles an average of 125 landings and take offs a day, weather permitting seven days a week the year around. Much of the activity at Sam Tong is related to refugee movements, which are mounting daily as communist troops increase their pressure in many sections of north, central, and eastern Laos. Sam Tong also assists larger aircraft in airdrops of various commodities to thousands of refugees in flight from enemy troops.

Next to the large hospital, jointly operated by USAID and facilities at Sam Tong. They include an open maintenance hangar, a Quonset hut operations building, transient billets, a laundry, plus a dining room and recreation lounge.”⁹

On Saturday, Jarina returned to Zone Steel to continue his shuttles of people between Moung Tiouen and Ban Done.

The next day, he was relieved and deadheaded to UTH on C-123 Triple Nickel.¹⁰

Deadheading on C-123K 6293 on the thirteenth, I returned to Long Tieng, where I took command of XW-PFJ with Roman Olkowski.

While jet and T-28 pilots continued pounding targeted areas, reducing already-damaged structures into smaller pieces of rubble and Meo artillery supplemented the bombing, I supported the Xieng Khouang Ville operation. I worked Phu Khe and the area for the next three days.

Flight Mechanic Terry Dunn replaced “Ski” on Thursday.

I worked part of Thursday morning and then, after being relieved, deadheaded home on C-123 568.

⁹Blaine Jensen Letter.
Bill Yarbrough's Description of Sam Tong in the 6/69 Edition of the *Air America Log*, Edited by the Author.

¹⁰Mike Jarina Interviews.

As targets were uncovered by Raven FACs and developed, bombing continued on and around the Plain of Jars with good results. At mid-month an enemy headquarters had been located and was subsequently bombed into the Stone Age.

A reputable spy revealed the presence of a cave packed with Soviet fuel drums. A jet pilot accurately directed a guided Bullpup missile into the aperture. The resulting explosion ignited the gasoline, which burned furiously for more than half a day.

JARINA

Taking a temporary backseat to Military Region Two activity, Special Missions backed up in MR-3 and 4. Therefore, Mike Jarina was scheduled to fly Hotel-41 to Thakhet on the afternoon of the sixteenth. His crew included Flight Mechanic Stan Waite and First Officer Leon Lashomb, making one of his first upcountry familiarization flights in an H-34 with Air America. Customer Mike LaDue had two missions planned at the "Y" pad in the Mugia Pass area. The "Y" landing zone, which moved about as the situation warranted, was quite old and normally located on a flat mesa, one of many abounding in the area.

Captain Ed Reid led the three aircraft flight in a Huey during the late afternoon mission. ¹¹ While returning to Thakhet, the flight was passing over a major road at 3,000 feet AGL (above ground level) when Leon anxiously remarked, "We are taking fire."

Unflappable as usual, Mike replied, "We're high enough. We're okay,"

Disconcerted, Leon said, "It must be AAA, for it just went by us."

¹¹ Ed Reid had transferred permanently to Savannakhet.



The Meo-FAR BP camp located on the south side of Phu Khe (LS-19), Laos. A 105mm howitzer with a depressed gun barrel is seen to the left center. Piles of expended shell casings attest to the number of rounds fired at Xieng Khouang Ville.

Author Collection.



The "backdoor" to the Plain of Jars viewed from above southern hills. Smoke rises in the distance generated from allied bombing.

Author Collection.



Isolated karst housing a cave on the Plain of Jars, which contained fuel drums that were destroyed by USAF jets on 21 April 1969. The fire was so intense that the cave entrance and much of the hill was badly scorched. Local legend had this cave as the abode of giants.

Author Collection.

While chattering, they passed beyond the volley. Since Hotel-41 was the last ship in the gaggle, Mike radioed Ed to inform him that they had just flown through 37mm or 23mm AAA fire. Seemingly unconcerned, Ed casually inquired if they were alright. ¹²

After dropping their team at Lima-40, the crews flew south to Savannakhet for the night, where hot food and a hostel were available. Part of the flight was conducted in the dark. Despite the presence of other aircraft, this procedure was a little iffy in a single engine ship, because a forced landing would place an aircraft and crew in no-man's-land, often patrolled by enemy units. Still, the terrain was flat and the major river city of Savannakhet displayed adequate illumination to define the airport landing area.

The crew of Hotel-41 was assigned to work the Bolovens the next day. Complying with Customer requirements resulting in several hours of ferry time, a lot of territory was covered on Thursday. During the early morning, Mike flew directly to the SGU camp at PS-38, located on the southeast corner of the Plateau. After completing two Special Missions, Mike flew south past Attopeu (L-10) to Kong Mi (PS-07), and then back to PS-38. Following a trip to Houei Kong (L-56) for fuel, Mike flew more than two hours north to Thakhet for another Special Mission. Many times, teams in the outback would radio the Case Officer with a request for an emergency mission to retrieve "sick, lame, or lazy" individuals. Regardless of the cause, the Customer had

¹² Usually, the leader of Special Mission flights in Military Region Three because of his seniority, Ed rarely, if ever observed groundfire. I was an eyewitness to this during an April 1965 mission, while on a SAR into Sam Neua Town to search for a downed pilot.

Even as late as 1969, enemy gunners still lacked the ability to accurately lead a moving target. With strung out helicopters, groundfire generally impacted the rear ships in trail formation.

to comply with these calls to maintain the special trust and confidence of his teams.

With all requirements satisfied, Jarina returned to Lima-39, once again landing well after dark.

Jarina's long day and the hundreds of miles covered reminded one of a portion of beloved American Robert Frost's poem, *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*.

**"The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep."**

Repositioning for Special Missions continued the following morning when Mike again departed south for PS-38. There he joined another Captain in CASI Porter XW-PFD for a recon of the two mission landing zones. The road watch missions in and around Route-110 were conducted out of Khong Mi. After returning one team to PS-07), Mike dropped Customer Swanson off at PS-38 and returned to Lima-39. In contrast to the previous two days, this time the crew touched down at dark.

After "Fat" Frank Fee replaced Stan Waite on the nineteenth, Mike returned to Thakhet for an afternoon Special Mission. Completing the requirement, he returned to Udorn late. New helicopter pilots were quickly exposed to all the hazards of flying in Laos, and during this period Lashomb was no exception. Mike was scheduled upcountry early on the 21st. He, Captain Elmer Munsell, who had worked in Nepal with Jerry McEntee for a couple of years, and Flight Mechanic Rudy Serafico ferried Hotel-64 to LP. They, along with other helicopter crews, were assigned to deliver SGU troops sixty miles north to Ban Chik Chung (LS-138) in a move to reestablish some government control north-northwest of Nam Bac, and then conduct western feints toward the major enemy base at Moung Sai (L-27). It was hoped



Mountainous terrain located north of Luang Prabang (L-54), Laos and south of Nam Bac (LS-203).

Author Collection.

that the action would divert attention and pressure away from Pak Beng, a river city mortared and attacked on 14 April. The site was subsequently abandoned after the enemy's seven-month effort to clear government forces from the Beng Valley. Pak Beng represented the last important Mekong town between Luang Prabang and Ban Houei Sai. Although for some time communists had achieved access to areas around Pak Beng, and occasionally blocked river traffic, the site's loss removed a final obstacle to the Chinese road building project from Moung Sai to the Mekong. Its fall also raised questions and concerns over a danger to LP, other RLG territory, and border province areas of Thailand. Consequently, Thai leaders were particularly interested in Chinese intentions that likely included more assistance to communist insurgents in Nan Province. FAR temporarily recaptured Pak Beng, but it was short lived and the enemy moved back into the village in May.

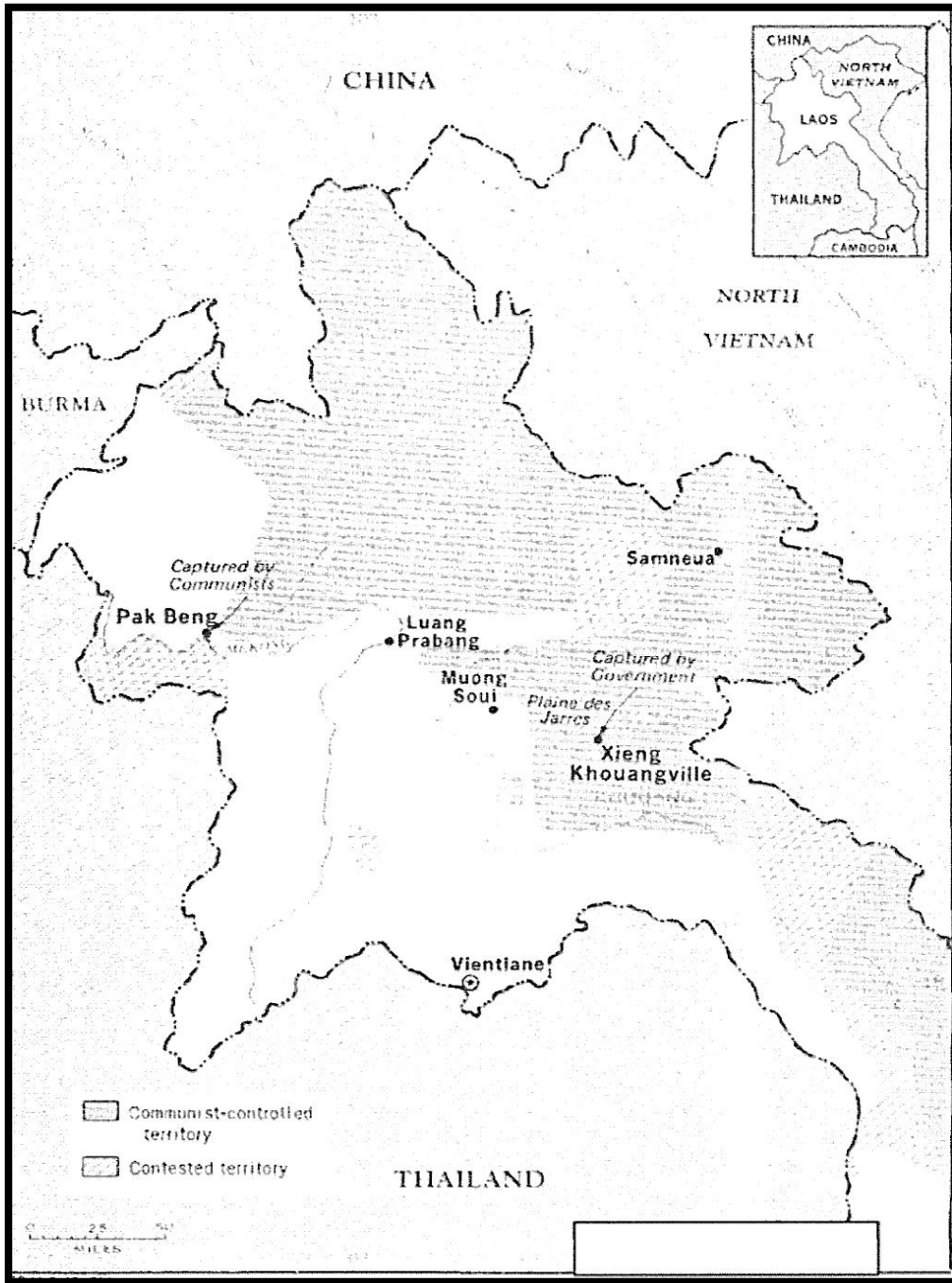
An Agency bulletin noted:

"...Communist forces have once again captured the village of Pak Beng but government forces are trying to hold outlying defense positions. The continued enemy pressure in the Pak Beng area may be an attempt to counter efforts that the government has been making in recent months to disrupt the infiltration of men and supplies into Thailand." ¹³

On Tuesday the crew recommenced work in the Site-138 area until adverse weather impacted the region and they were obliged to RTB LP. Bad weather continued the next day, grounding all aircraft.

When weather cleared, work continued around Site-138, with one Special Mission conducted to Boum Lao in the Beng Valley.

¹³ CIA Daily Bulletin, 05/15/69.



In Military Region One, Pak Beng located on the banks of the Mekong River, was captured by the enemy.

CIA Map, 05/15/69.

Part of the 25th was devoted to the Chick Chung operation. Toward late afternoon, Jarina was recalled to Udorn and deadheaded two hours on Hotel-66, the helicopter in which Tony Byrne and Mac Thompson had received battle damage in the Phu Cum area. ¹⁴

Two days later, after Hotel-66 had been released from a hundred-hour maintenance inspection, FCF, and was considered airworthy, Mike and Flight Mechanic Lavoriza flew the aircraft to Savannakhet to position for a Special Mission the following day.

On Monday morning, Captain Larry Hennesy joined Jarina in the cockpit, and the crew repositioned north to Thakhet. There, they joined other crews for a road watch team mission near the border. Since it was late, upon return, Mike et. al. dropped their team at Lima-40. Because only manual fueling from drums was available there, he went to Nakhon Phanom to obtain rapid refueling from a truck before proceeding to Udorn.

On the last day of the month, with Tolentino as his Flight Mechanic, Jarina ferried Hotel-66 to Long Tieng to exchange with Hotel-50. While working between The Alternate and Sam Tong, he experienced some mechanical problems with the machine. After FCFs, he returned to Udorn via Wattay Airport. ¹⁵

¹⁴ John Pratt, *CHECO*, 102.
J. Zasloff (ed), *Beyond the Revolution* (New York: St Martime Press, 1991) Part 5, U.S. Policy Towards Laos in Historical Perspective, GM Godly and J St Goar, *The Chinese Road in Northwest Laos 1961-1973: An American Perspective*, 296-297.
CIA Bulletin, 04/16/69.
Mike Jarina Interviews.

¹⁵Mike Jarina Interviews.

BOUAM LONG

The capture of Site-32 was still a primary enemy goal. On 18 April, responding to a troops in contact (TIC) radio call from the site, daytime control ship Cricket and Raven pilots responded by marshalling and directing air strikes on the positions.

Four days later, with Bouam Long again under attack, Cricket diverted aircraft in support.

The next day the site was besieged from all sides. Diverts were pulled into the fray and Raven-45 worked eight strike aircraft flights. By day's end, Site-32 held, with many enemy KIAs reported.

The previous night enemy efforts had once again failed to penetrate and destroy the Bouam Long complex--the tough warriors or civilian population. Contributing to the defense, attacks were thwarted by Meo artillery and Spooky gunships spewing lethal fire into the attacking hordes.

By early May reinforcing elements of the 148th Infantry Regiment, of the 316 Division, and four other enemy battalions arrived and moved into assault positions with orders to capture Sites-32, 6, and 50 prior to the end of the rainy season.

"...the [NVA] hope to take these positions in order to prevent government guerrillas from using them as a base for moving back into Sam Neua Province during the rainy season." ¹⁶

"North Vietnamese forces are still threatening guerrilla outposts north of the [PDJ] and fresh enemy troops have been observed moving into the area. Although heavy air strikes appear to have kept the enemy off balance, an all-out enemy assault

¹⁶ CIA Daily Bulletin, 05/05/69. (Heavily redacted.)

could come before the monsoon rains, which normally begin in early June." ¹⁷

Attacks against the Meo defenders failed. Bouam Long held, and ensuing attrition of enemy forces stymied the offensive. Although assaulted many times, Site-32 always held, and was never taken during the entire war. ¹⁸

XIENG KHOUANG VILLE

On Saturday-26 April, I deadheaded on Caribou 293 to The Alternate, where I took control of Papa Foxtrot Hotel (PFH). Terry Dunn was my initial Flight Mechanic until being replaced by Glen Woods.

We continued work supporting the Xieng Khouang Ville operation. As expected, the enemy quickly reacted, resulting in troops in contact reported at Phu Khe on the 16th, 18th and 19th. That night, to the southwest in the hills of Khang Kho (LS-204), across the valley from Padong, following up on an enemy assault on the first, the Tiger Mobile position was again under attack and requested air assistance. Gunship Spooky-05 relayed this to Cricket. Events were set in motion whereby Raven-47 directed three flights against the attacking force, which departed the field under direct Air Force pounding.

The previous week, after consolidating positions on and around Phu Khe, some of Vang Pao's troops moved closer to the Ville on the forward slopes of the mountain to probe and assess enemy strength. Prior to this, only forward observers (FO) sent to spot targets for the howitzer and a few men equipped with light crew-served weapons, had ventured forward.

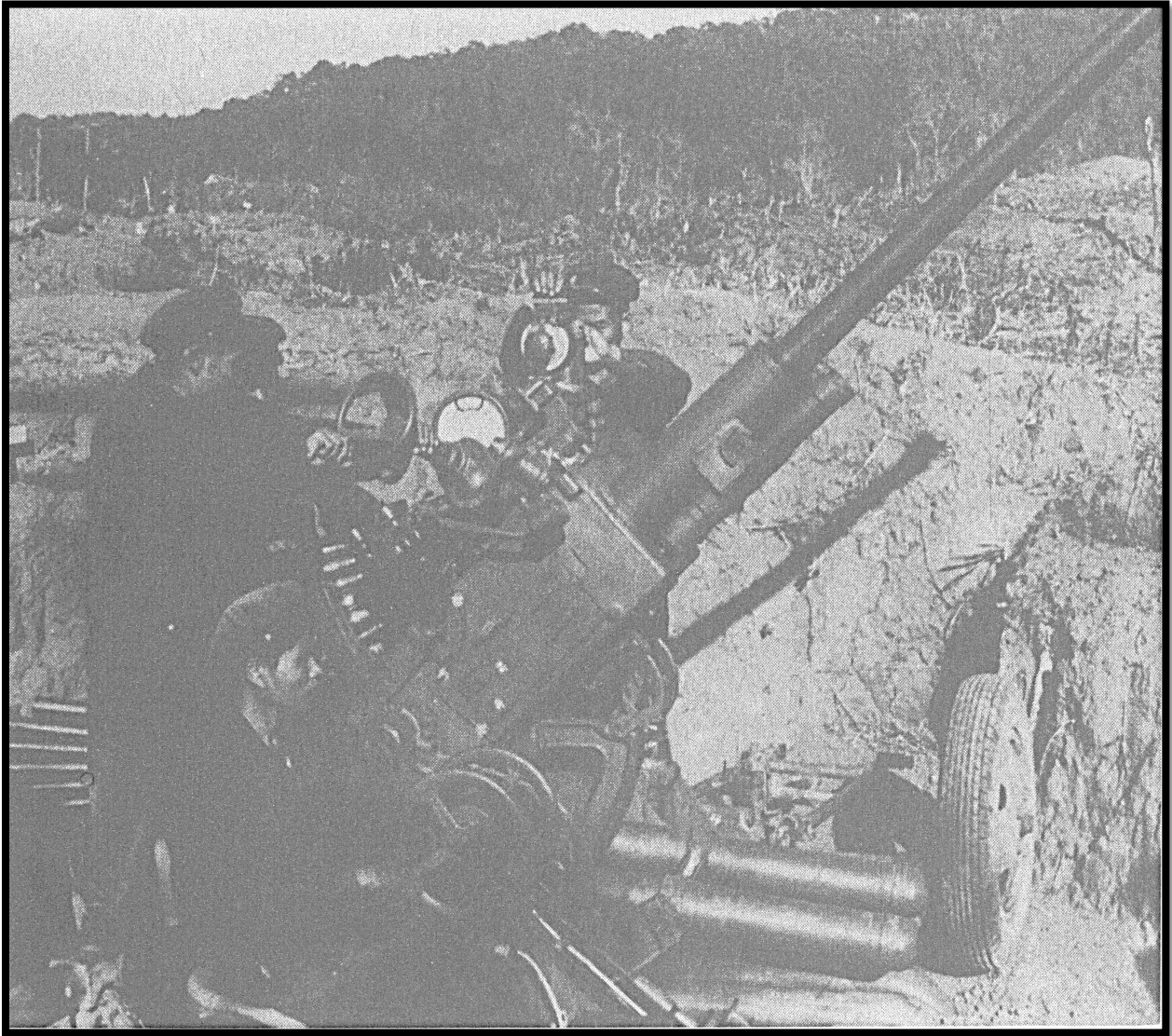
¹⁷ CIA Daily Bulletin, 05/15/69.

¹⁸ Extracts from ABCCC.
Victor Anthony, 297.
McDonnell, 49.



Three horseshoe shaped 37mm gun pits perched on a hill in the Xieng Khouang Vile Valley. Radar controlled AAA could be directed from a van placed in the center of the earthen revetments.

Author Collection.



Pathet Lao crew manning a 37mm Anti-aircraft gun. The formidable weapon had the capability to fire eighty 1.6-pound shells a minute to a height of 9,000 feet.

Bowman: *The World Almanac of the Vietnam War.*

Cowed by friendly air strikes, enemy response had been relatively tepid. However, on the 20th, a formerly quiet mixture of AAA opened fire, blowing Raven 44's wing off at 3,000 feet. Even though a SAR was mounted, there was little chance of survival for the pilot.

Then the larger guns began firing on the troops. In response, Raven pilots in their O-1s converged on the valley with a vengeance. While friendly troops were evacuated, upset Raven pilots directed numerous air strikes calculated to first quiet and then destroy the guns. Two days of concentrated bombing followed that finally silenced enemy resistance and destroyed what remained of the town. ¹⁹

By Sunday, with all enemy guns considered "neutralized," and the sterilized valley virtually quiet, we commenced movement into the valley. To ensure that Vietnamese resistance was over and to discourage any resurgence into the Ville, the howitzer on Phu Khe's reverse slope continued to belch rounds toward the town.

On Monday, except for an emergency exfiltration at the Tango X-ray pad near Houei Tong Ko, with Meo and BP troops again moving forward, we worked at Phu Khe and environs.

By the 29th, after recon patrols and visual air reconnaissance reported the low ground essentially devoid of enemy, friendly troops quickly moved unopposed into the town and valley. After many years, albeit for only a short time, the ancient and historical provincial capital returned to government hands. I had never landed in the valley. Unfortunately, I did

¹⁹ Christopher Robbins, *The Ravens: The Men Who Flew in America's Secret War in Laos* (New York; Crown Publishers, 1987) 155-156. Extracts from ABCC.

not have the chance to initially participate until my next RON, as PFH was recalled to Udorn for a hundred-hour inspection.

East of Xieng Khouang Ville, troops had already entered the Moung Ngan Valley (LS-236) and eastern areas, effectively sealing off the expanding enemy Route-72 LOC. By 1 May, Raven-46 worked several strikes against positions near Site-236. After these positions were neutralized, Meo troops moved in to occupy them.

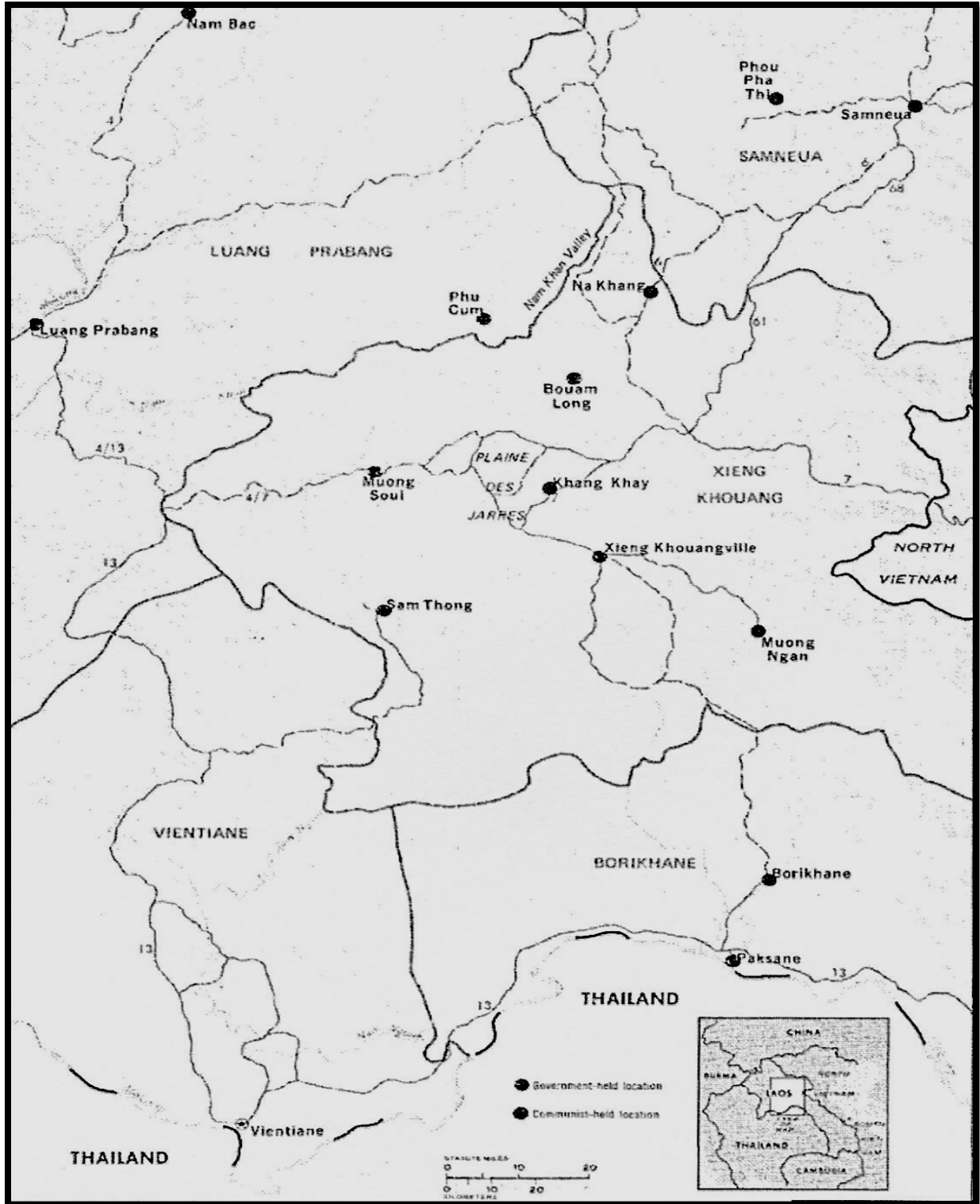
Further to the east, Raven-48 conducted operations in support of Moung Ngai (LS-01) on the afternoon of the 3rd. ²⁰

"Government guerrilla forces now have moved into the former Pathet Lao stronghold of Xieng Khouang Ville, and in a related operation have driven the enemy from the Moung Ngan area to the east, capturing large amounts of supplies. The government's counter offensive was originally designed to force the communists to divert troops to protect their rear areas—an objective that has failed to materialize. The ease with which the enemy positions have fallen, however, has led Meo leader Vang Pao to change his objective to hold ground already captured and to press deeper into enemy territory.

There is now a danger that Vang Pao may be overextending his thinly-stretched guerrilla troops. There are large numbers of North Vietnamese troops who have not yet been committed to the fighting." ²¹

²⁰ Extracts from ABCCC Reports.

²¹ CIA Daily Bulletin, 05/05/69. Laos: The government continues to make gains south of the [PDJ] but there are fresh signs that the communists intend to go on the offensive once again.



The Mung Ngan valley was located a considerable distance southeast of Xieng Khouang Ville.

CIA Map, 05/05/69.

Emulating a Yin-Yang scenario, combining both elation and anxiety, the embassy, the COS office, and to some extent, Vang Pao were aware that quality time in the Xieng Khouang Ville Valley would necessarily be temporary. Therefore, it would not be prudent to spend too much effort in an area where heavy losses that would difficult to replace might occur. After retrenching and reinforcing before the rainy season commenced, the enemy would certainly surge back in strength against Vang Pao's exceptional guerrilla fighters, who rarely performed well in a purely defensive role. Moreover, the operation might trigger diversionary attacks against Sam Tong, Long Tieng, and established flanking positions. If so motivated, the enemy could even move south against Mekong towns.

Although a portion of Phu Khe came under attack the night of 1 May, at daylight, Cricket mustered a flight that, working with Forward Air Ground (FAG) Pogo, temporarily relieved the pressure.

Largely unimpeded by an enemy that had moved into the hills to avoid the airborne pounding, valley operations commenced immediately at a fever pitch in anticipation of enemy counterattacks. Troops quickly fanned out over the area to assess, what if, anything had been left behind and what might be salvageable.

Such operations always generated numerous refugees. The valley and immediate area were long a traditional home for many Meo and other ethnic types. Therefore, complicating matters, refugees began arriving from concealment in the mountains. Professing no love for the communists or their methodology dealing with locals, the independent-minded people had to be relocated to deny the enemy use of their goods or labor.



USAID representative Mac Thompson standing beside a functional Soviet truck employed to transport refugees from town to the Lima-03 airstrip for evacuation. A Meo woman stands to the right rear of the truck conversing with a trooper.

Thompson Collection.



Enemy vehicles in various states of disrepair discovered abandoned in the Xieng Khouang Ville Valley. Those that were not operational or transported to Long Tieng were loaded with captured explosive and destroyed.

Author Collection.

Mac Thompson initially worked out of Padong during the refugee evacuation phase of the Xieng Khouang Ville operation. In the morning, after learning that the town was declared "safe," Mac and his indigenous assistant Her Tou flew in a helicopter over the downtown soccer field to confirm the reported absence of enemy, and to ascertain the viability of working there. Observing many civilians milling about the area, they instructed the pilot to land and went into the Ville. The airstrip west of town had not yet been assessed as to the general surface condition or cleared of mines, so Mac and others began marshalling helicopter evacuations from a large school yard to Padong. As was VP's policy, the men were briefly vetted at the site, and if found worthy, were drafted into the army. Other motivated and healthy people walked to the 2,550-foot dirt strip to be evacuated by Porters delivering ammunition and other supplies.

Although much intelligence regarding the area was already established, the refugees provided whatever additional information they could. They added an abundance of knowledge as to what life under the long communist rule had been like. Curiously, even though a normal existence had been difficult, they would have preferred to remain on their traditional land. Furthermore, after relocation south many people received a rude awakening when the RLG only converted their Pathet Lao kip to regular kip on a ten to one hundred basis. Those who chose to remain in the lower Military Region Two area were more fortunate and received government kip on an under-the-table exact parity.

Surprisingly, after the concentrated bombing, an abundance of booty remained in the area. Items included assorted vehicles, AAA guns, and ammunition. What was deemed useable from the rolling stock was culled and delivered to Long Tieng for static display. With the aid of heavy-lift U.S. Army CH-54s, undamaged

37mm guns and trucks were slung to The Alternate. Hardware and other items that could not be used were destroyed employing captured ammunition.

Using low grade, green colored Soviet gasoline, despite inoperative brakes, Mac and Her Tou shuttled refugees from town to the strip in a Russian jeep and truck, which had mounted data plate information written in Spanish. The construction of the larger vehicles designed for mountainous all-weather terrain was innovative. Some of the trucks possessed the ability to reduce tire pressure from the cab while driving to allow additional traction on the muddy LOCs during wet season conditions.

Storage caves proliferated in the area. A little over a mile from the strip, SGU troops reported one so large it was never fully explored. After a hospital of some proportion was discovered, Mac called Vientiane recommending someone in the medical profession come up to assess the find. The following day, Jiggs Weldon's wife, Doctor Pat McCreedy, Medic Don Dugan, and Mac entered the cave to evaluate the preliminary reports of a hospital complex. Mac had conducted spelunking forays in Oregon and considered this expedition interesting, although it proved a "little spooky" because of a possibility of undetected booby traps. The cavers carried flashlights, but did not have the three sources of light normally carried for safety reasons while exploring caves. Therefore, they did not venture a great distance from the entrance. ¹

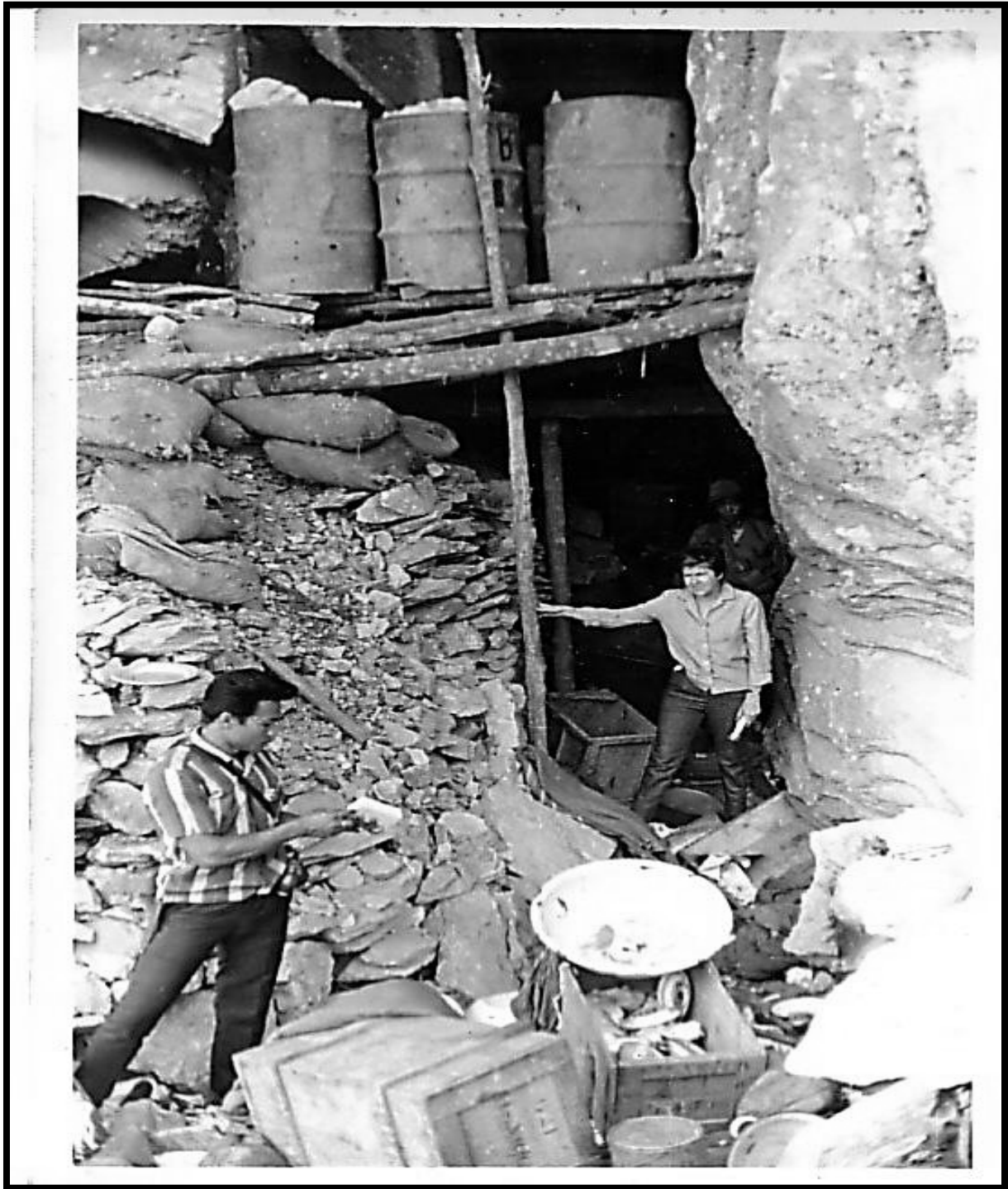
The team was amazed at the complex's degree of sophistication. Tons of imported medical supplies, some marked "For Iraqi Ministry of Health" in English, were stacked in rooms.

¹ Although often flying into the valley to check on refugee removal, AID representative Blaine Jensen never entered the cave.



The short Xieng Khouang Ville dirt and grass airstrip (L-03) located a short distance northwest of the town. A rocket-blasted cave can be seen at the base of the mountain to the right. Roads or trails leading into the woods and hills led to other caves or storage areas.

Author Collection.



The rock and sandbag-reinforced entrance to the Xieng Khouang Ville hospital cave complex. Doctor Pat McCreedy and Lao assistant, Adul Keomahathai, conducting an inventory of medical goods.

Thompson Collection.



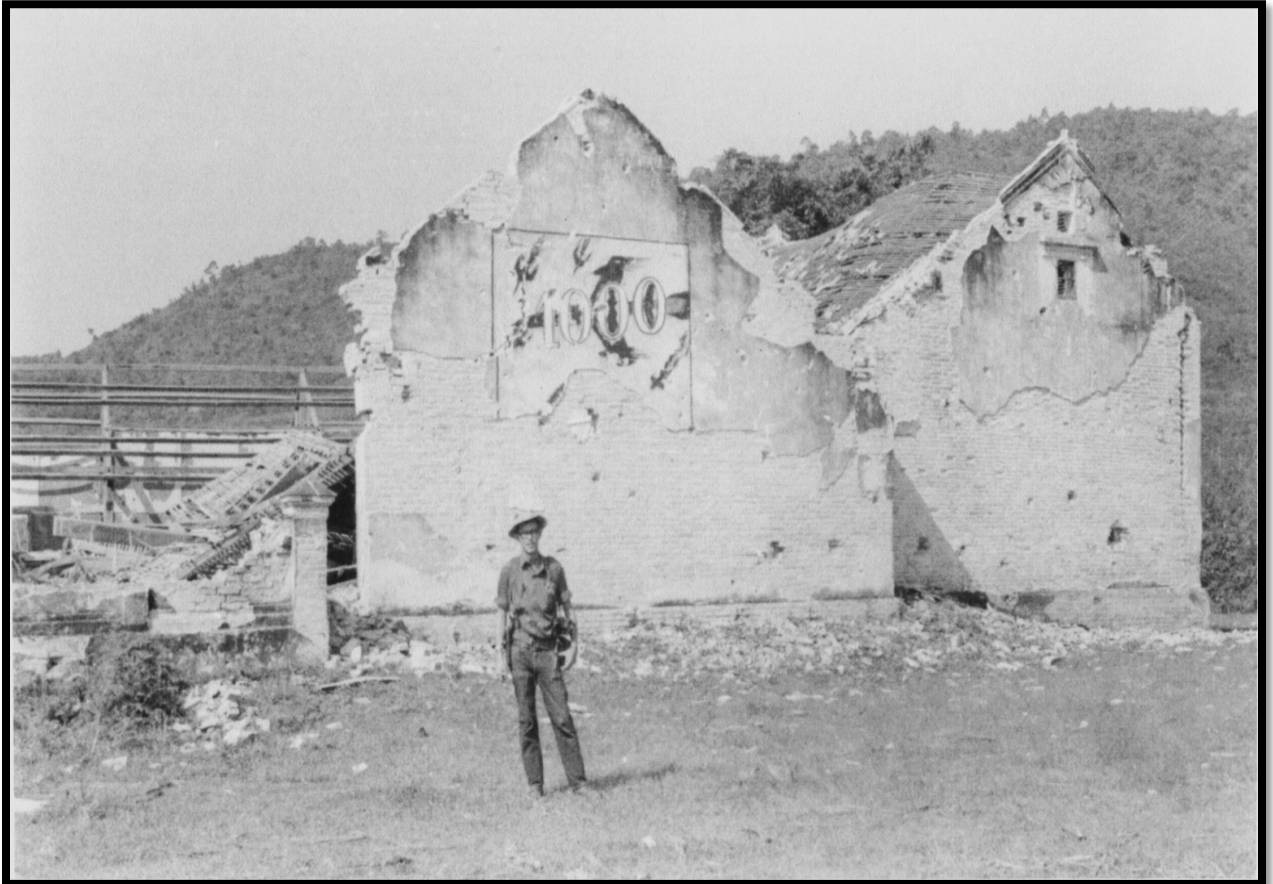
A portion of captured mobile Soviet 37mm anti-aircraft guns lined up at Xieng Khouang Ville, Laos.

Thompson Collection.



MacAlan Thompson posing in the gunner seat of a Soviet 37mm AAA gun at Xieng Khouang Ville, Laos.

Thompson Collection.



Mac Thompson posing in front of destroyed buildings at Xieng Khouang Ville, Laos. Only the more permanent structures in the former provincial seat, although rendered uninhabitable, were spared total destruction.

Thompson Collection.



Thompson's assistant Her Tou, standing in front of a demolished building at Xieng Khouang Ville, Laos.

Thompson Collection.

Another section in the cave contained beds for 1,000 patients. There was an operating room and one containing ex-ray devices. Pat gathered a few medical samples to examine at leisure. With limited time available, they talked to troops retuning from exploration. The men claimed they had walked for half an hour and never reached the end of the cave. Later, a portion of the total items were deemed useful. Some medicine was selected, carried out of the hospital cave, and deposited alongside the runway to be loaded on aircraft for delivery to Long Tieng.

Agency Case Officers explored another cave, discovering records that indicated it was the command headquarters for the province. Enormous caches of food also revealed that the grotto was a major regional supply source. It also contained large sleeping quarters.

Destroying caves from the air using normal iron bombs proved difficult, as they lacked sufficient deep penetrating capability to collapse the massive rock coverings. Moreover, the enemy had installed rock barriers at cave entrances to prevent airborne missile delivery directly into the enclosures. To solve the problem innovative solutions were devised. In one case, three very large bombs were individually placed in C-130 aircraft and rolled out onto the target.

As the hospital cave was considered too massive to destroy by aerial bombardment, Agency personnel ferried in explosives, to include forty-pound ammonium nitrate cratering charges, to seal the entrance. Then "Super Mex," Dick Santos, and others spent a day packing the large opening with charges. The ensuing explosion ignited fires that burned for hours, but failed to fully seal the cave.

In addition to other duties, Thompson enjoyed tinkering with enemy equipment and having his picture taken by his

assistant for posterity before items were destroyed or back-hauled to The Alternate. ²

JARINA IN NORTHWESTERN MR-1

On the first of the month Mike departed Udorn with Flight Mechanic Tolentino in H-34 Hotel-62. On the way to Ban Houei Sai, he stopped at Phu Hua Moui (LS-67), twenty miles north of Sayaboury Town. After landing at Lima-25, he was directed to Nam Yu, where he conducted a trip six miles northeast to Ban Na Woua (LS-109), an old Meo-Yao site Bill Young helped develop during the early period. Mike RON at the Company Houei Sai hostel.

Flying in marginal weather, Mike returned to LS-118A on Friday. He again worked Ban Na Woua and the surrounding area. From Site-109 he flew nineteen miles northeast to the Nam Bu (LS-125) and Team-7 areas. Then he journeyed twenty-seven miles directly south to the Ta Fa (LS-216) Team-8 area. Teams that were stationed at the sites were constantly on the move and had to be supplied with goods landed or dropped at the positions by small STOL planes. Mike returned to Houei Sai for the evening. He only flew three hours and fifteen minutes, but still conducted thirteen landings.

The weather improved Saturday enabling Mike to fly a full day (thirty-two landings). His first trip was to Pak Beng, the small town at the end of the river and valley of the same name. Efforts to alleviate pressure on the town helped, and it was still under government control. After supplying area outposts, he returned to Nam Yu and assigned to work the Ban Vieng (LS-

² MacThompson, Interview, 12/29/96.
 Mac Thompson Emails, 08/04/12, 01/27/97, 04/30/06.
 Blaine Jensen 02/01/97 Letter.
 Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 210-211.
 Tom Ahern, *Undercover Armies*, 316-316.
 Extracts from ABCCC Reports.

135) area. Ban Vieng overlooked Route-03, the disused artery leading from Nam Tha Valley to Ban Houei Sai. Team-6 scouted this area and reported on enemy activity. Mike's last work area of the day was forty miles east of Site-118 Alternate to the proximity of Ban Sa Phout (LS-151). There he supplied Teams 11B and 11A; Team A normally located equidistant between the Houa Kong-Luang Prabang border and the Nam Tha. Team B was located on the west side of the demarcation line.

Work on Mike's fourth day in the field started out in the Ban Vieng area. The Nam Yu Customer then sent him twelve miles northwest to Moung Mounge (LS-93). The final work area of the day was Ban Nou Kha Chok (LS-148). Located in the hills north of the bend in the Mekong where the river flowed south from the Houei Sai area, the site was abandoned or lost during May.

The fifth was Jarina's last day in northwestern Military Region One. Following morning trips to Ta Fa and Nam Bu, he departed for Ban Nong Tong (LS-209), a site seven miles west of Bac Beng. Then he continued east to Luang Prabang for fuel, and on to Wattay Airport and Udorn.

Jarina and Tolentino returned upcountry on the seventh in Hotel-15. The H-34 had been transferred from the U.S. Marine Corps to Air America in the fall of 1962, and was still flying despite many accidents and battle damage incidents. It had undergone many repairs, major overhauls, and rebuilds, and was approaching 10,000 airframe hours. By month's end, this total airframe time was surpassed by Captain Wayne Gentry and Moon Centeno. According to the Sikorsky manufacturer, it was a record that no other UH-34D of this type and model had ever accomplished.

Supporting the Xieng Khouang Ville operation, the crew worked at Padong, Phu Khe, and Pha Khao (LS-14) before retiring to Sam Tong for the night.

Even before movement into Site-03 began, enemy patrols were rumored moving off the southern Plain of Jars toward Tha Tam Bleung (LS-72), a site only six miles northeast of Sam Tong. Likely a diversionary move calculated to impact Vang Pao's efforts to the east, the rumor and potential threat to Sam Tong had to be taken seriously. Therefore, attempting to fly in horrible conditions of smoke, rain and low ceilings, on Thursday, Mike was tasked to move troops and civilians around the Site-72 valley. A long-established listening post sat at TG9830 on a ridgeline not far to the east, the Victor Pad blocking what we called "the backdoor to the PDJ."³ He conducted twenty-two short flights, logging only a little over two hours. Because of a high number of aircraft upcountry, and potential sapper threats to major bases, Mike was informed to leave Hotel-15 at The Alternate and proceed to Site-20 to RON. He deadheaded to Sam Tong on CASI Porter Papa Foxtrot Romeo, where only a minimum number of H-34s were parked for crew and Customer evacuation if deemed necessary.

THE PDJ

A few days after General Vang Pao's victorious foray into the Xieng Khouang Ville Valley, Mac Thompson returned to Sam Tong for refugee work assignments at Site-72. During the course of his daily work, a helicopter pilot excitedly shouted, "We now have troops on the southern end of the PDJ." This was news to Mac and a bit of a shock to everyone. Always invigorated by new adventure and expecting a new round of refugees to ferret away from enemy clutches, Mac had a H-34 pilot drive him to UG0231, where an "H" signal was displayed by a few troops and several villagers. The landing zone was located just off the foothills

³ Signals at the site, like the white Lima India varied over the years.

on low ground in what was later pruriently called "The Nipple," a well described prominent projection leading south into the hills from the Plain of Jars. During Vang Pao's push toward Xieng Khouang Ville, ADC troops, likely from the Khang Kho area, had walked three and a half miles north-northwest along ancient trails to the position.

Shocked and confused at the appearance of government troops after many years of enemy presence, people from the surrounding area congregated there, unsure of what to do next. By late afternoon villagers were scrounging about for food. At the same time, over his hand-held HT-2 radio Mac heard a C-46 pilot talking while dropping supplies ten miles west at Ban Na. Mac called the aircraft, hoping to obtain a food drop. When he asked the crew to come to his position, there was silence as the pilot consulted his map. After ascertaining the mystery talker's location, the pilot inquired who was on the ground. To establish his bona fides, Mac said, "Babe Ruth" and other such prearranged identification codes. Fortunately, a few pallets of supplies remained in the cargo hold, and the refugees received a little food that night.

It was a big surprise that after several years the troops had managed to obtain a tenuous foothold on a small section of the southern Plain. For the next two days H-34 pilots shuttled refugees from the Hotel landing zone to Lima Site-72. During the operation Mac observed, for the first time, an all Thai crew manning an H-34. It was also the first time that he fired an M-16 rifle, a formidable weapon recently being distributed to SGU troops to match the enemy's high rate of fire AK-47 assault rifles. Late in the afternoon, Mac climbed onboard the last helicopter departing the "H" pad. While a family attempted to load a pig, the spooked animal wriggled free and began to vacate the area. Since the owner refused to leave without the swine and

the pilot was anxious to leave before total darkness, Thompson borrowed an M-16 and dropped the pig with one shot. Then he said to the family, *"Here is your pig. Have a barbecue. Now let's get out of here."*

Friday morning, Mike Jarina returned to Long Tieng on Porter N197X to retrieve his H-34. The weather had cleared and he worked a full day to the east at Padong, Khang Kho (LS-204), Phu Khe, and the Xieng Khouang Ville area. His forty-three landings attested to the high level of activity. A locked desk from Site-03 was placed on his helicopter that was later found to hold very important papers describing the enemy logistics for the region. Since the rumored threat from the Site-72 area had not subsided, he left his H-34 at Alternate again and joined others in CASI Porter PFR which crossed Skyline Drive to Sam Tong for the night.

After deadheading on Hotel-33 to 20A to again retrieve his machine on the tenth, Mike was tasked to move refugees to several locations. He started at Moung Oum (LS-22), and then proceeded a few miles south to Ban Nam Feng (LS-223). This was followed by a trip farther south to Moung Ao Neua (LS-227) all in the Moung Cha (LS-113) refugee complex. The next trip was to Phu Khe to begin back-loading troops to Than Heup (LS-238), south of the Nam Ngum northern defense line, between San Luang and Houei Ka Nin.

Reports were generated from "reputable" ⁴ road watch teams and local spies that three battalions of Vietnamese were moving toward Moung Soui with explicit orders to capture the site or, like the legends of ancient Greeks, return on your shields. Following a trip to Pha Khao, after thirty-eight landings, Mike landed at Long Tieng. Once again, he left Hotel-15 on the

⁴ Although Vang Pao's justice was swift and harsh, one could never be completely sure of the veracity of the road watch teams.

parking ramp and boarded Hotel-33 for a ten-minute trip over the ridgeline to RON at Site-20.

By the 14th, FAN at Site-108 reported TIC to the east. The next morning, Sunday the eleventh, Jarina rode to Long Tieng on Hotel-33 to Captain his ship. He made one flight twenty miles south to Ban Xon (LS-246). No one could predict what effect the bombing campaign and the current Xieng Khouang Ville operation might do to divert or stem the flow of enemy troops south on the Plain of Jars, or how far they would attempt to penetrate Vang Pao's defenses. Therefore, alternative refugee sites were planned and being developed to receive the potential hordes of people.

When Mike returned to Site-20A he discovered his relief pilot had just arrived. Therefore, he boarded the same aircraft, a C-123B 293, for Wattay and Tango-08. ⁵

LIFE IN UDORN

CJ Abadie departed on his home leave scheduled from 1 May to 30 June. During his absence Dave Hickler assumed the duties of Udorn Acting Base Manager. He was no stranger to this job and had accomplished it before during periods of management vacation.

Dave considered working in Udorn very interesting because the base was so well organized. Moreover, he had a healthy respect for the helicopter pilots and noted that they were a vastly *"different breed" from the fixed wing types. They were younger and flew a number of hairy missions that required skillful flying and demanded special people who knew no fear,*

⁵ Mike Jarina Interviews.
Mac Thompson Interview, 12/29/96.
Mac Thompson Emails, 02/23/99, 04/29/06.
Extracts from ABCC Reports.



Skyline Drive and junction of dirt roads at the customary ridgeline helicopter crossing point from the Long Tieng Valley to Sam Tong.
Author Collection.

for they flew down in the trenches while the bad guys shot at them.

They just kept going and never faltered."

We all liked Dave and were always happy to see him. CPH Knight considered Hickler "a prince of a guy to work for." The feeling was mutual and Dave attempted to get Wayne to transfer to Vientiane as Assistant Base Manager. Upon his completion at Udorn, he wrote up a glowing letter of appreciation. ⁶

"Yes, Laos is more and more marginal every day. We are working right up to the front lines again and this is bad because you don't know exactly where the enemy is. In this situation you have to expect to take hits.

This is the hottest season that I can remember. Even the Thais are complaining."

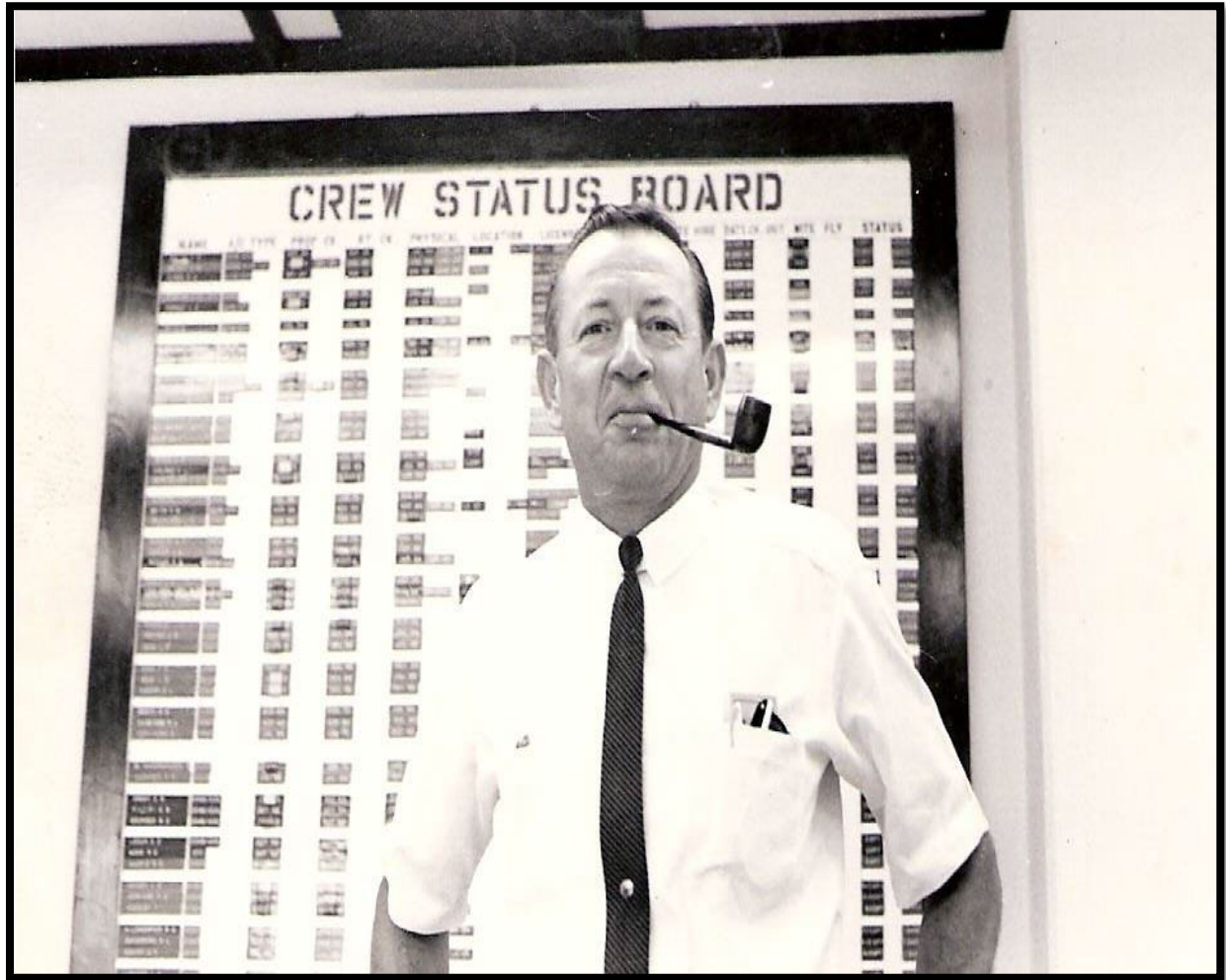
Author 05/04/69 Letter Home.

"Stay out of the hot spots, and I don't mean seasonal heat."

05/09/69 Letter from Home.

To avoid the extreme heat, we often drove the Cortina to the Air America swimming pool on the base or the air-conditioned bowling alley at the U.S. Army Signal Corps base south of Udorn at Ramasun. Khun Yai (Cham) owned a piece of property across the road from the base where hot mint leaves grew on bushes. When

⁶Memorandum SA/ACP.
Dave Hickler Notes.
EW Knight Email, 09/23/00.



Pipe smoking Dave Hickler.
Knight Collection.

added to chopped meat and chili peppers and served on top of jasmine rice, the mixture provided a most delicious meal.

On Thursday the eighth, I had a local Bell proficiency check ride with Company check pilot, Wayne Webb in Papa Foxtrot Hotel.

Five days later, with management again considering reverting volunteer Bell pilots to the H-34, CPH Knight conducted a training flight in Hotel-52 with Billy Pearson. In early June, he flew two days with Scratch Kanach in an H-34.

During May, Wayne flew many FCFs. Some were in Bell N1304X. As Saigon possessed little more than light maintenance capability, the ship was in for damage repair. ⁷

UPCOUNTRY WORK AT LIMA-03

Responding to Vang Pao's operations at Xieng Khouang Ville and the southern Plain of Jars, on the early morning of 10 May, the enemy attacked Tiger Mobile at Khang Kho with heavy mortar fire. By daylight, with Cricket coordinating, Raven-40 and a fast FAC worked forty strike flights, succeeding in stabilizing the situation.

The next day, I boarded CASI C-47 PFT at the "Q" warehouse for a deadhead flight to Long Tieng. ⁸ Arriving early at Alternate, I had to wait until the PIC of 204B 11F returned to Alternate with a load or for fuel. Joining Flight Mechanic Dave Crowell, the process resulted in flying less than two fuel loads. During a walk about, I noted numerous Soviet weapons sitting alongside the upper runway near Vang Pao's residence.

⁷ EW Knight Email, 09/23/00, 09/25/00.

⁸ This large facility was located adjacent to the Air America parking ramp and conjoined with the CASI parking area and the AB-1 White House.

That afternoon, FAG White Rose reported troops-in-contact (TIC) activity around Xieng Khouang Ville, with eleven friendly casualties incurred two and half miles east of the strip. Raven-43 worked two sorties in support.

On 12 May, TIC at Phu Khe continued throughout the day. Raven-45's efforts to thwart attacks proved fruitful by day's end, although the enemy resumed aggression the following day. During this phase of the operation, Raven-43 tallied forty enemy killed by air (KBA).

Action continued around Site-19 on the 14th. Numerous sorties were conducted against enemy troop positions, with an estimated eighty-four KIAs and two guns destroyed.

The following day involved additional TIC activity, including mortar fire which strike aircraft addressed under Raven-46's direction. ⁹

Working past sunset, the succeeding two days involved high time supporting Vang Pao's operations in the Xieng Khouang Ville Valley. I hauled refugees to Padong, and enemy booty still being discovered to Long Tieng, then troops to mountain landing zones overlooking the valley that we had used to advantage during past Xieng Khouang Ville incursions, and patrols into the valley toward the Plain of Jars.

Scuttlebutt and activity indicated that the enemy had moved into hills southeast of the Plain and would soon move to recapture the Ville and other lost positions. Regardless of these prognostications, the operation was interesting work, and for the first time, it afforded me a choice opportunity to snap photos of the valley, one that I knew, from Customer, road watch reports, and rumor of enemy forces moving back into the area, might never present itself again.

⁹Extracts from ABCCC Reports.

Part of the diversionary tactics employed to encourage enemy units to withdraw from Route-4 and south and east of Mounng Soui involved ground and air interdiction on LOC Routes 61 and 7. Although certainly of some benefit, enemy units were still pressuring friendly positions north of the Plain, and concentrated assaults were not unlikely.

An Agency bulletin at the time commented:

"With only a few more weeks before heavy rains begin to make ground operations difficult, it appears doubtful that the communists intend to launch a major ground offensive throughout the country. If the government is able to retain its foothold in northern Xieng Khouang Province. it is even possible that guerrillas may be able to move back into their former redoubts in Sam Neua Province during the rainy season..." ¹⁰

Since adverse weather negated visual and photo recon, much of our information relied on intelligence gathered from road watch teams.

In order to gather intelligence, on Wednesday Ellis Emery joined our crew for a deep penetration infil-exfil to UH8854 in the hills of upper Military Region Two. The landing zone was located three miles southeast of Hong Non (LS-86), close to the major enemy base at Sam Neua. The long-established teams were charged with observing activity on Route-6 six miles to the east. Since the long-range missions required fuel and a reasonably safe place to land, when not impacted by enemy probes like the one two days before, operations of this type were conducted out of the refugee camp at Houei Tong Ko (LS-184).

As was often the case during road watch missions, this one included mixed group of helicopters. Mike Jarina, Tony Byrne, and Flight Mechanic Punzalan arrived in H-34 Hotel-39 to act in

¹⁰CIA Daily Bulletin, 05/15/69. Laos:



Destroyed infrastructure along Route-04 at Xieng Khouang Ville, Laos.
Thompson Collection.



Photo displaying Xieng Khouang Ville destruction. The Nam Ngiu loops south of the multi-town valley, paralleling Route-4 east to the Route-4/42 junction, the river plunges south toward Tha Vieng (LS-13). The valley is dotted with higher terrain and foothills leading into surrounding mountains.

Author Collection.



An oblique airborne view of Xieng Khouang. Hilltop in the upper center of the photo contained three 37mm AAA gun pits.

Author Collection.



Rice paddies define the narrow western Xieng Khouang Ville Valley. Foothills slope upward toward higher mountains. Seen as a white ribbon, Route-4 leads west toward the village of Lat Houang and the Plain of Jars, which is wrapped in light seasonal smoke and haze.

Author Collection.

a SAR capacity. We departed Alternate with some members of the SGU team and supplies at the appropriate time to meet our escort aircraft and proceeded to Houei Tong Ko. From there we flew east. When the Customer established contact with the existing team and confirmed that the landing zone was safe, we released our cover, landed, and refueled for the return trip to 20A. Total time to complete the mission took a little less than four hours. Time in the denied area was one hour and fifteen minutes.

After landing with our load, we returned to duties to the east.

Reducing the number of helicopter crews at Sam Tong, Mike RON at The Alternate.

The following morning, we continued supporting the deteriorating Site-03 operation. During the day, John Melvin replaced Dave Crowell.

Conducting a forty-landing day, Mike was also one of the H-34 pilots supporting the operation. Subsequent to a fact-finding trip to Lima-03, General Vang Pao was initiating steps to reduce the number of his men in the valley. Consequently, he withdrew some troops to contend with the ongoing action around Phu Khe. Then Mike flew to Padong to shuttle refugees to Moung Cha (LS-113). After a trip to Pha Khao, he returned to Xieng Khouang Ville for another load, and then moved to Khang Kho (LS-204) to back-haul some troops previously stationed there for the operation, and to reinforce the men on the Plain of Jars. Both Mike and I worked right up to dark or beyond, and in the absence of transportation to Sam Tong, Mike RON at Long Tieng for a second night.

After abbreviated flying on the sixteenth, I was relieved and flew back to Udorn on C-123B 293.

Mike was also relieved and deadheaded home on CASI C-47 Papa Foxtrot Tango (PFT). ¹¹

Tuesday the 20th, to obtain first-hand experience on the current action in Military Region Two, talk with Customer, and fulfill periodic Company line check training requirements, Wayne Knight departed Udorn late for Long Tieng with Robbie Robertson in 11F. After RON at the hostel, he remained with Robbie the entire day on Wednesday.

On the 22nd, he switched ships, conducting a spot check with H-34 Captain Dave Ankerberg. As a loophole to circumvent Company rules for managers, spot checks were logged when proficiency or line checks were not due. Wayne returned to Udorn that evening in PFG with Bill Pearson.

CARIBOU MISHAPS

May was not kind to Caribou crews. From "The Nipple" on the southern edge of the Plain of Jars, Meo troops slowly fanned out, probing north. An old unnamed dirt-sod strip near the village of Lat Khai was used by STOL Caribou pilots to supply troops with ammunition and other supplies. After landing and taxiing for takeoff, C-7, 389's landing gear became mired in viscous mud. Stuck, unable to taxi, the ship remained in place for most of one day, all night, and much of the next day while maintenance departments of both Vientiane and Udorn were deciding to risk damaging the landing gear by pulling it out. In the meantime, Agency Case Officer Chuck Campbell (code name White Top) and several SGU troopers attempted to pull the plane out of the restraining mud.

¹¹Mike Jarina Interviews.



Air America C-7 Caribou 389 bogged down in mud near the village of Lat Khai on the southern Plain of Jars during the Xieng Khouang Ville offensive in May 1969.

Thompson Collection.

Late on the second day, it was acknowledged that roving enemy patrols were circulating close enough to destroy the plane with mortar fire. Indeed, on 18 May, there had been TIC to the west that had been addressed by friendly air. Therefore, Air America maintenance and the Customer logically concluded that it was better to retrieve a damaged aircraft than to lose the entire ship.

The cockpit crew which flew 389 off the Plain of Jars site never retracted the gear after takeoff. They proceeded to Udorn, where an emergency unit awaited the landing. The only damage discovered to the plane were broken brake lines and copious amounts of dried mud. Repairs were minimal, involving inspection of the wheel bearings to ensure that the plane was safe to operate.

On 21 May, our troops still held the high Moung Ngan Valley and surrounding hill areas that interdicted portions of Route-72. They were being supplied by STOL fixed wing and helicopter crews. On Wednesday, the PIC of Caribou 392 landed on the 1,100-foot grass strip at Site-236. After setting the parking brakes and exiting the aircraft, while locals unloaded the cargo compartment, the cockpit crew watched in horror as the plane began rolling slowly and then faster down the steep slope. After 150 feet it veered off the strip and came to rest into trees fifty feet below runway level. Damage was substantial. Since the Site-03 operation was winding down, Air America management was tasked to make a decision as to 392's disposition-leave the plane in place or recover it.

Toward the latter portion of May Mac Thompson flew to San Tiau (LS-02) with Her Tou in a CASI Porter to evaluate and act on reports of refugees arriving there from the Ban Ban Valley area to avoid the renewed bombing campaign. Like most of Laos, he thought it was a beautiful area as he watched people walking

up the hill from the north. Mac talked to some people already gathered at the strip for evacuation to Moung Moc and learned that more were expected. Therefore, Mac requested a C-46 supply drop. Since he had other pressing duties, and the movement was being handled by another person, he never returned to Site-02. Before leaving Thompson traded government kip for worthless Pathet Lao kip.

As the situation tightened around LS-236, Pop sent Mac and Her Tou to Phou Ngieu (LS-232), seven miles northeast of Moung Ngan. Employing a H-34 for part of two days, his task was to supervise refugee shuttles twenty-one miles southeast to Moung Moc (LS-46), regional headquarters of Zone Steel, which was normally overseen by Agency Case Officer Jim Adkins. To expedite the movement, as fuel burn lightened the helicopter, maximum payloads were conducted using rolling takeoffs. On one return trip from Moung Moc, the pilot nervously indicated a requirement to hurry loading, as the low-level fuel light had just illuminated. A few adults climbed onboard with their goods blocking the cabin entry. Many children waited outside the helicopter, so Mac and Her Tou jointly grabbed the kids by their arms and legs, propelling them headfirst up and over the obstacles. Cubing the ship to maximum, they lost count of the number of souls on board (SOB). He later estimated the total to be forty passengers. The load required the pilot to conduct a long rolling takeoff north down the short 650-foot strip. A drop off at the end of the steep strip provided an opportunity to carry heavy loads. Trading altitude for airspeed, the Captain initiated a dive to obtain proper climb and cruise speed for the twenty-minute trip to Moung Moc. With rainy season activity already impacting Zone Steel weather patterns, Thompson spent part of his time at the site hunkering under his poncho waiting for the return of the H-34 pilot.

During the course of the refugee movement, Mac and the PIC of the H-34 flew into Mounng Ngan looking for fuel. While there Mac observed the broken Caribou in the weeds, with maintenance people removing large components for recovery. Before returning to Sam Tong, fuel was obtained at Site-46, but Mac did not observe any Americans present.

In mid-June, Thompson prepared to leave for the States on home leave, where he was scheduled to spend the summer in Washington, D.C. undergoing processing into a permanent USAID hire status. He had completed a temporary AID assignment from August 1968 to June 1969 satisfactorily, so obtaining the permanent slot was considered no problem. AID often hired local people familiar with the job and area. Paul White, who was an International Voluntary Service (IVS) representative at Sam Tong, transitioned to permanent AID status at the same time as Mac.

While in Vientiane prior to departing, Mac updated FIC personnel regarding the current situation in areas where he worked. When the subject of the 392 "Bou" at Site-236 arose, Mac recommended that if there were plans to recover the aircraft, they should be implemented soon. The advice was heeded and arrangements were made for a U.S. Army heavy lift CH-64 Sky Crane to rotate from South Vietnam to Udorn for the task.

The 392 recovery process was mounted on 5, 6, and 7 June. The first two days Hotel-67 was the supporting aircraft flown by CPH Wayne Knight giving Scratch Kanach line checks for bookkeeping purposes. Flown to the site, a Vientiane maintenance crew stripped the plane and removed lift devices. The operation was staged from Paksane where fueling of the CH-54 helicopter loaned from South Vietnam was undertaken using a U.S. Army motorized fuel pump. The job was rendered much more difficult and labor intensive when the pump failed one day and use of a

manual hand pump was required. The exercises were very fatiguing, for it was a long reach to the fuel filler cap of the huge machine, but the recovery was successful. Wayne flew solo the final day and rode to Udorn on the Sky Crane.

By August 1969, 392 was repaired and back in service.

THE LIMA-03 OPERATION WINDING DOWN

With the Xieng Khouang Ville Valley temporarily cleared of large amounts of booty, either flown out or destroyed, and with enemy forces returning to challenge Vang Pao's men, the Xieng Khouang Valley operation began winding down. Satisfied with the near-term results, and in anticipation of a massive Vietnamese counterattack, Vang Pao had been steadily withdrawing a number of troops from the valley to surrounding high ground, or to new areas of import.

His timing was good, for on 20 May Pogo, White Rose, and Red Tiger FAGs all reported TIC. A strike aircraft worked with Pogo with good killed-by-air (KBA) statistics. In addition, Phu Khe positions received incoming artillery throughout the day. To the west, positions near Site-72 received incoming.

In the meantime, many fresh targets had been generated by road watch teams and aerial recon along Route-7 in the Ban Ban Valley and the northern portions of Routes 6. Consequently, to thwart or slow enemy movement toward the Plain of Jars, a concentrated bombing campaign was planned to commence on 22 May and continue for five days. Concurrent with the bombing, guerrilla units would again move to interdict or harass Route-7 from three points: First units from Bouam Long would move over mountain trails fourteen miles south toward Nong Pet, a junction where Route-71 intersected Route-7 at the western portion of the

valley leading toward the Ban Ban Valley. ¹² By 15 June Watts radioed TIC in the lower Phou San hills near Phou Keo (LS-115). Four A-1 flights responded to the plea for help.

At the same time, other ADC would descend north into the Ban Ban Valley from the San Tiau (LS-02) area. Then a final Meo probe would advance on Route-7 from Sam Song Hong (LS-201), located in the mountains eleven miles north of the valley.

The enemy struck the Xieng Khouang Ville region hard. The day before the Route-7 operation was scheduled to commence, multi-battalion Pathet Lao and Vietnamese army forces attacked Meo units and FAR paratroopers at the elevated Phu Khe camp. By the end of the day many positions had been lost, after gradual disengagement and withdrawal of friendly forces to surrounding areas. Attesting to the action's heavy cost in personnel, Bell Captain Frenchy Smith's log reflected evacuating thirty-two dead and wounded during the day.

The following day, BP troops from the Ville moved up the northern slopes of Phu Khe in an attempt to retake the high ground. TIC continued with four Raven pilots providing support, but Site-19 fell.

Below on the valley floor, the enemy attacked a sole BP company remaining in the town. The determined men temporarily held, but were eventually overrun by the 23rd. Declared a free fire zone, all available air was solicited to dump ordnance on Xieng Khouang Ville. Five flights complied before adverse weather shut down the bombing.

Residual friendly troops in positions along Route-4, where they had been observing enemy movements and interdicting the road, either withdrew to safer locations or were evacuated. The

¹² Americans, particularly aviators who probably did not know the name of the town, working in the Theater generically called Nong Pet the 7/71 split.

latest phase in the Xieng Khouang Ville operation was now history, and the next chapter would await future developments.

An Agency recapitulation of the action stated:

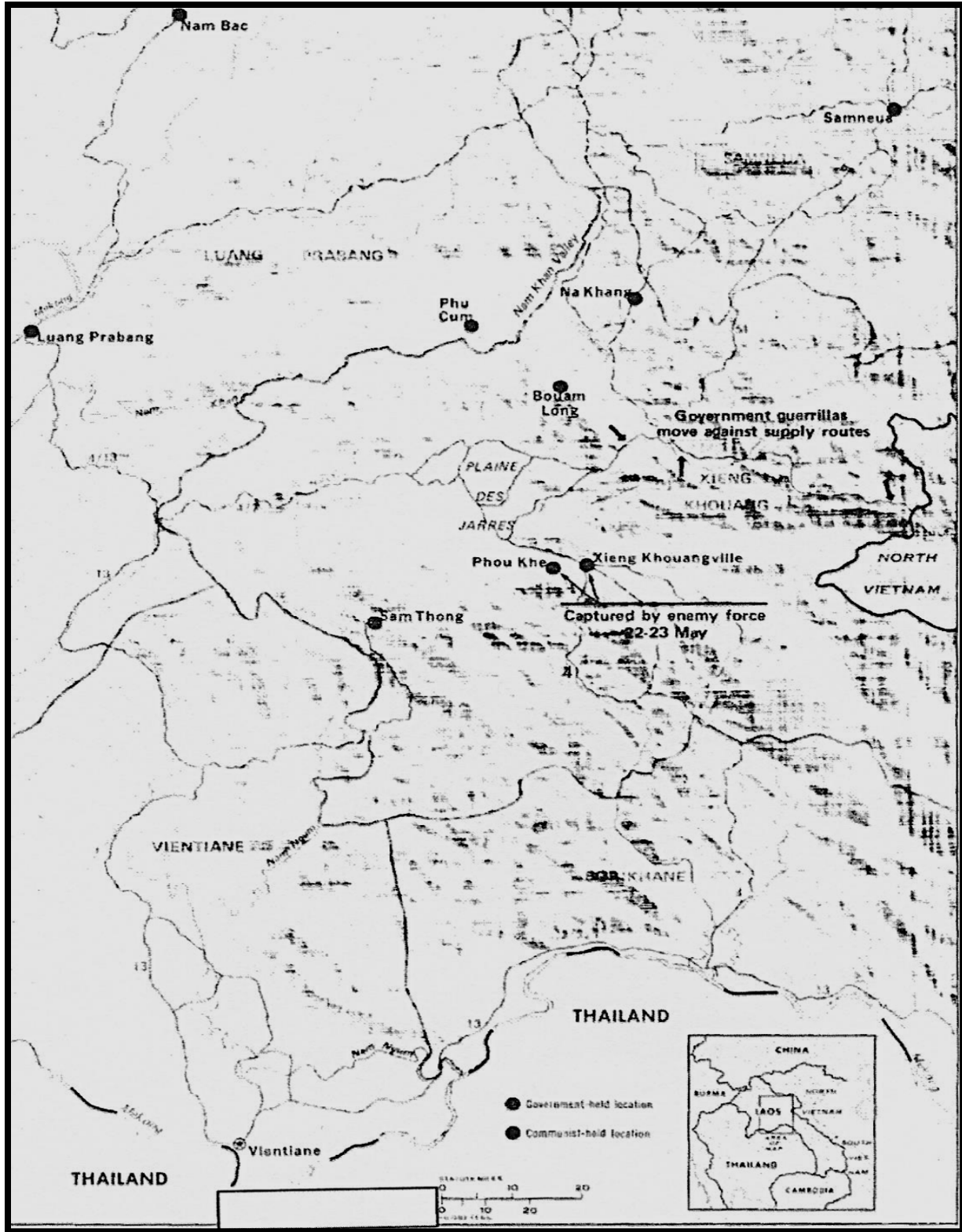
"A multi-battalion Pathet Lao and [NVA] force captured the remaining government positions on the strategic highpoint of Phou Khe on 22 May, and the following day forced heavily outnumbered government troops to abandon Xieng Khouang Ville. Government guerrilla teams have also pulled back from positions along Route-4, from which they had interdicted communist supply movements since the government counteroffensive got under way over a month ago.

Vang Pao, who has written off Xieng Khouang Ville as indefensible, hopes to muster about four battalions to recapture Phou Khe. If this operation succeeds, he evidently plans, with Prime Minister Souvanna's encouragement, to press his offensive northward into the [PDJ] itself. Government troops are still holding positions they captured two weeks ago on the southern edge of the Plain, and guerrillas with strong U.S. air support are now moving against the communist supply routes leading into the Plain.

Heavy casualties suffered in the recent fighting, and continuing signs that additional [NVA] reinforcements may be moving into the area, suggest that [VP's] plans may be overly ambitious..." ¹³

Despite what was considered a successful operation, many Lima Sites in lower Military Region Two and Zone Steel were still considered unfriendly. A few included: LS-13, 11, 95, 61, 63, and 01 on the eastern border.

¹³ CIA Daily Bulletin, 05/27/69. Laos: The communists have recaptured Xieng Khouang Ville, but Meo leader Vang Pao is still pressing his counteroffensive in the Plaine 3des Jarres area.



The May loss of Xieng Khouang Ville and Phou Khe and Vang Pao assaults on Route-7.

CIA Map, 05/27/69.

Although the ground portion of the Route-7 campaign accomplished little in the way of tangible results, allied bombing achieved considerable success destroying POL, AAA sites, vehicles, tanks, and crew-served positions. ¹⁴

BAD DAY AT LP

Former U.S Army Bell pilot Bill Gibbs, who had served two tours in South Vietnam, was a direct stateside hire. After retiring, Bill, known as a happy-go-lucky type individual, obtained a job as an instructor pilot. A year of this boring work convinced him to apply for a helicopter position with Air America. H-34 pilots were in demand, so after checking in at Taipei, he was assigned to Udorn.

Bob Charters and Gibbs had known each other for a long time, and their families were close after moving to Udorn. In anticipation of a scheduled RON on the 12th, the men and their families shared an evening barbecue together.

Still a First Officer, Gibbs was sent to Luang Prabang to satisfy a double crew requirement for a mission and to obtain obligatory area familiarization for upgrading to H-34 Captain.

¹⁴Segment Sources:

Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 211.

Victor Anthony, *The War in Northern Laos*, 301.

Tom Ahern, *Undercover Armies*, 317.

Joe Leeker, *The Aircraft of Air America*, C-7 Caribou.

William Leary Notes for 21 May 1969.

Mac Thompson Interview, 12/29/96.

Mac Thompson Emails, 02/23/97, 05/14/99; 07/25/12, 07/26/12, 07/28/12, 08/04/12, 08/05/12.

Mac Thompson 201 File.

Blaine Jensen Letter, 02//01/97.

EW Knight Email 09/25/00.

EW Knight Logged Flights, 09/26/00.

Information from the May 1969 Flight Information Center Vientiane, Air Facilities Data Pamphlet, Laos.

Extracts from ABCCC Reports.

Bob Charters, also a former Army aviator, was his mentor. Bob, a Saigon transferee, had a reputation as being a hot head who had been involved in Bell cockpit fistcuffs with a Co-Captain.

The first day flying in Hotel-68 went well. Bob was the senior Captain, but from their service time together, he considered Gibbs no less qualified in the machine than he. Many of the Air America Co-Pilots were former combat pilots and what he considered Captain material. However, Company policy dictated that all new hires begin flying as a First Officer. Normally, Bob had no compunction about letting someone of Gibbs' caliber sit in the right seat.

The morning of the thirteenth they began flying supplies to positions about twenty minutes or more north of Luang Prabang, then they returned for fuel and an infiltration mission. While walking to the aircraft, Gibbs realized that he had left his map in the Customer's hut. As he turned to retrieve it, Bob said that he would get the chart and Bill should swap seats for the next leg to obtain some right seat time.

They departed with Larry Fraser flying SAR CAP. While Fraser orbited at 8,000 feet, Gibbs landed without incident. The Flight Mechanic offloaded the goods and took on passengers.

They launched about 1430 hours. While climbing out over the landing zone, a blast of gunfire was heard. Charters was looking down at the area to discern if mortars were involved, when suddenly Hotel-68's nose pitched up to such an unusual attitude that Charters saw only sky. As a former instructor pilot, Bob's training and instinct prompted him to immediately seize the controls. After manipulating the cyclic forward and returning the helicopter to a normal attitude, Charters could tell by experience that the helicopter was responding exactly as it should, and had not received any critical hits to control surfaces. Next, he looked to the right at Gibbs, who was slumped

forward, not moving, and appeared unconscious. As there was no visible injury, Bob was unable to determine the extent of the problem. Surmising that he might possibly have suffered a heart attack, he called a Mayday, informing all in radio contact that something was wrong with Gibbs.

After a thirty-minute flight to Luang Prabang, while Gibbs was extracted from the cockpit his helmet shifted off his head and blood gushed from a wound in his skull's lower right lateral parietal area. Apparently, while taking off from the site, a projectile had entered the open window and caused the injury.

A C-123 was available to fly Gibbs to the hospital. Bob went along as escort, and to explain what happened to management, and along with Knight and Abadie console Bill's wife. Gibbs lingered in intensive care four hours and then expired. A military doctor later told Bob that the wound was likely fatal when inflicted, that nothing could have saved him.

Once again, work at Luang Prabang proved fatal to a crewmember.

Bob spent a lot of time with Bill's wife and four small children, indicating how sorry he was about his decision to let Bill fly that fateful leg from the right seat.¹⁵ Mrs. Gibbs replied that she was aware of how much Bill enjoyed the right seat experience, although she was likely attempting to make Bob feel better and relieve his guilt feelings.

Because there was no other damage to Hotel-68, the incident was considered suspicious. The possibility of friendly fire was broached several times during the investigation, but neither the accident report nor Board of Review reflected this thinking. One Flight Mechanic reported that earlier he had spotted a troop

¹⁵ The Author believes Bob Charters' statement was emotional, not logical, and counterintuitive, for if Bob had been sitting in the right seat, he would be dead.

tracking them with his rifle at his shoulder. However, since this claim was only unsubstantiated word of mouth, and there was no hard evidence presented during the investigation, it was decided to leave all mention of friendly fire out of the final report. Moreover, there were other avenues through which the Customer might pursue such claims.

This incident, along with others, prompted management and the Customer to employ double crews, when available, on future flights in the Luang Prabang area.

Bob Charters departed Air America in December. His own wife, unhappy with her husband's risks involved in flying in Laos, had not been content with his job. They had not been married long and Bob's first marriage had ended for similar reasons earlier in Saigon. Therefore, as a Christmas present to his new wife, Charters resigned and the family left Southeast Asia for the States.

A few days after the Gibbs incident, Captain Larry Fraser, a former Marine pilot in South Vietnam, requested a transfer to another program. In the petition he claimed that he had been cognizant that an undeclared war was occurring in Laos, but was totally unaware that his role in the conflict would be as extensive as experienced. In 1966, he had heard scuttlebutt that the situation was not considered too dangerous, but presently the job entails vertical assault, *"flying combat troops into known enemy strongholds."*

Fraser went on to relate that since February, he had been subjected to groundfire seven times while en route to landing zones. He was also shot at once while on the pad, mortared another time on the ground, and fired on while approaching or

leaving another pad. Fraser's request was denied. ¹⁶

THE SOUTH

Missing Vang Pao's final action in the Xieng Khouang Ville Valley, my work venue changed, and on 18 May I deadheaded on CASI Porter XW-PFC to Savannakhet.

Joining Flight Mechanic Dave Crowell in PFJ, I flew in the Lima-39 area for most of the next two days. On the second day, Glen Woods replaced Crowell, and we relocated late to Pakse.

Consistent with the pilot pecking order and Customer crew flipping, I deadheaded back to Savannakhet on 62G on 21 May. Whatever mission planned was aborted and I returned to Lima-11.

The following morning, I was assigned to the Bolovens Plateau, and worked the region the entire day for eight hours and twenty-eight minutes.

Dick Elder joined us for a Special Mission on the 23rd. As per Udorn's orders, I deadheaded with Dick to Houei Kong (L-56) to retrieve SGU troops, and then moved northwest to Ban Khok Mai (LS-171), a SGU camp north of Saravane. The large movement to XC8773, twenty-six miles northeast, was supplemented by USAF Pony Express helicopters. The landing zone sat on top of a large plateau, east of, and overlooking, Route-92 and the upper portion of the Ho Chi Minh-Sihanouk Trail structure. The mission was completed without a hitch and we recovered at Site-171.

¹⁶ Segment Sources:

Leigh Coleman Hotujec, 09/22/00, 09/25/00 Emails and Information gleaned from her 09/22/00 Phone Call to Bob Charters.

EW Knight Emails, 09/23/00, 09/24/00, 09/25/00.

Bill Leary May 1969 Notes and 04/07/91 Telephone Interview with Bob Charters.

Author Note: The Original Air America XOXO erroneously reported the incident in Military Region Three north of Dong Hene, Lima Site-54 Instead of Lima-54.



Northern rim of the Bolovens Plateau. Most of the Plateau rose sharply above surrounding river valleys. It was covered by rain forest and rolling grassland. Several different tribal groups and exotic animals, including the rare Gaur, lived on the Plateau. For many years, the commanding ground along the eastern and southern rims supported Agency-sponsored training and launching sites for road watch and interdiction teams on the enemy eastern LOCs.

Author Collection.



In addition to its other attributes, the Bolovens also contained many beautiful waterfalls that produced outstanding photo opportunities throughout the year. This photo shows water cascading down from a ravine off the Plateau.

Author Collection.



This waterfall existed in the Plateau interior and required some difficult maneuvering and hovering to photograph.
Author Collection.

My time in the field was complete for the month, and I rode home in the cavernous cabin section of a USAF CH-3 63-13165.

UDORN

A rare letter from Charlie Williams in Steamboat Springs, Colorado, awaited me at the airfield. It described a new project Don Valentine and Charley's enterprise had recently undertaken in South Dakota for the Sunray Land Corporation. Through company lawyer and his wife's father, William Loeffler, Don had arranged to purchase controlling interest in the Warbonnet Company, with 3,400 acres of development land at the base of the Terry Peak Ski Area. The development was located at Terry Peak in the Black Hills two miles from the towns of Lead and Deadwood, where famed lawman and gunfighter "Wild" Bill Hickok was murdered while holding a winning hand of "aces and eights. Situated on the property was the abandoned Homestake Gold Mine.

Charley's letter, displaying a note of urgency, inquired if I would be interested in overseeing and administering the new land development operation. The management job offer was really the first from the company since a helicopter flying slot in Steamboat Springs and running a potential land operation between Durham and Chapel Hill, North Carolina was proposed. I had turned down both as far too risky, or requiring injection of my hard-earned dollars.

However, it was my seventh year flying combat missions and I knew that despite how careful I was, sooner or later the Biblical admonition, "*As ye live by the sword, ye will die by the sword,*" could become a reality. Moreover, with Laos looking grimmer every day, I knew my Southeast Asian tour continued to be tentative, influenced and limited by developments across the border and in South Vietnam. The cement block project in Kuala Lumpur had failed to evolve into a successful business that

could support the original investors. Therefore, I constantly looked for interests and opportunities to work elsewhere. Sunray offered the only viable alternative.

I had never been to the part of the country the job offer encompassed. Attractive from a historical aspect, the project was located in Sioux Indian Black Hills country, famous for Lieutenant Colonel George Custer's 1874 7th Calvary foray into the then-unexplored region, where gold was later discovered, resulting in a gold rush of major proportions. The additional kicker of a gold mine on the Warbonnet property was an attractive draw. After all, what "hairy chested" man was not interested in the lure of gold?

The prospect of a different vocation with Sunray was invigorating, exciting, and certainly worth investigating. Here was a choice opportunity to leave my previous life as an aviator behind, relocate, and establish my family in the States. But I was not about to charge headlong into a new career and area without first investigating all its facets.

With seventy hours logged, I had completed my flying for the month. Therefore, I talked with Wayne Knight regarding a short stateside leave. Since an excess of Bell pilots existed for the small number of airworthy line aircraft, he authorized my travel plans. I made immediate plans for a quick journey home on back-to-back STO and a few extra leave days. Tuie, who also agreed I should get out of the flying business, sanctioned the trip.

While I readied for the long trip, I had a letter from Dad:

"We had a caller last night, Roman Olkowski, a very nice chap who gave us a run down on some of the doings over there. Of course, he did not give any pertinent details but spoke in general of some amusing things. He stayed with us about three hours and I liked his manner."

Ski, a Bell Flight Mechanic, lived in Plainfield, New Jersey across town on Eighth Street near an old girlfriend's parents' home. When he departed on leave, I told him to visit the folks and say hello if he had a chance.

I departed for Bangkok on the night train, and after obtaining my tickets, was on my way to CONUS on the 29th. I arrived at Kennedy Airport in New York on the last day of the month.

After recovering somewhat from the week-long jet lag, I alerted the Steamboat crowd that I was in the States for an abbreviated time and would be proceeding shortly to Colorado. Intending to proceed to California on my way back to Southeast Asia after the Steamboat excursion, I purchased a one-way ticket at the Kadash Travel Agency in North Plainfield to Stapleton Airport.

Don was waiting for me in Denver. There we met with Bob Klein, who described the current status of the Baja Colorado project in Cabo San Lucas, Mexico. Naturally, as a primary investor, Bob's spiel was upbeat. Construction was proceeding on schedule and Bob expected the first eighteen units to be completed by year's end. He was planning to travel to Cabo to build a house and retire there. On the basis of Bob's report, Don and I jointly elected to purchase another share in the company, with the thought of erecting a house there for Sunray investors.

Don's attorney father-in-law was also in town. In February he indicated the time was propitious to enter the public stock market with Sunray securities. Stock listing and offerings would make us all a lot of money. However, preferring the latitude and benefits of a private company, Don was stubborn and did not want to let the company go.

At the offices of Sunray Land Corporation, I learned that Ling Temco Vought (LTV) was in the process of purchasing interests in Mount Werner and all the raw land the company could muster. It was envisioned that LTV would pump a lot of money into the area, which would add to the boom. When offered a tidy sum to sell Sunray with a kicker of a job offer, Don refused, as he believed the value of the land Sunray owned would continue to

appreciate. Besides he had already proclaimed himself a millionaire.

Since my time in the U.S. was limited, we flew 400 miles over Wyoming to Sturgis, South Dakota, in Charlie Williams's airplane. There, a huge Sioux Indian, a gofer in the Warbonnet land project, met and drove us to Terry Peak, a mountain that soared to over 7,000 feet. June weather was beautiful, but as we talked outside the Warbonnet office, large black biting flies swarmed over and attacked us.

Principals were lined up for me to meet. Affable Gary White and his Irish born wife were involved in land sales. Gary had lived in the area a long time and professed to know where old gold claims still produced a nugget or two that he mounted and sold to tourists for extra income. Of course, he would not divulge where these small caves were located. A lawyer, banker, and politician from Lead, who looked anything like his titles indicated, was instrumental in legal work.

At first glance, it appeared the Terry Peak project was in urgent need of a lot of work, mainly close supervision, and money--something that was currently very tight and costly. The transaction was explained to me, along with a requirement to refinance, but the information was quite detailed and involved interrelated companies, some Sunray controlled, some not.

White escorted us on a tour of the land Warbonnet owned on the 400 acres the mountain supported. Some of the subdivided lots perched on rocky ledges, presenting breathtaking views of infinite distance. Impressed with the potential, as owners, both Don and I took options to purchase outstanding plots pending a viable right of way to the property. The existing plat indicated a road existed, but lay off the edge in space.

I could not leave Terry Peak without visiting the abandoned Homestake gold mine. I do not know how long the mine had been

inactive, but almost everything looked old, rusted, and disused. Reddish tailings abounded a short distance from the entrance, creating a considerable extension to the mountain slopes. ¹ Huge wooden ore vats girdled with iron bands sat like sentinels guarding the main working area where gold was extracted. The small assay office was littered in disarray, but displayed some of the tools involved in the mining process. A furnace containing a crucible had a large crack in the side displaying minute amounts of gold. Two roll top desks were present that Don said he would transport to Steamboat. I did not see everything and vowed to explore more during a future visit.

Several old Homestake company houses lined the side of a winding road. Lacking many amenities, they were necessarily small to enhance heating capabilities during the harsh winter months. If I accepted the job, one would be provided me and my family as part of an employment contract.

During and after our short visit, I asked a lot of questions regarding a multitude of items and thought hard about effecting a transition to Terry Peak. Realistically, there were many more negatives involved than positive factors. Mainly, the little I observed during the short time in South Dakota convinced me that living and working at Terry Peak, as the current situation and conditions existed, constituted an enormous chore, and would be a dramatic change to our family lifestyle.

First of all, the financial aspects of the Terry Peak project had to be resolved in favor of Sunray. The lawyer-banker indicated the development could eventually evolve into a thirty million venture; Williams estimated a considerably lower eight million.

¹ Tailings: Discarded processed ore.

Secondly, from what I observed, living and working in the States seemed to be a perverse rat-race, a revolving door going nowhere. Moreover, I was not used to working even a fraction as hard as Don and Charley. We did not talk much about salary, but it probably would not amount to more than subsistence wages at first, perhaps taking the form of land parcels rather than hard cash.

Thirdly, I would be abandoning my tenure and a well-paying job with Air America. Dislocation from semi-tropical Southeast Asia, and subjecting my wife and young, growing family to a remote, primitive area, one which experienced bitter winters and was largely devoid of basic creature comforts, presented an enormous unknown, and did not particularly appeal to me. Still, if I was truly intent on returning to the USA, I was aware that I had to begin somewhere.

Finally, until major issues were resolved between principals, it did not appear that Sunray required someone immediately full time at Terry Peak. The boys visited the project two to three times a month to monitor what overtly appeared largely a self-sustaining operation. A decision could wait.

On Wednesday the 11th, I purchased an airline ticket at the Steamboat Travel Service from Denver to San Francisco to visit my cousin Colonel Robert Townsend Anderson and family in the nicely wooded area of the Walnut Creek bedroom community.

I spent two nights at the Anderson home. Bob, a U.S. Army chaplain and former World War Two Marine Corps trooper, worked at the Presido, where the chaplain corps had earned a reputation for radical views on just about every issue. His superior and long-time career mentor was General Bartholomew. I had met the general once before at Bob's house at Mount Holly, New Jersey while Bob was stationed at Fort Dix. Generally assigned to the

same bases, the careers of both men closely intertwined and paralleled each other, and I envisioned Bob one day advancing to a brigadier general rank. One night we went to dinner at the general's house on the grounds of the Presido. During the course of the evening, while polishing off a gallon jug of wine, we foolishly discussed America's trials and tribulations. During the course of our boozy conversations a possible requirement for assassination squads to rectify some of the country's left-wing problems was raised. ² Chaplains? Of course, it was merely the abundant alcohol talking, but the insightful evening allowed me a close peek into the current military mentality.

RTB

After a long trip through Japan and Hong Kong, I arrived in Bangkok on 16 June. I spent a night in the big city, and then was home by Wednesday.

Except for Pete's cold everyone was fine. As opposed to previous years, precipitation was quite heavy and prolonged and it looked like a wet beginning to the rainy season. The driving rain caused our tin roof to leak badly in a number of places, forcing Ricky to sleep in Peter's room. After we threatened to withhold the monthly rent, the landlady recalled the roofers who had repaired a previous leak.

RECOMMENDATIONS

While Washington leaders continued to search for viable answers to the current military situation in Laos and a way to return the balance of power to a more equitable state, many civilian and military minds were tapped. CINCPAC and other U.S.

² At that time in America's history there were active anarchistic groups in the country which advocated violence and total overthrow of the U.S Government.

military leaders strongly advised and lobbied for a significant escalation in military activity. Moreover, the military hierarchy desired to assign a major general to conduct all activity in Laos, superseding much of what former U.S. Ambassadors Unger and Sullivan had previously overseen.

Former Ambassador Sullivan, now Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, in general believed that, short of attacking previously off-limit populated areas, there was not much more that could be accomplished in the country to change the situation. Therefore, he opposed the military brass solution for escalation. When queried for opinions by President Nixon's Assistant for National Security Affairs, Henry Kissinger, he stated flatly that the Royal Lao Army would never be a match for the North Vietnamese. Without the unpopular idea of committing U.S troops on the ground (which would destroy the Geneva Accords), Lao forces would have to defend the country with the current U.S assistance in training, equipment, air support, intelligence, and clandestine functions.

Sullivan reiterated a few suggestions to enhance the RLG's efforts: augmentation of USAF support of Lao ground troops, providing the RLA (regular and unconventional) with thousands more M-16 rifles, and allocating the RLA additional C-47 planes for gunship conversion.

Within a week, the Sullivan memorandum was bumped to the Oval Office with Kissinger's thoughts and admonition that the Under Secretaries Committee further pursue the issue. ³

³FRUS #82, 06/10/69, Laos.
National Archives, RG 59, Central Files 1967-69, POL 27 Laos,
Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Kissinger Papers, Box CL
286, Memoranda to the President. June 1969, Folder 2.

MILITARY REGION TWO

Hostilities had generally waned on the ground. Because of long supply lines and considerable difficulty providing logistical support to a large number of forces on the Plain of Jars during the monsoons, enemy units normally withdrew to safer areas to retrench and await the dry season. Although there were signs that some of this was happening, the enemy appeared to be adopting defensive measures and consolidating regained positions.

After Vang Pao's troops withdrew from the largely successful, but short Xieng Khouang Ville operation, USAF and RLAf strikes continued at an elevated pace with the intent to limit major enemy movement and interdict eastern LOCs. During marginal weather on 10 June, a Firefly flight discovered a number of trucks on Route-7. Although one A-1 pilot was lost during strike operations, the area was worked over with good results.

On the eastern Plain of Jars just north of Lat Houang a cave containing POL was discovered and hit. The resulting conflagration burned for hours.

In the meantime, General Vang Pao, his advisors, and the General Staff huddled to plan a timely and effective Military Region Two rainy season offensive. The government operation was envisioned to commence during the second half of June.

Since 1968, RLG ground forces had been considerably diminished by combat losses. With most of Houa Phan Province in the Sam Neua region no longer under government control, except at Houei Tong Ko, a site that was still undergoing enemy pressure and TIC by 10 June, requirements for troops to man friendly positions in north Military Region Two were vastly reduced. Therefore, remaining assets were diverted for operations in Xieng Khouang Province. Failure to act to counter

enemy movement at this point in the war would only allow the Vietnamese to remain in place or pursue further inroads toward main bases at their leisure.

During past government operations, tri-pincer multi-battalion movements were often employed. Rarely overseen by a single commander or properly coordinated, they were largely unsuccessful. The simple battle plan was dusted off, studied, and modified to adapt to the current situation where it was believed necessary. This year the evolving plan was tailored to employ all principals in the FAR Army. Meo forces who were not already in positions on the edge of the southern Plain of Jars would be reinforced and move north, while Mekong River forces would locate north from Vientiane and Paksane units toward Tha Thom, a major site lost the previous year, and a third foray conducted by Moung Soui FAN would march east along Route-7 onto the PDJ proper.

By the third week in June, government units stationed at Paksane had moved north into Sala Den Din above Borikhane, and were preparing to advance into the Tha Thom Valley. Hostilities soon developed, with Raven-16 reporting TIC at Tha Thom on the 16th. Five days later, as friendly troops fanned out, TIC were encountered north of the valley. An estimated two battalions of enemy were engaged by Cricket diverts and worked by Raven-46. USAF support continued through the 21st. ⁴

T-28 PROGRAM

During early June, perhaps overly optimistic as to current enemy intentions, personnel staff in U.S. Embassy Vientiane

⁴Extracts from ABCCC Reports.

departments attempted to prognosticate regarding the current and future situation. This assessment included RLAFF air assets:

"The current waning dry season offensive by the enemy took every bit of energy and all the assets this mission could muster in support of the armed forces of the Royal Lao Government in order to avert a potential disaster. We were required to employ even the advanced attrition [of] T-28 aircraft on hand in order to bolster the government's morale and safeguard its tactical position on the ground..."

Many considered the forty-five combat-ready RLAFF T-28s, and the Meo, Lao, and Thai pilots manning them, a key force in providing close air support required by government infantry troops. For some time, to supplement a lack of Lao pilots, Thai RTAF pilots, usually about twenty, were seconded to and hired by the Agency for six-month periods, but the cadre was controlled by AIRA under USAF auspices. Known as Fireflies (not to be confused with A-1E flights), the men and their planes did not remain overnight in Laos, but flew to Wattay Airport, were loaded with weapons and assigned missions, then returned to Udorn at the end of the day.

The only other propeller driven plane in the Theater that came close to providing such support was the USAF A-1E. Reducing flight time to the target from Wattay, T-28 sorties and support increased many-fold when some of the Lao-piloted aircraft were staged out of Long Tieng, with VP allowed to control his own planes and influence his pilots. Because of the obstacles--sloping runway and distorted depth perception, Thai pilots refused to operate from The Alternate. Moreover, there were accidents.

During June, six additional Meo pilots graduated from training in Udorn, adding needed manpower to the Meo T-28 fleet. As a result, the increased sorties ensured a maximum effort out



With Skyline Ridge visible in the background, a T-28 pilot, "loaded for bear," prepares for takeoff down the 2,200-foot Long Tieng runway. Air operations and other buildings are situated near prominent karsts for protection. A mobile refueling tanker is seen to the right on the asphalt parking-unloading-loading ramp. Unseen in the photo, the Air America crew hostel is located to the right at the top of the ramp.

Author Collection.



Not all T-28 landings were successful at Long Tieng as evidenced by this plane locking horns with the Air Operations building.

of the site. While they lived, these new aviators would relieve pressure on ace Lee Lieu and other pilots, who had been pushing themselves to their limit of endurance in the number of sorties flown per day.

Because of a requirement for an Air Operations Center (AOC) at The Alternate, and resulting dispersion of the T-28 fleet to forward sites, embassy personnel were not all equally elated as was Vang Pao. Still, it was realized by all parties that morale at Alternate noticeably increased when the planes moved forward. Because of enemy action in and around the Plain of Jars, T-28 pilots were required to fly as many daily sorties as possible. Much of the ability to produce these sorties depended on aircraft turn-around, distance to the target, cumulative fatigue, and individual motivation. Factoring in numerous variables created sortie disparities of one to eight or more per day. Lee Lieu, despite caution by AIRA advisors to slow down, continued to fly up to an incredible twelve and occasionally more missions a day.

The high sortie rate prompted advisors to recommend standard combat pay of 500 Lao kip per sortie (roughly one U.S. dollar) to RLAf pilots. Agency funds were provided for the new program, and were distributed to participants the same day as missions were flown.

The standard was implemented in June. Increased pay did wonders for pilot morale, and actually increased the quantity of sorties. However, quality of T-28 support suffered, particularly from Long Tieng. Five hundred kip was still a tidy sum at the time. Therefore, to generate high sortie numbers, a few greedy pilots merely took off, dropped their bombs at a place of their choosing, and returned for another load.

The void created when Vang Pao withdrew his troops from Xieng Khouang Ville was immediately filled by enemy forces who,

after consolidating their hold on the town, continued marching west along the valley to the Plain and from other areas toward Moung Soui.

On the ninth, as forward enemy units encroached on FAN positions around Site-108, forward observers directed T-28 pilots to area targets. Sporadic fighting continued around the site for the next five days. ⁵

JARINA

Mike went upcountry on Monday the 16th in Hotel-33 with Tom Conouyer. Working out of Wattay Airport in adverse weather, he journeyed thirty miles north to the "Dam Site" (Ritaville Ridge area), where work was underway by laborers and engineers from several nations to create a hydroelectric dam, a project that would provide power to northeastern Thailand. He also landed at Ritaville (LS-53) in the hills just north of the alluvial flood plain, where General Siho's paramilitary police training camp once had been active before the coups of 1965. Next to the final stop of the day, before terminating at Wattay and Vientiane for the night, was to Ban Keun (LS-44). Located on the east side of the Nam Ngum, the area was home to numerous cluster village of refugees, and was employed to stage FAR troops for movement in MR-5.

On Tuesday, during another abbreviated flying day of six landings, Mike and Tom started out with a stop at the FAR Chinaimo headquarters on the eastern outskirts of Vientiane. Picking up officers, they went back to Wattay Airport to

⁵Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 211.
John Pratt, *CHECO*, 102-104.
Jesse Scott Interview, 22-23.
Victor Anthony, 295.
CIA Bulletin, 06/20/69.



Bell Hueys and crews at Ban Keun, Laos (LS-44) standing by for a Customer commitment.

Author Collection.

retrieve additional people for a trip to the FAN garrison at Vang Vieng (L-16) on Route-13. Retracing their steps, the party next flew south to Phong Hong (LS-133). The trip likely was associated with the imminent FAN movement east from Mounng Soui to support Vang Pao's push on the Plain of Jars. Toward late afternoon, Mike returned the group to Wattay Airport, refueled, and then departed for Luang Prabang.

Jarina was grounded by foul weather for the next two days. During the down days he was reassigned Hotel-47 with Flight Mechanic Punzalan.

Flight was possible on the twentieth. During the afternoon, in an unusual move across province boundaries into Houa Phan, a Special Mission was mounted to the refugee camp at Houie Tong Ko, seventy-four miles northeast of Luang Prabang, where action had occurred on the 10th and A-1 bombing to the southwest had taken a toll on enemy supplies in the valley to the west of the Alpha pad. Subsequent work consisting of fifteen additional landings continued in the area.

Operations continued past sunset, causing the H-34 pilots to land at Luang Prabang in the dark. Maintained by Air America radio operators, normally a 400-watt beacon operated at LP, producing intermittent Morse code letters (LP) during daylight hours on 379 kilocycles. However, for this late operation, the Customer had the radio operator keep the radio navigation unit on until the pilots landed. The beacon was weak and largely ineffective at low altitude, but if flying high enough and no electrical storms were present to disrupt the signal, a helicopter pilot might have a homing capability within a five to ten-mile radius of the station. Mike completed the day with just short of four hours, to include fifty minutes night.

Saturday was Jarina's final day at Luang Prabang. He began by shuttling troops forty-two miles north to Tong Too (LS-186).

After the second trip, he went twenty-four miles northeast to Ban Chuk Chung (LS-138) and returned to the Luang Prabang airfield, where his relief pilot awaited. Mike then deadheaded to Wattay Airport on CASI Porter XW-PFR and to Tango-08 on C-123 555 (Triple Nickel).⁶

Before Mike went to Luang Prabang to work, CPH Wayne Knight conducted line checks there with Larry Henesy on the tenth in Hotel-49, and a spot check with Don Henthorn in Hotel-30. The line check regimen continued the following day with Henesy. He conducted a spot check with Ben Van Etten on Thursday while returning to Udorn.

Wayne and Jerry McEntee performed a UH-34D recurrency check on the 29th.

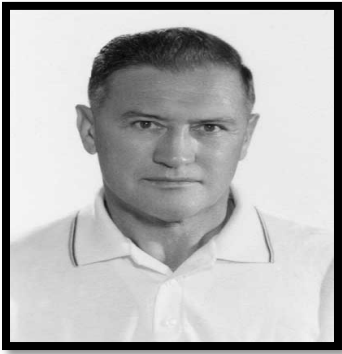
Toward month's end, Knight began training RJ Marquardt. Found seriously deficient in the H-34, the man never qualified as Captain and remained a second-in-command (SIC).⁷

MR-4 MISSION IN THE VICINITY OF THE BOLOVENS

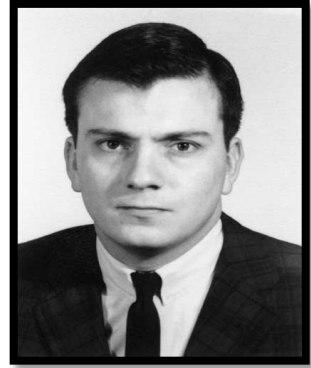
Nearly over jet lag, on the 21st, I began a convoluted, five-hour deadhead to PS-38 on the Bolovens, where I was assigned to fly Papa Foxtrot Hotel pending a TBA (to be announced) battalion-sized Special Mission. I departed Udorn in the morning on Hotel-32 for Ubon (T-19), and then Savannakhet. There I offloaded my gear and re-boarded Hotel-57 for Pakse and the SGU camp on the Plateau, where I joined Flight Mechanic Gaza

⁶ Mike Jarina Interviews.
Extracts from ABCCC Reports.

⁷ EW Knight Email.



Mike Jarina



Larry Henesy



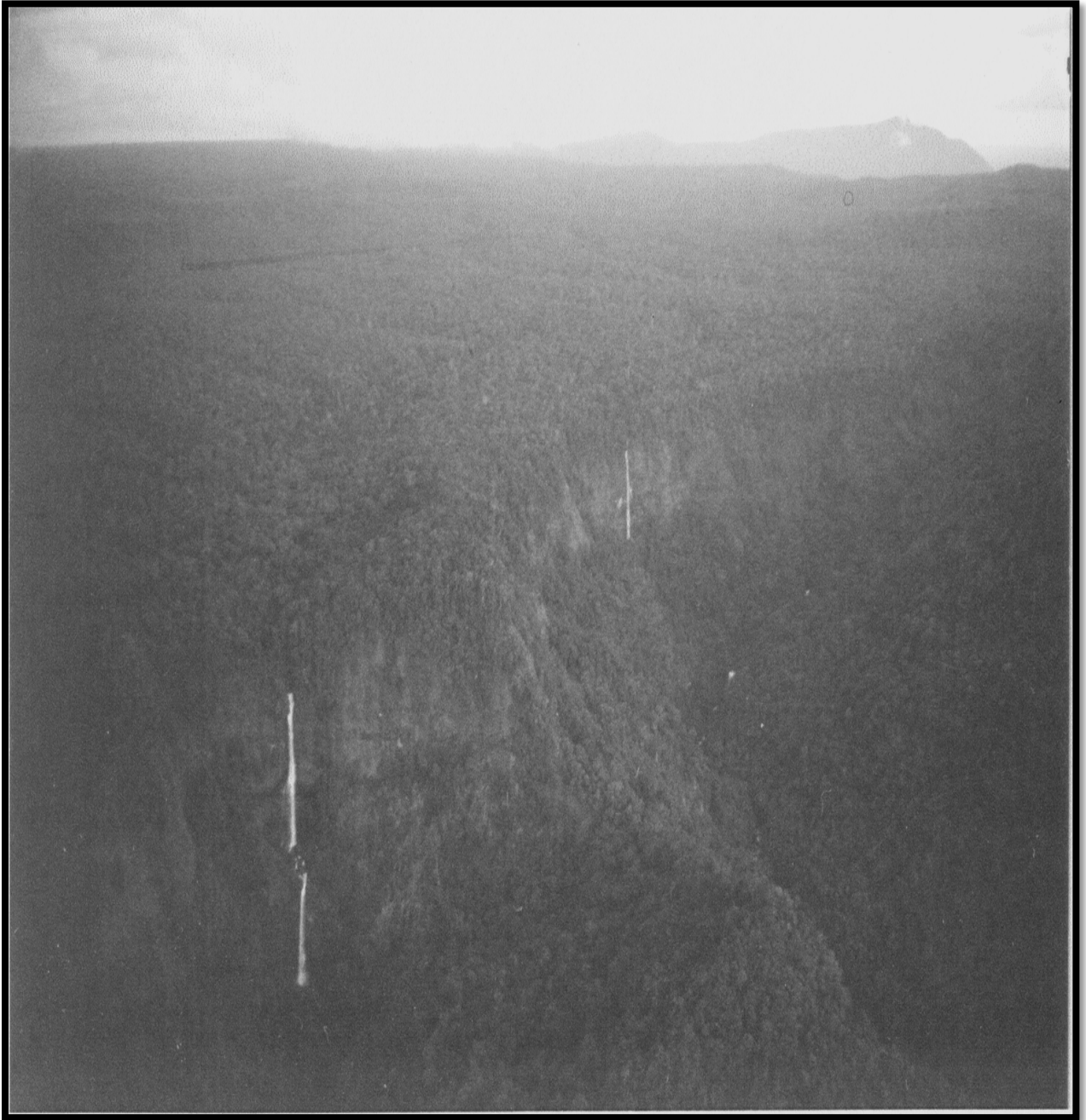
Ben Van Etten

Eiler for about two hours of local work. We RON in the Customer quarters at the site and enjoyed charcoal steaks on the rear porch overlooking lush scenery. I was not acquainted with the Case Officers there and there was not much conversation regarding the upcoming mission other than it was scheduled for the 23rd.

On Sunday I flew a little over four hours. The flight time was not high, but unlike other areas, every minute counted as project pay.

Scratch Kanach joined me for the Special Mission on Monday. We waited until other assets and crews arrived for the battalion lift. In order to move 350 troops within the allotted time frame, the lift armada consisted of three UH-34Ds, three Bell Hueys, and five USAF CH-3 Pony Express aircraft. While we learned what the mission entailed, C-123 crews continued to shuttle additional troops and supplies into the strip to support the mission.

Customer Mickey Kappes' 2 SGU Battalion was slated to be inserted twelve miles south-southeast of our base to coordinates XB912263 on or near a confluence of trails, bypasses, and junctions of what had been called the Sihanouk Trail since 1966. The relatively uncomplicated mission was calculated to sever Route-110 for a minimum of three days to disrupt the LOC connecting Cambodia, Laos, and South Vietnam; to locate real or potential targets for air strikes; and to relieve enemy pressure on the provincial capital at Attopeu. The operation constituted the first battalion-sized movement ever attempted from the Plateau. During past years, smaller versions of this same operation were conducted to test the combat readiness and



Three of many picturesque waterfalls plummeting hundreds of feet from the southern rim of the Bolovens Plateau to the valley floor.

Author Collection.

viability of new units. The missions invariably resulted in only partial success or abject failure.⁸

The pre-selected landing zone was situated on a low hill mass that jutted prominently north, overlooking flat scrub land abutting the Bolovens foothills and leading toward Attopeu. The troops' primary mission was to interdict the monsoon-drenched road system with mines and "boots on the ground" until 26 June. As timely visual recon uncovered neither vehicular traffic nor enemy ground forces in the area, resistance was not anticipated. However, like all missions into remote, albeit enemy-controlled areas, until launching, an uncomfortable sense of the unknown pervaded our minds and was always present at the onset. Despite the large number of missions of this type accomplished successfully over the years, variables of "what if" prevailed. What would we do if enemy were encountered in the landing zone? What would we do if shot down...? But that was the reason we were provided Special Mission pay.

Accompanied by what would eventually total four A-1s sent to escort and cover the large, staggered gaggle, Scratch and I led our Bells off the southern rim of the Plateau and across flatlands to the landing zone, where pathfinders would secure the area and establish a defensive perimeter for the major lift. Insertions of men and supplies continued without incident for about two hours until a unit radio operator contacted Case Officer Kappes aloft in an orbiting Porter with an emergency medevac request. Apparently, a few troops had inadvertently stepped on button mines, which USAF planes had previously dropped while seeding roads. The Customer claimed he had no idea that the mines were present and it constituted just another of

⁸ Like all military operations, this one was accorded the name Left Jab.

the unknowns and perils involved from operations in remote Laos. Designed to only disable and not kill an individual, the mini-mines were a particularly nasty form of interdiction. Moreover, blending in with terrain and vegetation, the devices were extremely difficult to detect and avoid. Three-foot contact sensitive strings projected from the main body of the tiny device that when stepped on would activate the mine and injure a man's foot. ⁹

The wounded were evacuated. With the remaining troops cautioned regarding the continuing danger, the infil continued. We logged eight Special Missions before retiring to PS-38 lodging for the night.

I deadheaded home on the 24th, C123 671 to Pakse and CASI Porter XW-PDC to Udorn. ¹⁰

⁹ Button mines: The mines were developed to injure and not kill a man. In theory, caring for wounded would necessitate more personnel and lessen the number of combat participants.

¹⁰ Ken Conboy, 222.
Bernard. C. Nalty, *The War Against Trucks: Aerial Interdiction in Southern Laos 1968-1972*, Chapter 6, *Interdiction During the 1969 Southwest Monsoon Season*, 149.

Over the years, from the top to the bottom rank and file, Neutralist-soldiers were generally portrayed as inept, ineffective fighters, who added little positive support to the overall Lao war effort. Granted, proper leadership was lacking, but to us pilots they were considered U.S. State Department-coddled "crybabies," who were just as likely to switch sides or run for the hills as not. The only reason they were tolerated was because of the façade of a so-called tripartite neutral government headed by Souvanna Phouma, who himself eventually saw the light and quietly morphed toward a rightist solution as the only means of stemming communist advances in his country. It was also believed by principals that by maintaining a strategic cork in the bottle at MOUNG SOUI, the western flank protecting Sam Tong, Long Tieng, and the Route-7/13 junction at Sala Phu Khoun leading northwest toward Luang Prabang and south to Vientiane would be preserved.

At the helicopter pilot level, our people discovered that some FAN soldiers could be treacherous and innovative as Dac Cong sappers. Eventually the combined powers became disenchanted with the amount it was costing to support the Neutralists. This was in addition to the fact they were doing virtually nothing tangible to bolster the RLG's war effort. Therefore, to stress a point, Vientiane military leaders decided to reduce assistance to the Site-108 MOUNG SOUI garrison. This would be implemented by the delivery of less ammunition and only two cargo flights a week with fresh food in lieu of current daily runs. Naturally, such a drastic change from established policy roiled people.

Dick French and two other Requirements Office (RO) types were full time advisors at Site-108. Each man had his own elevated house in the military compound. One-night, dissident

FAN placed explosives under his bedroom. These were detonated early in the morning. French was sleeping on a twelve-inch foam rubber mattress he had acquired for comfort. The thick mattress saved his life. The force from the blast propelled him and the mattress three feet into the air onto the floor. Noise from the explosion caused his ears to ring for the next three weeks.

As a result of the "friendly" attack, French and the other ARMA personnel relocated to safer climes at Vang Vieng, only working at Moung Soui during daylight hours.

Mike Jarina considered French a savvy person. One rainy morning Mike was flying at Moung Soui dodging fog banks and attempting to work when French was present. Mike observed a lot of expensive equipment uncovered and rusting along the runway. He asked Dick why he did not place tarpaulins over the items to preserve them. Dick replied that if he did, the people would steal them. Mike was surprised to hear this for there were many troops around. Later in retrospect, he had to admit that the soldiers were probably the prime thieves.

To facilitate Vang Pao's customary rainy season offensive, six ARMA advisors were assigned to Moung Soui and at the forward western Thai artillery base of Ban Khay. These men were Majors Phil Werbiski and Bob Moberg, Captains Art Rodriguez and Bill Bessilieu, and Sergeants Joe Bossi and Dave Pompeli. Moberg, who had operated in Laos with an early White Star Special Forces unit out of LP and in Phong Saly Province, was senior advisor in charge of artillery detachment advisors, Bessilieu and Pompeli. Wearing a dual hat, Moberg, an aviator, also served as a ground forward air guide (FAG) controlling allied air strikes. The other three men acted as advisors to the cadre at Site-108.

Four thousand FAN troops were reputedly present to defend the Moung Soui complex. This included several outposts on surrounding hilltops. Two and a half miles to the east, at the

large Ban Khay firebase, 105mm and 155mm artillery guns and over 300 Thai supporting infantry personnel were augmented by one hundred Meo and elements of a FAN airborne battalion. As part of Vang Pao's western offensive probe toward the Plain of Jars, FAN units with a Thai artillery forward observer for support marched along Route-7 and then north toward Phou Kout, a series of strategic hills never completely cleared of enemy since the 1964 Operation Triangle.

Moung Soui had increasingly been reporting TIC. Toward mid-June, the Vietnamese 312 Division-165 Regiment, Special Forces units, and armor were already moving undetected across the drenched and soggy Plain toward Moung Soui, with specific instructions to capture the facility at all costs. As they infiltrated along established roads and trails, adverse monsoon weather and low clouds permeated the region, preventing friendly recon and targeting of the multi-battalion attacking force.

While the enemy tightened the noose around the Site-108 area, despite spates of foul weather curtailing jet and T-28 support, helicopters and small planes continued to support the base for the impending battle.

On 23 June, Mike Jarina deadheaded to Sam Tong on Hotel-32. Following interim stops at Wattay Airport and Long Tieng, he assumed control of Hotel-62 with old timer Flight Mechanic Moon Centeno. As TIC was reported near Moung Soui and air strikes were generated, Mike flew to Site-108 where, using only the southern portion of the runway for loading purposes, he shuttled items to FAN outposts. Late in the day, after conducting thirty-nine landings, he departed for Site-20.

THE ATTACK

"The action was highlighted by a sharp attack on 24 June against neutralist headquarters at Moung Soui. At least two

*battalions of communist troops supported by tanks overran a number of the base's outlying defense positions and inflicted light casualties on government defenders. The airstrip, however, remains in government hands and at last report the fighting had eased..."*¹

Marking the first major action against Moung Soui in five years, under the cover of darkness, enemy elements easily pushed through thin FAN lines at Phou Kout. Shortly afterward, lead elements arrived at Ban Khay's outlying wire perimeter. With highly trained Dac Cong attempting to breach the wire, employing Soviet World War Two PT-76 tanks as a spearhead, followed by infantry units, the battle was joined about 0100 hours on Tuesday morning.

Although several Vietnamese forward elements managed to enter the compound and FAN trenches, Thai infantry personnel were well prepared to receive them with mines, gunfire, and direct fire artillery. Compared with later model tanks, portions of the antiquated PT-76s were covered with relatively thin metal, especially the rear portion. Mines were particularly devastating to the vehicles. During the initial attack, the combination of arms, along with T-28 and A-1 strikes, destroyed three tanks and disabled one. The main complex held. However, with losses mounting, forward FAN elements predictably deserted the eastern perimeter, allowing the enemy to capture most of the forward artillery guns. Collateral damage occurred when a hung bomb detached from a weapon store point and fell into a 155mm howitzer position killing, and wounding additional men and disabling one gun.

¹ CIA Daily Bulletin, 06/25/69. Laos: Communist forces have launched a series of ground attacks against government positions near the Plaine des Jarres.



Looking south toward Ban Khay from the foothills of Phou So (LS-57) toward the end of the day. Shadow envelopes the firebase complex of Ban Khay seen in the right center of the photo. Smoke rises from allied air strikes to the east.

Jarina Collection.

All interested parties were immediately aware of the opening action at Ban Khay, and closely monitored the developing situation through radio communications. U.S. Army Chief Warrant Officer Ted Untalan, detached TDY from his Korat unit to the Vientiane ARMA Attaché, was airborne early in a dark brown Huey. With him were the Attaché and Major General Vitoon Yasawat (Yasawatdi), Commander of Thai Special Forces at Udorn 333 headquarters, who was in charge of all Thai forces assigned to Laos. Peers commonly knew Yasawat by his code name THEP.

Ted was an ethnic Hawaiian and, like Moberg, an early White Star participant for "Bull" Simons. As with all personnel in the relatively small Special Forces family, the two men knew each other at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. Ted was very affable, one easy to converse with. Embraced by our pilot group, Ted became a favorite among helicopter pilots. He was accorded the affectionate title of "Pineapple." Ted confided to me one day that he had walked from Attopeu to Saravane during the White Star years. The trek took a month. It constituted an incredible feat, and an adventure difficult for me to fathom. But, with his flowing black mustache and fierce Genghis Khan appearance, I was not about to question his veracity or the content of his war story.

Untalan landed near the artillery compound, offloaded Thep et. al., and paid his respects to Moberg, whom he had not seen since 1965 at Nha Trang, South Vietnam. Then he began back hauling wounded to Mounng Soui for additional first aid and disposition to area hospitals.

Moberg, who had been tabulating a damage and casualty inventory inflicted on both enemy and friendly forces, concluded while talking to his Thai counterpart that, although the first phase of the battle had been "won," with FAN security departing the field and little remaining artillery, perhaps it was better

to evacuate Ban Khay while there was sufficient time. Evacuation was proposed to THEP, but the tiny general had suffered considerable loss of face after his men performed poorly during the initial failure to hold Phu Pha Thi during the March 1968 sapper assault, and the early 1969 loss of a PARU team at Na Khang. In this case, either to reestablish prestige, or appear bellicose, taking umbrage to Moberg's sage advice, he refused to entertain a wholesale withdrawal at that time. However, a helicopter task force of CH-3, HH-53, H-34s, and crews were alerted, assembled, and were ready should the situation further deteriorate and warrant an evacuation. Following DHEP's diatribe regarding his Thai forces ability to fight, remaining healthy personnel were organized and assigned to perimeter defense positions for compound and remaining artillery protection.

With this accomplished, Untalan relocated Moberg to the Moung Soui strip to evaluate the current situation there, consult and coordinate with "Ski," and commandeer a parked O-1E Bird Dog normally used to spot targets for Thai artillery. Then after a cursory preflight, he entered the cockpit and cranked the engine. Determining the plane flyable (at least obtaining oil pressure), amid smoking buildings, he throttled up and departed directly from the parking revetment. Obtaining flying speed by the time he reached the side of the runway, he continued at low level through patches of fog over Vietnamese positions. Once clear, he commenced an abbreviated area recon and then landed on a road leading toward the Ban Khay headquarters entrance, to brief THEP and his officers regarding his observations.

Later, Moberg departed in the Bird Dog to conduct an expanded search for the reputedly destroyed tanks. While reporting to ground units, he changed his FAG call sign from City Hall to Jacks, later modified to "Jack the FAC." All the

firebase officers had received some kind of injury, so Moberg advised a Thai sergeant over the radio to attempt to move the wounded back to central headquarters.

Throughout the day, he continued area recons and helped coordinate Air America C-46 cargo drops at both sites. Fixed wing resupply continued until adverse weather enveloped the area.

During the night and for the next four days USAF AC-130 aircraft were assigned to work the Moung Soui battlefield. The formidable gunship crews did what they could to comply with requests to fix positions and stop enemy tanks, but foul weather generally prevented visual contact.

Jarina and other H-34 crews departed Sam Tong early for Moung Soui. When in the area, he was advised to land at Ban Khay headquarters to retrieve wounded. Mike landed first at Site-108 to obtain a current briefing. Captain Rodriguez, who offered to help and wanted to see what was occurring at Ban Khay, joined him in the cockpit. They ferried the first load of WIAs to Moung Soui for fixed wing transportation to other medical facilities. During a later trip incoming mortar fire impacted the area, so the RO Captain disembarked to assess the situation. After that, Jarina asked Dan Carson to cover him during another trip to the LZ located at TG8562.

Between sorties, Mike contacted the CPH office, relayed details of the hazardous situation he was experiencing, and asked for advice as how to proceed. Because Bill Gibbs had been killed recently, Knight advised Jarina to return to the main base at either Sam Tong or Long Tieng and sequester another pilot to fulfill the double crew requirement.

Jim Williams was tapped as Mike's second pilot. Jim had recently returned to Udorn after a stint of extended medical



Smoke depicts evidence of Allied bombing and artillery shelling along Route-7 east of the Ban Khay complex toward the Plain of Jars during the Vietnamese 24 June attack on the firebase facility.

Jarina Collection.

leave related to a nervous eye condition, an annoying tic that manifested in excessive blinking. Nearly cured, Jim's nervous affliction was much improved.

Hired in 1964, despite his long absence, Jim retained seniority over Mike, and assumed control of Hotel-62. Flight Mechanic Baccay replaced Centeno.

With "Jack the FAC" Moberg flying in the area attempting to spot enemy tanks and infantry, and directing air strikes, they continued the evacuation. At one point, Jim wanted to lift ten people. Mike cautioned him that with their current fuel load the number might be excessive, adding that it took all the power he could muster from Hotel-62 the last time he attempted to take off. Unconcerned, Jim countered that they had burned off fuel since then.

At that moment, multiple incoming mortar rounds and tank fire impacted the area, with pieces of shrapnel striking the helicopter. Jim hastily pulled pitch to effect an immediate departure. Mike glanced at the instrument console, and after observing the tachometer needle unwinding below 2,500 RPM, locked his seat belt thinking they were goners. Jim dove off the hill through pine trees and managed to become airborne. Directly after landing at Moung Soui Jim began "cussing up a blue streak." He said he counted twelve people depart the helicopter. Apparently two additional men had hopped in the cabin section when mortar fire commenced.

Fighting rain, low ceilings, and sporadic enemy attacks, the crew worked late and landed at Site-20 well after dark. Mike logged just short of eleven hours and twenty-two landings. Earning every penny, the crew flew seventeen Special Missions removing "sick, lame and lazy" personnel.

Despite numerous rain showers, Moberg also worked late. Landing at Moung Soui amid burning buildings during twilight,

he, Werbiski, and a Lao man manually refueled the O-1. It was after 1900 hours when he departed in heavy rain with "Ski" for Long Tieng. Before Bob could obtain cruise altitude a formation of Raven pilots arrived with the discouraging information that The Alternate was "socked in." Lacking maps, they asked the direction to Luang Prabang. One Raven pilot's O-1 was low on fuel, so Bob led him to the Site-108 strip. Then he accompanied the other two Ravens to LP, where radio calls to AIRA personnel assured them that the non-directional beacon would be operating and Jeeps would be properly staged to illuminate the runway. The beacon allowed them to home on the site, but when they arrived there were no Jeeps providing runway lighting. The third Raven eventually arrived at Luang Prabang.

Despite enemy pressure, Moung Soui and Ban Khay survived another night of enemy mortar and infantry attacks with support from USAF flare, AC-47 gunships and fighter bomber aircraft.

By morning, weather conditions had deteriorated in fog and low ceilings so that only eleven sorties could be conducted. However, this did not deter helicopter support. Crews simply worked around the storms. Conducting seventeen exfiles, Mike and Jim worked a full day in the Moung Soui area. Most of the day was without incident, except for occasional automatic weapons fire southeast of the base where the enemy had dug fighting positions.

Captain Duane Keele also worked at Site-108 resupplying outposts. He was current in regard to the situation from those also working there, and was aware that the enemy was very near the eastern portion of the strip. One position, a slight rise or low hill with an outpost in a narrow saddle one hundred yards long, was located several yards to the east of Moung Soui. Under increasing pressure, both the outpost and resupply aircraft had been taking fire. The enemy was on a hill east of the saddle.



Another view of Route-7 and Ban Khay. A road network can be dimly seen in the distance leading toward the Plain of Jars.

Jarina Collection.

Duane was careful to avoid the area and gave the position a wide berth.

Toward late afternoon, just as he thought his daily task was complete and was preparing to leave for Sam Tong, the Customer informed Duane that the site was now receiving small arms fire, probably from the east. Troops at the site were running out of water and ammunition, and would be unable to survive the night without resupply. Duane, not thinking much of this request, and aware that the site was zeroed in and the enemy just waiting for a juicy target, refused.

The Customer would not accept no for an answer. He walked to a parked T-28 and talked to the pilot. A short aviator came over to Duane's H-34, climbed up the side of the fuselage, and poked his head in the cockpit window. Communications were not good over the engine roar, but Duane managed to convey his apprehension at landing at the position with the enemy so close and the pad bore sighted. The pilot indicated that if Duane would perform the flight, he would fly between the pad and the enemy and cover him while landing and on the landing zone.² From past experience, Keele had little regard for FAN or FAR assurances to keep any promise. Consequently, he was skeptical, and personal assurances from this pilot meant little to him. Still, he agreed to attempt the mission, with the caveat that he would abort should anything not look proper at the site.

Strip and outpost elevations were about the same at 3,600 feet ASL. Between the two positions a considerably lower bowl-like terrain existed. After loading proper supplies, Duane departed and headed for the site. Taking advantage of the concave lower terrain, he flew to the position at an altitude which masked observation from the eastern hills. Upon arrival at

²The pilot was legendary Meo Lee Lieu, a man who Duane was not acquainted with and mistook for a Lao.

the saddle, he slowed and ascended to have a look at the outpost and landing zone, with the intention to land if no problems existed. Upon clearing the hill, he was amazed to see the T-28 pilot circling at 500 feet between the saddle and suspected enemy position. To further show his intent, the pilot fired intermittently when lined up on the hills.

Inspired by the man's courage, Duane landed. Within seconds his Filipino Flight Mechanic discharged the load and Duane leaped off the pad and headed toward the runway at low level. To his knowledge not a round was fired at him.

Duane was measurably impressed with the T-28 pilot's performance and the troops at the landing zone. It was extraordinary. For the first time, instead of FAN soldiers bugging out under pressure, he had witnessed bravery and willingness to fight by both air and ground personnel.

Duane was eager to leave for home plate before another mission was fostered on him, but motivated to inform the Customer of the pilot's bravery, he landed. The Customer did not seem particularly impressed and acted as if the action was a ho-hum everyday occurrence. He mentioned the pilot's name, which meant nothing to Duane at the time. Later Keele learned from Raven pilots that the man was the famous Meo combat pilot Lee Lieu.

The critical situation dictated that every helicopter be pressed into service. With the PIC of PFF circumnavigating around gathering storms, I deadheaded upcountry on the second day of the enemy attack. At Long Tieng, I joined Nikki Fillipi and Glen Woods in N8511F. There was interest in enemy movement in upper Military Region Two. Therefore, a two-helicopter infil/exfil mission was planned to UH861681 in the hills eight miles north of Hong Non (LS-86) in Houa Phan Province. There were no main roads in the area, so perhaps the original team had

hiked a good distance away from Sam Neua Town for safety. Since this was a long mission far exceeding two hours, and the questionable weather requiring low-level flight and cautious circumnavigation, we landed to take on fuel prepositioned at Houei Tong Ko on the return trip. After landing our charges at Pha Khao (LS-14) for debriefing, we worked locally up to dark before retiring to the hostel.

The night was relatively quiet at Moung Soui. Preparing for a final push, the enemy was either reinforcing or, knowing FAN past performance and proclivity to break and run under modest pressure, was awaiting an inevitable base evacuation.

Williams and Jarina returned to Moung Soui on the 26th. The area was much the same as the previous morning. Fog and low clouds enveloped the area, concealing enemy positions and drastically restricting friendly air sorties. Moreover, they discovered that the number of FAN desertions had escalated, and only a few hundred troops remained to defend the entire area.

Later, columns of troops and civilians were visible streaming toward the strip and also west of Moung Soui, Mike called Moberg to inform him about incoming fire and that it appeared the Thai were having problems at their position.

Mo replied, *"They can't have problems, they have all the artillery and guns they need out there."*

"Oh? You might have them, but all I can see is a string of individuals moving west."

Mo began yelling over the radio for the Thai to return to their guns.

Mike said, *"You are not talking to anyone. They are all walking back to Moung Soui. Come down here and look."*

Moberg descended, and after buzzing the area confirmed that it appeared the Thai had abandoned the forward guns at Ban Khay.



UH-34D pilot working at Moug Soui during the enemy spring offensive.
Jarina Collection.

During a fueling stop and repairs at Sam Tong, Mike joined old timer, Captain Elmer Munsell in Hotel-48.

With the Special Mission completed, I was assigned to work at Site-108 single pilot. Except for stops at Long Tieng for fuel and supplies, I worked all day shuttling ammunition to defensive sites in the hills adjacent to and overlooking Moung Soui, and delivering a few passengers to Xieng Dat.

When the site was finally abandoned, I learned that the enemy had been hiding in the grass just east of the strip. This was a particularly chilling revelation, for all day I had been departing the loading area and climbing to the right toward hilltop pads directly over this area-just one burst at low level and...

At day's end, I departed for Udorn and chocked in about dark.

During spates of foul weather, when ceilings were very low and activity at the airfield was limited to IFR flights, and I was low on fuel, I identified and followed the narrow track railway that ran south from Nong Khai into Udorn for orientation and navigation. While contacting Brigham Control, the Air Force radar control facility, on UHF frequency 338.3, for clearance to the field, after providing my approximate position and receiving a discrete frequency to squawk on the identification friend or foe (IFF) set, I would request a *"special VFR iron compass narrow railroad gage approach"* to the approach end of Runway 30. At first, this was difficult for the folks in the tower to comprehend from the smart-ass Air America pilot, but eventually they understood the logic and accepted my approach as safe and affording positive control.

An Agency Weekly Summary titled *"Communist forces have launched a series of ground attacks against government positions near the PDJ"* was prepared for Friday dissemination:

"...One NVA prisoner claims that his unit moved into Laos from North Vietnam in early June with the specific purpose of attacking Moung Soui. The ability of the NVA to move their forces into position around Moung Soui demonstrates the vulnerability of the neutralist headquarters to enemy forces situated directly east on the PDJ. It is also fresh evidence that the NVA can deploy troops into Xieng Khouang Province with little warning or chance of detection.

In apparently related moves, the communists drove government troops from Phou Soung (LS-156).³ And hit government guerrilla outposts on the southern rim. These responses are almost certainly in response to VP's recent effort to re-establish a government presence on the [PDJ]...

[The attack] may have been intended as a commensurate response to the government's occupation for six weeks this spring of the once inviolate communist base of Xieng Khouang Ville. The attack may also have made a concerted effort to portray communist 'patriotic neutralist' elements as the 'true representatives' of the neutralist faction. Such pretensions presumably would be furthered by the capture of the neutralist headquarters at Moung Soui." ⁴

³ Located on Route-7, east of the Routes 7/13 Sala Phou Khoun road junction. The site was reclaimed in early July.

⁴ Segment Sources:
 Blaine Jensen Letter.
 Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 211-212, 223 fn #12.
 Victor Anthony, *The War in Northern Laos*, 302-304.
 Robert Moberg, CWO Lucious Theodore Untalan, Deceased: 281st AHC 1968-1969, Internet,.
 Bill Leary 1969 Notes, 03/16/85, Interview with Duane Keele.
 Bill Leary Notes-Ballard 124-125.
 Duane Keele Email, to Author 08/22/12.
 Mike Jarina Interviews.
 Extracts from ABCCC Reports.
 EW Knight Email.
 John Pratt, *CHECO*, 103-104.
 Weekly Summary: Communist Forces..., 7, Internet, foia.icia.gov/scripts/cgise;
 CIA Bulletins, 06/25-25/69, 07/05/69. Laos.

BAN KHAY AND MOUNG SOUI ABANDONED

"A fresh communist ground attack-once again with the support of tanks-in the early hours of 27 June further reduced the base's defensive perimeter and resulted in the desertion of large numbers of the government's neutralist troops...

Lao military leaders must choose soon whether to give up Moung Soui or bring in new reinforcements. The inability of government troops to re-establish a viable defensive perimeter and the doubtful morale of the remaining defenders suggest that the situation will be difficult to salvage if the communists continue to press their attack....

The loss of Moung Soui would have little immediate effect on the military situation in Xieng Khouang Province. Although some Lao aircraft have staged from the Moung Soui airstrip, the base itself and the large neutralist garrison there have contributed relatively little to either the defense of the [PDJ] or to the government bases farther north. If the communists hold Moung Soui, however, they will be in a better position to move westward and re-establish their presence in northern Vientiane Province, from which they were driven several years ago.

The psychological impact of the fall of Moung Soui would be more severe. In addition to raising new alarms about communist military intentions, the attack will deflate the recently raised hopes of Lao leaders that Hanoi might be more willing to reach a political settlement in Laos" ⁵

Almost surrounded, the Thai artillery unit at Ban Khay was constantly hammered by accurate enemy fire. Under the cover of morning fog common to the area, an infantry attack commenced, supported by PT-76 tanks. Later, clearing skies enabled some

⁵ CIA Daily Bulletin, 06/27/69. Laos: Government forces are still holding at Moung Soui, but the end appears near.

friendly air to slip into the battlefield and lay waste to offensive assets.

With only a quarter of the original 4,000 Neutralists remaining to defend the entire Moung Soui complex, and the barbarians once again at the gates, despite a willingness of Thai officers and American advisors to remain at their posts, Ban Khay was deemed indefensible and an evacuation planned. As word of the impending evacuation filtered down the rank and file, Thai personnel began removing breechblocks from artillery pieces still in commission and sabotaging the base's rolling stock.

Alerted for several days, except for H-34s and Bells already present at the parallel sites of Sites 20 and 20A, a mixed armada of USAF and Air America helicopters from Nakhon Phanom and Udorn converged on Long Tieng early Friday morning. Assets, including helicopters arriving from Sam Tong, numbering about two dozen, parked on the loading-unloading ramp and along both sides of the runway. A long wait commenced as crews lounged in either the hostel or the Raven hooch on Customer hill, as ranking leaders combed through current battlefield intelligence and meteorological information to decide when it was propitious to launch all hands.

"The wholesale desertion of neutralist troops forced the government's hand, although enemy pressure had eased..."

Communist forces have mounted a number of small-scale attacks against the lightly defended Route-7/13 road junction to the west of Moung Soui, but there are no signs that the enemy is moving large numbers of troops into western Xieng Khouang Province.

The Lao communist radio has termed the recent fighting a defensive strategic operation designed to regain one of the 'important strategic positions' the communists held at the time

the 1962 Geneva Accords were signed. the communists will probably trumpet the capture of Moung Soui as 'proof' that the pro-communist neutralist faction represents the genuine neutralists in the tripartite Laotian government." ⁶

On 27 June, with A-1E escort accompanying the staggered helicopter gaggle to Site-108, the evacuation commenced with Air Force emphasis centered on removing the remaining Thai artillery men from Ban Khay. Air America pilots would concentrate on lifting refugees from the Moung Soui complex.

Flying Hotel-62, Jarina, Williams, and Baccay, and other H-34 crews flew loads of Meo troops into Site-108 to help form temporary defensive positions. Then they began moving refugees twelve miles south-southwest to new Xieng Dat (LS-117), where Commanding Officer Colonel Sing and a sizable number of FAN troops had already fled and were thought might provide a modicum of defense.

Despite steadily worsening weather, the operation continued until almost five o'clock. Mike and Jim flew less than one fuel load. During that period, the combined civilian and military force removed almost 500 Thai, Meo and dependents to either Site-117 or Long Tieng. Even though the base was being abandoned, many people still converged on the site and streamed west away from enemy positions.

Jim remained as PIC of Hotel-62 the next day while Mike deadheaded home on four separate aircraft, two H-34s, a CASI Porter, and a Caribou.

The evacuation operation was not easy, particularly for the relatively inexperienced Air Force helicopter crews working under the intense pressure cooker of combat operations.

⁶ CIA Daily Bulletin, 06/28/69. Laos: Government forces abandoned Moung Soui.

From a distance, smoke, fires and explosions were evident throughout the area and around a large field surrounded by flooded rice paddies. Well-disciplined Thai troops waited patiently at the landing zone in ranks for evacuation. Flying at comfortable intervals in trail formation, individual Air Force helicopters arrived and landed into the wind. One pilot, having barely enough power to hover, gingerly turned his heavily laden machine 180 degrees downwind for takeoff away from the direction of enemy fire. Lacking sufficient power to achieve translational lift for forward flight, the aircraft scooted across the ground at low level toward a building. Therefore, to avoid an impending crash, the PIC jerked the collective upward into his armpit. The last-second effort was sufficient to clear the obstacle, but the resulting loss of RPM and corresponding lift caused the helicopter to plunge into a wet paddy.

Igor Sikorsky, renown for manufacturing very durable machines, won once again. Since the aircraft landed in a three-point flat configuration, with a slight roll cushioned by forgiving water, no overt damage was incurred. Four troopers were invited to disembark and the remaining soldiers were flown to Long Tieng.

The fun was not over. A few minutes later, while in an approach landing mode, another CH-3E pilot landed on a fencepost. Believing enemy were shooting the helicopter down, the cabin crew wildly fired their weapons, as the pilot frantically reversed course, and pulled pitch to head away from the enemy. As a result, Pony Express-33 from the 21st Special Operations Squadron (SOS), 56th Air Commando Wing (ACW) Nakhon Phanom, settled into a rice paddy off the end of the runway. The hypersensitive crew then abandoned the Pony Express ship and dashed to Captain Larry Henesy's H-34 for immediate evacuation to The Alternate. Later in the day, Henesy, who had supposedly

been checked out in an S-61, or U.S. Navy version of the Sikorsky CH-3, examined the downed aircraft. After determining the ship damaged but still flyable, he offered to move the machine to a safer location. However, Air Force leaders refused the offer and the aircraft was later destroyed. ⁷ ⁸

I was at the Udorn airfield late on the 27th enjoying friendly conversation and a cool, tasty beer at the Club while attempting to determine what was occurring at Moung Soui from upcountry late arrivals. Before leaving for the house, I checked the daily flight schedule and discovered my name:

"Casterlin to LS-20A via H-33, relieve [Ken] Wood in N1196W, RON, pickup at 0630."

The B-Bus driver arrived at our house on Benjarn Road and activated his horn at the appointed time. After stowing my RON gear in the rear compartment, we left to retrieve other crewmembers from the area. At length we were deposited at the north side of the operations-administration building under the Transportation Department carport. Down the hall, I rechecked the schedule for changes and collected my weapon bag from the pilot locker room. Contained in an especially durable bag, the AK-47 rifle and five full magazines were heavy, but provided me a sense of well-being should I be forced down in enemy territory and require a standoff device to prevent capture until rescued. After collecting my gear and obtaining a Company-supplied

⁷ USAF History erroneously records that CH-3E 65-15691 was shot down at Moung Soui and declared a combat operational loss; we are all aware that Air Force records are impeccable and beyond reproach.

⁸ VictorAnthony, 302.
Ken Conboy, 212-213.
Mike Jarina Interviews.
EW Knight Email.
Robert Arnau, The Evacuation of Moung Soui, Laos.

SAT 28 JUN 69

A/C No.	FUEL	ACL	CREW	LTD	P/U	DESTINATION	REMARKS
H8803	FULL		MOHER <u>CHANPANIL</u>	0900L	0800L 0800L	TO8/	STANDBY AT FIELD
H-39	FULL		ALLENDORFER <u>LEGASPI</u>	0730L	0600L 0600L	TO8/LO8/LS20	AID/RON
H-33	FULL		McCAULEY HENTHORN(D/H) <u>LEONIDA</u>	0730L	0600L 0630L 0600L	TO8/LO8/LS20A	RO/RON
H-32	FULL		VAN ETIEN <u>PIGOTT</u>	0730L	0600L 0600L	TO8/LO8/LS20	AID/RON
H-66	FULL		ANKERBERG <u>GACULAIS</u>	0800L	0630L 0630L	TO8/LS118A	713/RON <u>SEE NOTE 6</u>
H-TBA	-		McENTEE <u>TONGBAYAI</u>	0830L	0700L 0700L	LCL	FCF
XW-PFG	FULL		GODDARD <u>WOODS</u>	0700L	- 0530L	LCL	FCF <u>SEE NOTE 3</u>
N8511F	FULL		GODDARD <u>EILER</u>	1100L	- 0930L	LCL	FCF
N9542Z			BONANSINGA <u>WATERS</u>	0900L	0730L 0730L	TO8/AS DIRECTED	
57-6293	1000	16126	CAVILL STAHLMAN <u>BUZARD/STONE</u>	0730L	0600L 0600L 0600L	TO8/LS20A/TO8 SHTLS	MAINT TAXI TO Q-WAREHO AT: 0600L
54-0613	640	18173	RANDALL COOPER <u>SUTHI</u>	0645L 0900L	- -	TO8/LO8(AOC) LO8/LS20A/LO8 SHTLS.....	AFD REPORT TO A/C 060 RON LO8
55-4576	1000	-	WYCHE DRIVER <u>SEETHALER/MEECHAI</u>	0800L	- -	TO8/AS DIRECTED	BY PPG/LO8.....RON LO PIC TAXI TO PPG AT: 0
56-4374	1000	-	VAN HELLEN STENSLOFF <u>KNOP/PRAVES</u>	0815L	- -	TO8/AS DIRECTED	BY PPG/LO8.....RON LO PIC TAXI TO PPG AT: 0
54-0617	1000	-	SMITH,GV WIENKER <u>RUSSADA/REED</u>	0700L ASAP	- 0600L	LCL TO8/AS DIRECTED BY PPG.....	FCF RON TO8
55-4555	-	-	HINES MacPHERSON <u>PRAMOTE</u>	0800L ASAP 1700L	- -	LO8/LS20A/LO8 SHTLS LO8/LS268/LO8 LO8/TO8(AOC).....	RON TO8
54-0636	-	-	BUCKLEY KERCH <u>GAMELIN/CHOOMPOL</u>	ASAP	- -	L11/TO8.....	RON TO8

NOTES:

1. CASTERLIN TO LS20A VIA H-33 RELIEVE WOOD IN N1196W RON.....P/U 0630L
2. FILLIPI TO LS20A VIA H-33 RELIEVE WEITZ IN XW-PFJ RON.....P/U 0630L
3. WOODS PREPARED FOR RON
4. ROBERTSON STANDBY AT HOME
5. MELVIN TO LS20A VIA H-33 RELIEVE SIMMONS IN XW-PFJ RON.....P/U 0630L
6. TAXI TO Q-WAREHOUSE PICK UP CARGO FOR LS118A

ADDITIONAL PICK-UPS: 0515L SURAPHOL, THILASAK, THAWAT, ANUPAP, TRIAM, SHAI, SAWAI, SATHIEN.
0530L SURBPONG.....0540L KOON

A representative 06/28/69 Air America Operations Department daily flight schedule listing a formidable array and assortment of aircraft and crews dispatched to various Lao upcountry areas. Note #1 indicates the Author's destination.

Author Collection.

survival and flack vest from supply,⁹ another bus driver drove me to the flight line.

UH-34D Captain JJ McCauley was assigned to work ARMA Requirements Office Moung Soui. Hotel-33 did not make the grade, so JJ was reassigned Hotel-37. When Hotel-33 was determined airworthy, Nikki Fillipi, Don Henthorn (the "Crazy Indian"), and I were reassigned to deadhead upcountry on this machine. Because of the aircraft change, regional poor weather, and interim stops at Wattay Airport and Sam Tong, it was nearly two hours before I reached The Alternate. There I joined Captain Dick Elder and Flight Mechanic Demandal in the 204B. Since weather and enemy conditions rendered Moung Soui work untenable, we remained at the hostel dinner tables feeding our faces and waiting for "the word" to launch.

"The word," a ubiquitous term couched in the lingo of the day to describe anticipated information, finally arrived during the afternoon. Several H-34, Bell, and USAF helicopter crews cranked up, taxied, took off, and proceeded north toward the target. The mission was programmed to extract as many remaining souls as possible from the immediate Moung Soui complex and deposit them at Xieng Dat. USAF A-1E Skyraiders arrived from Nakhon Phanom and orbited on station to discourage enemy fire and ensure our safety. From the air, columns of people were observed streaming west along Route-7. During a three-and-a-half-hour period we exfiltrated many people from landing zones northwest of the abandoned site to Xieng Dat. Since the distance was short and Special Missions were authorized by the Customer, we logged seven missions.

⁹ Flack vest: Generally considered too nasty to wear by sophisticated helicopter pilots, the flack vest was normally placed at the bottom of the Bell's Plexiglas chin bubble to minimize shards of plastic and shrapnel impacting the cockpit.

From my perspective, since no enemy fire was observed during the operation, aside from foul weather hazards, I considered the missions almost a license to steal. Almost--but not entirely--if one judged or rationalized that over time they all generally averaged out. Relatively uncomplicated missions tended to counter particularly difficult ones. However, what occurred that day was obnoxious and demeaning to our reputations and overall helicopter program. It was especially painful to me, for us old timers had labored hard to gain a modicum of respect and renown for the program during the volatile but successful SAR era.

Toward the end of the day, a few more volatile and vocal pilots excitedly began querying each other and commenting on how many "greenies" they had amassed over a two-day period. The talk was infectious; bragging begat bragging over the airways. Pre-calculating their money, a few euphorically declared they had logged more than seventy missions. I was amazed, for at fifty dollars a pop, working the math resulted in quite a tidy sum. Embarrassing, unprofessional, and demeaning, the obnoxious chatter continued uninhibited. Moreover, the frivolous talk seemed pointed, possibly to offend USAF pilots who were exposed to exactly the same risks for considerably less pay. Yet, not one of us mustered enough gumption to scold the offenders and recommend that the dialogue cease. Finally, tired of the subject, silence mercifully reigned.

I considered it fortunate that "straight shooting" CPH Knight was absent from the field and missed the sickening verbiage his people spouted. Wayne, who loved flying, often under the guise of upcountry check rides, also flew the line as much as the Chief Pilot management slot would allow. Consequently, many pilots either forgot or did not care that



Bedraggled refugees with possessions patiently waiting for a ride out of the MOUNG SOUI, LAOS, area.

Jarina Collection.

Wayne was cognizant of the type mission they normally flew. Therefore, Wayne often refused to process Special Mission claims he regarded as obviously frivolous greenie requests that were generally submitted from repeat greedy individuals--especially ones for which he had little or no respect. Cementing his opinion regarding bogus greenies, he had even participated in one of the missions for which a fallacious claim was submitted by offenders for mission pay.

With Moug Soui apparently down the tubes, the majority of refugees, soldiers, and dependents moved, others moving west on foot, and ceilings lowering, we retired to our respective bases to unwind and attempt to obtain some rest.

SKYRAIDERS

Nakhon Phanom-based A-1E pilots, who normally only worked the Steel Tiger area, were assigned strike duty in Barrel Roll (MR-2) and missions to provide helicopter escort for the evacuation. A few Hobo Skyraider cockpits were configured with seating to accommodate a pair of pilots for checkout and check ride purposes.

Upon arrival in the Site-108 area, the men in the two planes observed a daisy chain of Air America helicopters shuttling people out of and returning to landing zones. They radioed their presence and intentions, then assumed a position to observe the area for enemy infantry and escort the helicopters west. From altitude, the H-34s reminded one Air Force pilot of "small green insects buzzing about the hills." Occasionally, amid AAA fire, a Raven FAC marked and had fast movers strike discarded equipment along the runway.

When the Skyraider pilots were low on fuel, and with another flight inbound, an O-1 Raven FAC recommended the pilots drop their remaining stores on abandoned supplies that he

described. Lead rolled into a dive and delivered his napalm canisters with the intention of igniting the mixture with twenty mike-mike rounds. The technique worked, but the explosive blast at low level forced the plane into the low ceiling. The wingman followed, but observed a continuous arc of tracer fire from a hill on the southeast side of the field. With the target clearly in sight, the pilots attacked the AAA site.

The lead aircraft was hit. With the right wing on fire, the two pilots exited the crippled plane, one with considerable difficulty. Following a Mayday call from wing, two UH-34D crews arrived to successfully perform the rescue. The Hobo pilots were delivered to Long Tieng and taken to the hostel for whatever first aid was required and refreshment. Later Jolly Green pilots ferried the A-1 drivers back to their Nakhon Phanom base.

AFTERMATH

Predictably, during the siege and loss of Moung Soui there was much consternation in Vientiane. The base had been strongly supported by USG and tightly held since 1964. ¹⁰ Regardless of their inability to contribute little else to the war effort, FAN defenses theoretically formed a barrier to enemy movement along established arteries south toward the Mekong. Now, with most of Houa Phan Province, the Plain of Jars, and lowland areas from the border east of Nong Het, east of Xieng Khouang Ville, and beyond under enemy control, they could consolidate victories and then maneuver at will.

Even though the number of FAN defenders substantially outnumbered the dreaded Vietnamese, the Neutralist fighting record and staying power of troops under fire was abysmal and predictable--in almost all cases they broke and ran from the

¹⁰ If not actually forming a real or tacit accommodation, the Neutralists were generally left alone by the enemy.

battlefield. The unheard-of use of Soviet PT-76 tanks by the enemy added a dab of terror tactics to the offensive and a new dimension in the Military Region Two conflict. Normally air could have easily neutralized this mechanized threat, but low ceilings and foul weather initially prevented visual contact of vehicles or troops in the open. Consequently, the tanks were able to perform their dirty work until seventy percent were rendered non-functional. During periods of clearing weather, Raven FACs from Long Tieng directed air strikes and exacted a terrible toll on enemy forces. The Thai in exposed forward positions held the fort until the reduced number of troops and guns rendered them relatively ineffective, and a distinct liability if captured.

In contrast, the weather worked somewhat to our advantage masking our helicopter flights and allowing mostly incident-free evacuations. Also, muddy conditions, flooded rice paddies, and allied air slowed or complicated enemy supply efforts along LOCs, and prevented large scale offensives toward friendly defensive positions. Hence, there was sufficient time to reform defenses, establish a semblance of fighting units, and evacuate people at the final hour.

The timely evacuation of so many refugees from Moung Soui was duly noted at Washington top levels. Even though we never received tangible kudos (except for greenies), four days after the fact, a message was forwarded from the Agency:

"The military attaché (ARMA) Vientiane has reported to senior military headquarters throughout the Far East on the evacuation of Moung Soui...no praise can evaluate the aircrews of the unarmed and vulnerable helicopters who time and time again descended into the enemy controlled area at minimum altitude and airspeed...These deeds should not go unnoted to the men of the Air Force helicopter units and their comrades of Air America, Inc.

Within the bounds of security, I ask that you make known to the Air America personnel concerned my personal admiration and respect for their courage and fortitude. If security precludes my association with the commendation to certain personnel, I ask that you take appropriate action in the name of the Air America Executive Committee." ¹¹

As the evacuation wound down, with rumors that large numbers of enemy were moving west toward Site-108, General Vang Pao, already planning a counteroffensive before the enemy could consolidate their gains, requested outside assistance in the form of a battalion from southern military regions not under siege. These units were calculated to encourage Colonel Sing's FAN troops at Xieng Dat, and reinforce and strengthen Vang Pao's western flank against further enemy advance. Protecting regional interests, FAR response was lukewarm at first. Then, conceding that the situation warranted help, FAR assented to dispatch a parachute battalion from Seno for Vang Pao's disposition.

Meanwhile on the Vientiane political front, Souvanna Phouma complained to the press that the recent attack constituted a North Vietnamese invasion, and RLG prepared propaganda for dissemination including details accusing North Vietnam of violating the Geneva Accords. Attempts by RLG to have the three International Control Commission (ICC) representatives fly to Site-108 in the French-piloted white ICC H-34s, originally transferred to and still maintained and tested by Air America, to investigate purported violations, were discounted as virtually impossible to execute. The justification: as in the case of past accusations and investigation attempts, the enemy would fail to cooperate and permit ICC entry into "their"

¹¹ Agency Message, to Vientiane (redacted) from CITE Director, 07/02/69, RE Cushman, Acting DCI, Releasing Officer.

territory. Consequently, it was more of the same for the inept and fractious organization consisting of a widely diverse group--a Pole (communist), an Indian (neutral), and a Canadian (west).

Considering the enemy capture of Moung Soui and recent light probes on the Route 13/7 junction at Sala Phu Khoun--sites highly egregious--State readily approved Vang Pao's counteroffensive plans to reclaim Site-108 within ten days.¹² A "simple coordinated" pincer movement was conceived. From a forward command post at San Luang (LS-41), VP would control and direct units of Seno BP-101 troops from Ban Na (LS-15), a Meo battalion from Site-41, and a FAN battalion from Phou So (LS-57) while converging on the objective. Other Meo units would move into Xieng Dat to reinforce FAN's rapidly vanishing forces and hopefully encourage those remaining to participate in the operation.

COUNTEROFFENSIVE

"Laos is grim. It really looks like we are going to lose a big portion of it. The NVA have moved in and it looks like they mean to stay. There has been some reporting about Moung Soui over here and I have been wondering if you get coverage in the States.

What I am worried about more than anything is a sapper team coming into our RON area [at Long Tieng] some night. They could really raise hell without us being able to do much. [The hostel was built off the ground. Grenades or satchel charges thrown under the building would cause its destruction and those sleeping inside.] We have some weapons that we have conned from people, so we might give some account of ourselves. I hope that

¹²Encountering only light resistance, the junction was cleared of enemy by early July.

we have warning so we can evacuate in time. We have been expecting something for months."

Letter Home, 07/21/69.

"Yes, we have been getting news of the operations in Laos and I am enclosing a clipping from the Courier News for your perusal. All I can say on this subject is if you are expecting an attack on your area, why in hell don't you prepare for it? To me it is unthinkable not to have guards night and day alert enough to avoid any confrontation, either from native or enemy sources. (Armchair General!)"

Letter from Home, 07/28/69

Preparations for the July offensive immediately commenced. During clearing weather, on the 29th, along with other helicopter crews, as troops arrived from Military Region Three by large fixed wing, I shuttled Seno units from Long Tieng to Site-15. We also began lifting Meo forces into San Luang. Finally enjoying a full day of work, I "choked in" at dark.

As part of the large undertaking, Mike Jarina arrived from Udorn in Hotel-63 with Captain Lloyd Higgins and Flight Mechanic Frank Fee. Logging forty-eight landings, they also participated in the Ban Na, San Luang, and Xieng Dat shuttles. Double crewed, they conducted two area Special Missions. A tail pylon problem was discovered at day's end, resulting in an aircraft switch to Hotel-49 that included Flight Mechanic Joe Siaotong.

Late Monday morning, after the ceiling lifted sufficiently to expose the west gap in the Site-20A valley, we repositioned

troops for the Moung Soui push. This continued for the remainder of the afternoon. ¹³

Because of its configuration and higher elevation, ceilings at Sam Tong curtailed flying until early afternoon. Despite the abbreviated day, Mike still conducted twenty-six landings that included a flight to San Luang with Vang Pao, taking refugees to a site seven miles west of Moun Phan (LS-37), and shuttling troops up to Skyline Ridge to form a listening post between the two sites and patrol the high ground.

On 1 July, under relatively decent weather conditions, the planned offensive commenced. Directed by Raven FACs, friendly air mounted numerous sorties with satisfactory BDA reported. Moving under the air strike umbrella, Meo forces surged north out of Site-41 and made steady progress toward Moung Soui. However, coordinated maneuvers were not a reliable attribute of all our Lao allies. Consequently, there were initial delays at Ban Na; little movement from Xieng Dat; and nothing at all from Phou So.

FAR troops managed to recover and hold the critical Sala Phu Khoun 7/13 road junction.

As troops were mustered for the operation, we continued to move them forward to support Vang Pao's push.

Late in the day Demandal and I transferred to 11F.

Because of the fluidity and volatility of enemy movement in the region, VP chose not to ignore his eastern and northern

¹³ During periods of adverse and marginal weather, helicopter pilots used three gaps of varying elevations to exit and enter the Long Tieng Valley: the normal south gap, also used by fixed wing pilots for landings and takeoffs; the west gap, the lowest and preferred route in adverse weather, was the same elevation as the Alternate bowl and led toward the Nam Ngum; and the least favored north gap between karsts adjoining the extreme eastern portion of Skyline.

flanks. Consequently, Jarina spent the day shuttling troops from Padong (LS-05) and Tha Tam Bleung (LS-72) to outposts, and delivering other personnel from Long Tieng to the northwestern front. Attesting to Mike's superior work ethic, he logged fifty-two landings.

Sometimes adverse ingredients unrelated to the hostilities of combat happened in aviation when one least expected them. This was evident when an incident occurred at Luang Prabang that could have resulted in a crewmember fatality. While Larry Egan parked Hotel-44 in front of the Customer warehouse on the east side of the runway, a C-130 pilot landed. During rollout, the 130's right wing tip clipped the H-34's still rotating rotor blade system. Severe oscillations followed to Hotel-44. Second pilot, Ivar Gram, was unceremoniously bounced around the cockpit, receiving a severe head injury. Ivar was provided first aid at the local hospital, then evacuated to Udorn. In time, Ivar recovered and returned to the line.

An initial investigation revealed substantial damage to the dynamic components of Hotel-44's transmission and rotor blade system.

Weather inundated the area on Tuesday, curtailing or severely limiting supporting allied air strikes, which amounted to only six flights. Depending on a helicopter pilot's intimate knowledge of the area and ability to work at low levels during even the worst weather, some missions were completed. However, most of this morning was lost, but when conditions improved, I flew a little more than half a day in support of the slow-moving Site-108 operation.

Late in the day, government forces reported troops-in-contact at Xieng Dat. A Raven pilot was trolling to investigate while Alleycat replaced Cricket as the airborne control.

In contrast to my abbreviated flight hours, Jarina conducted thirty-five shuttles, and managed to fly a full day to Site-5 and Site-72 in semi-improved weather conditions.

On the third my upcountry assignment in the Barrel was complete. Following one shuttle, I was relieved at The Alternate and deadheaded to Udorn on C-123 293.

During the day all strike flights were able to expend ordnance in the Moung Soui area.

As hostilities heated up, enemy contact continued around Xieng Dat. On the 5th, Quiet Man, the FAG attached to the Meo unit assigned to stiffen Site-26, reported fighting near the site. Cricket dispatched four flights in support, which helped thwart the attack.

On the same day Houei Ki Nin (LS-38), an original site in the early scheme of Vang Pao's defense line that tied in the eastern most portion of the northern flank along the Nam Ngum, was reported lost. Moreover, thousands of enemy troops were reputedly massing between Site-38 and the western edge of the Plain of Jars near Moung Phan (L-106). Later air strikes in this area confirmed the presence of many enemy.

The next day Firefly A-1 flights and other strike aircraft worked to silence crew-served mortar tubes, rocket launchers, and gun positions in the Xieng Dat-Moung Soui areas. Quiet Man was again reporting TIC at his location. In a tally of local sites around Moung Soui, Raven-36 later relayed to ABCCC that Houei Ki Nin was half friendly, half unfriendly; seven miles to the west San Louang (LS-41) was holding, but an enemy unit was located a little more than a mile northeast; and enemy were still in the Xieng Dat area in small pockets. Lastly, the Phou So radio operator reported enemy four miles north of Site-108.

Jarina remained in the field, but was assigned to work 713 in the eastern portion of Zone Steel. He performed numerous

shuttles (26) out of the Moung Moc regional headquarters. One shutdown occurred at Ban Nam Xao (LS-240), twenty miles north northwest of Site-46.

The trip reminded Mike of a time when he was moving lepers for Father Bouchard from the eastern border to a new location at the base of hills where the mountains ceased and the Vientiane flood plain began. Because of the stigma attached to the dreadful disease and shunned by normal folks, most leper villages were located far from those inhabited by the rest of society. The new area was still remote, but far easier for Luke to visit and supply. Mike retrieved a load of the physically challenged people and noticed crossbows and flintlock rifles were included in their possessions. While en route to Sam Tong, believing that leprosy was not contagious, Mike asked Luke if he could buy a few artifacts.

Luke replied, *"I don't think you want to buy those."*

Their work completed, Air America's Chief Accident Investigator, Doug Dreifus and a gray-haired assistant who had been staying at Site-20, learning that Mike was headed south, asked for a ride. Mike established Doug in the left cockpit seat and the other man in the cabin section. After depositing the lepers, Jarina continued to Wattay Airport, dropped his passengers, and proceeded to Udorn.

The following day Mike encountered Dreifus. Still shaken, Doug unloaded on Mike, saying, *"Do you know you carried lepers on that helicopter yesterday? If I had known that, I would have never entered the ship."*

Jarina answered, *"If you are concerned, don't ever ride with us again, as we carry lepers all the time."*

An area also becoming more active, TICs were reported in the immediate Moung Moc area on 6 July. A-1 strikes destroyed

many enemy bunkers and trenches allowing friendly troops to establish a position off the runway.

Monsoon weather curtailed Moung Soui's offensive supporting air strikes on Friday. As flying conditions permitted, Jarina, along with Joe Siaotong and Rick Strba conducted operations between Padong and the high ground at Phou Houang (LS-140), located on the southeastern edge of the PDJ, three miles northeast of Khang Kho (LS-204). This site provided a commanding view of the southern Plain and, like at Khang Kho, afforded an excellent jump-off position for movement onto the PDJ. Finishing this work, Mike moved west to Vang Pao's command post at San Luang and Than Heup (LS-238), a site three miles southeast of Site-41, close to Ban Nam Pit, a site Chris Crisologo and I had blasted with a BAR in 1964 when the complexion of the war morphed into new and more serious implications for all parties.

The next day weather cleared somewhat permitting friendly air to pound enemy hard points and allow Meo and Seno troopers to move onto high ground within sight of their intended target. However, even though enemy resistance was not strong, a coordinated pincer movement did not evolve as envisioned. This led VP and his advisors to consider that the enemy was regrouping to strengthen Moung Soui defenses. Moreover, noticeably absent from the government push were FAN forces from Xieng Dat and Phou So.

Jarina's RON was complete. After an abbreviated morning in H-49, he transferred to Hotel-32. Along with Flight Mechanic Leonardo, he ferried the ship to Udorn with a stop at a site eight miles south of Ban Keun and Vientiane.

The same day Mike returned to Udorn, I was scheduled for a deadhead flight to Long Tieng on CASI C-47 XW-PDE. I was to join Scratch Kanach and John Simmons in PFF to conduct a Special Mission north of Luang Prabang.

A stingy policy at the time relegated me to logging deadhead time from Luang Prabang to the start point at Mok Lok (LS-131), a former artillery firebase six miles south of Nam Bac. Infiltration of the road watch team was conducted to TJ0848, forty-three miles northwest to an area close to Route-48, a LOC that stretched from Phong Saly to MOUNG KHOUA at the Nam Ou, where it linked with Route-19 from Dien Bien Phu. Because no bridge existed to cross to Nam Ou, supplies were unloaded at the river and stored in caves or bunkers for further movement south by barges to supply communist troops located in the Nam Bac area and around LP. After return to Mok Lok, I resumed my deadhead role to 20 Alternate on PFF and to Udorn on 293. Total flight time logged: one hour and five minutes; total deadhead logged: four hours and thirty-nine minutes. This seemed like a consummate put down when one considered how little flight time we were accruing.

On the seventh, Jarina deadheaded upcountry on 293 to reclaim his command right seat on Hotel-49. Joe Siaotong remained his Flight Mechanic. Working for AID Mike moved lowland Lao Theung refugees out of harm's way from Xieng Dat southeast to Ban Na Luang (LS-66), located in a large refugee complex twenty miles south of Sam Tong on a tributary leading to the Nam Ngum. Then he shuttled people to New Na Luang (LS-252) two miles east of Site-66. Meo refugees were delivered to MOUNG CHA (LS-113), located in the long valley east and southeast of Phu Bia. Other Meo were deposited in the Long Pot area at Sam Sen (LS-112) on the west side of the Nam Ngum across the river from Nam Chong (LS-17). Making refugee lifts more difficult, the people had to be culled and distributed according to ethnic lines.

Therefore, attempts were made to deposit them in areas where relatives lived. ¹⁴

ANOTHER DAY, ANOTHER BELL ACCIDENT

Dick Elder crashed in XW-PFH at UH1047, a pad seven miles southwest of the large refugee camp at Houei Tong Ko (LS-184) in the Muong Son area. Following a purported engine failure, the aircraft slid or rolled down the hillside. The crew was recovered and flown to Udorn for medical examination at the USAF hospital. Doctor "No" looked at Dick and callously remarked that it would be lucky if he ever walked again. Air Force doctors judged Dick's back injury so severe as to require immediate medical evacuation to the USAF hospital at Clark AFB Luzon, Philippine Islands. Only slightly injured, Flight Mechanic, "Rusty" Irons and an American passenger were examined and released. ¹⁵

DOCTOR "NO"

Elderly Chinese gentleman, Doctor Kao, the first doctor to work at the Air America facility clinic during my tenure, still provided comic relief in an otherwise sterile environment. Pilots referred to the doctor by at least two nicknames-Doctor "Rice" by us old timers who used the Thai word for rice-kao-as a humorous moniker, while younger generation pilots used "No" for a reason I was not privy to. Neither, of course, was spoken in front of Kao, who was a beloved member of our Company team.

¹⁴ Mike Jarina Interviews and Flight Logs.
CIA Bulletin, The Government has Made Some Limited Gains in its Effort to Recapture Moug Soui, 07/05/69.
Extracts from ABCCC Reports.

¹⁵ Joe Leeker, The Aircraft of Air America, Papa Foxtrot Hotel.

Kao was likely a medical whiz in his younger days, but his advanced age and poor English ability rendered him a laughing stock within the Air America Udorn community. Over the years, humorous anecdotes and "somewhat" innocent pranks were played on the man by pilot jokesters.

Purportedly educated in what passed for a Shanghai medical university, during kinder, gentler days, Kao had amassed not only medical book learning, but also a proclivity for backcountry homeopathic remedies. On a shelf of his office in the clinic the doctor maintained an assortment of Chinese remedies, perhaps reserved as cure-alls for his Chinese or Thai clientele. One jar contained several pickled snakes. Curious, Captain Ben Van Etten asked the good Doctor about the reptiles. The doctor, who possessed a pervading sense of humor, laughed and mentioned something about them producing powerful medicine. After that, Ben considered Kao had as much fun with his "round-eye" patients as they had with him.

Except for the war, there wasn't a lot to talk about at the Club bar. Therefore, shopworn, often altered Doctor "No" stories usually found their way into conversation during the course of an evening.

For example, one-time Doc Kao prescribed nose drops for a Pilot's hemorrhoids.

Kao did not lack his own brand of humor. His usual comment was, *"Have you ever had this problem before?"*

Patient, *"Yes, Doc."*

"Well, you have it again." Then he would inquire, *"Did you see a doctor? What did he prescribe?"*

Another day, Captain John Ford, undergoing his semi-annual first-class physical, stood totally naked while Kao probed his chest with a stethoscope. Suddenly, the doctor transferred the instrument to his chest, back on John and then on himself.

Excited, Kao grabbed his medical bag and ran from the clinic exclaiming, *"I go see the Air Force doctor. I think I have heart attack."*

Left standing in the middle of the room, Ford signed off his own physical.

Results of the Air Force examination revealed that Kao had suffered no heart attack. ¹⁶

KNIGHT

Until Elder's accident, CPH Knight was restricted to a deluge of local FCF tasks and H-34 evaluation and training for recent Saigon arrivals. This also included obligatory semi-annual proficiency checks for line pilots in conjunction with FCFs.

On the first Joe Lopes (DOH 06/11/68) and RJ Marquardt (DOH 07/23/68) were either evaluated or trained in Hotel-39 and Hotel-57; two days later the CPH flew with Bill Johnson (DOH 05/31/66) in 144647, a ship that had been in the early helicopter inventory as Hotel-Bravo, and later transferred to the International Control Commission as CIC-5, bearing a distinctive white paint scheme. Part of the CIC contract included a provision that Air America's Maintenance Department would perform one-hundred-hour inspections and heavy maintenance. Operations Department pilots would FCF the machines.

The next day Wayne trained Hal Thompson (DOH 02/07/68) using 144638, the former Hotel-28 that had been transferred to the RLAF helicopter division.

¹⁶Ben Van Etten Memories.

Captain Al Cates (12/27/66) also checked in from Saigon after flying C-47s, C-45s, Pilatus Porters, and Bell helicopters. Cates was not enthralled with flying the H-34 (HUS-1), a machine he had not flown since the Marine Corps, but it afforded him the quickest way to Captain status. Transition to other programs would have to await progression through the seniority quagmire. Cates' refresher training took place on 139022, a UH-34G former Coast Guard model. A few days later, he had a proficiency check in Hotel-63.

The rest of the month Wayne conducted proficiency checks with Marquardt in Hotel-64 (second-in-command was all the man ever attained), Ivar Gram in Hotel-67, and John Ford in Hotel-46.

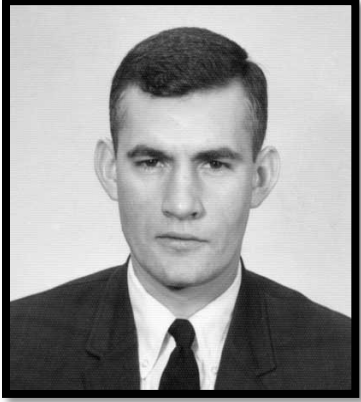
INVESTIGATION AND FINDINGS

Wayne ferried Papa Foxtrot Juliet upcountry Wednesday on the eighth with an accident investigating team, including a maintenance representative.

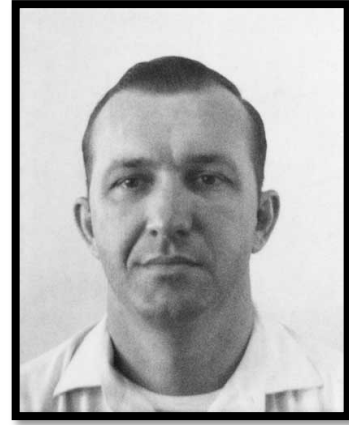
Papa Foxtrot Hotel had received substantial damage in the crash. Beside sudden stoppage to the drive train requiring major component changes, the tail boom was torn off. After recovery, PFH was repaired and eventually restored to service.

The crash was the commencement of serious Bell life-threatening malfunctions and accidents caused by worn parts that would only deteriorate with more usage. Fortunately, those of us in the Bell program had enjoyed a two-year respite from devastating accidents. It allowed inexperienced Bell pilots like me an opportunity to gain feel, confidence, proficiency, and learn to fly the machine to acceptable limits.

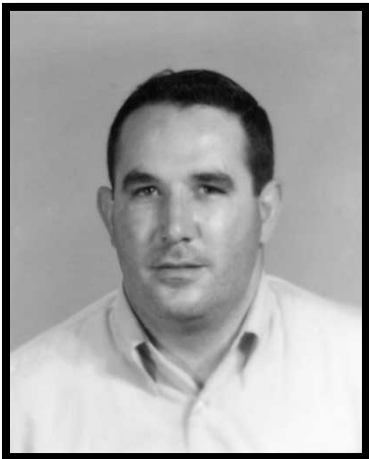
The human spine is one of the weakest portions of our skeletal structure (it has been said that humans were never



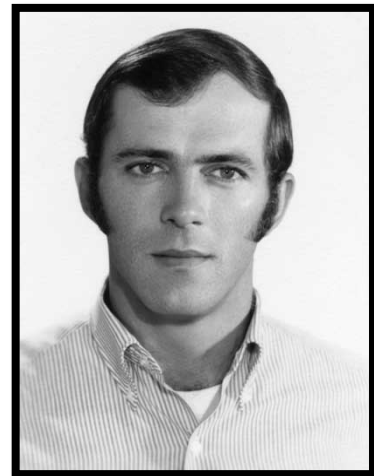
Al Cates



Bill Johnson



Joe Lopes



Ivar Gram

intended to walk upright), therefore, Elder was absent from Udorn for a long time. He had an invasive operation which fused damaged vertebrae. According to wag cronies, this procedure later improved his golf game on the Udorn course. When Dick returned to light duty in the CPH office, his recuperation was equally long.

Dick continued to maintain that the engine had quit. When I talked with him, Elder cited my campaign to inform all hands about the gas producer oscillations and raised the speculation that an FCU or governor had malfunctioned.

A preliminary accident board was convened and met while Dick Elder was absent. Another was held after he returned. CJ Abadie was in the chair. Jack Forney acted as the maintenance prosecutor, and Wayne Knight the pilot's defense. Of course, preconceived thinking and bias were involved. Wayne personally considered that Elder may have erred, but it was up to Forney to establish pilot error, and to him to support his man.

The forum became Forney's day in the sun. Surprising other participants, Jack strolled into the room looking like an attorney with an armful of books-basic aerodynamic and elementary theory of flight tomes we had all perused during basic training. Arguing PFH was in airworthy condition, he proceeded to draw diagrams on a chalk board indicating how rotor plane tilt would dissipate lift. Then he made theoretical accusations that Elder possibly banked too hard at too low an airspeed, an argument Herb Baker proposed to me after Ray Semora crashed a H-34 north of Mounng Soui. Forney's fatiguing and amateurish lecture pointing to pilot error might have carried some weight had the accident occurred within a vacuum. Still, Jack made a good case, but failed to completely convince others on the

board.¹⁷

Actually, there might have been some merit to Forney's argument, but Elder was a very senior pilot, and with the evidence proposed, Wayne could not believe he was lying. Wayne was considerably upset with Abadie, a man he considered no friend of or sympathetic to the helicopter line pilot. Ab merely sat and listened to Forney's spiel, when anyone who had ever flown a helicopter knew Jack's argument was going nowhere.

When Dick eventually returned to Udorn, the investigation continued. Questioned by Forney as to what happened, Elder simply replied, "*It quit.*" Elder, not known as an individual to waste time or effort on fools, often replied to murky questions with brusque glib remarks. Wayne observed Forney fuming under a not-so-calm exterior, persisting in his line of questioning as to the circumstances and details of the accident.

Dick once again patiently answered, "*It just quit. You know, flamed out.*"

Since Dick maintained that the engine had quit, and tangible evidence to the contrary was scanty, many questions remained unanswered. Because maintenance had no bench testing mechanism in the shops, no official finding that a malfunctioning FCU or governor was involved in the accident was proffered.

The accident further reduced our fleet and flight time, stimulating management to again consider reverting some of us to the H-34 program.

¹⁷ The Author knew virtually nothing regarding the crash other than the basics delineated here. However, from personal observation in the cockpit, although a highly proficient pilot, Elder was abrupt and quite rough on helicopter control systems.

EFFORTS AROUND MOUNG SOUI CONTINUE

"Government forces have moved into the high ground overlooking Moung Soui from the north, but poor weather and a stiffening enemy defense have hampered attempts to close in on the base from other directions. Added to this has been the unwillingness of pro-government neutralist forces to press attacks against the enemy. These forces were regrouped after the fall of Moung Soui to play a prominent role in the operation.

The communists have the option to put additional pressure on Vang Pao's thinly-stretched forces by attacking government guerrillas north of the [PDJ]. the local defense forces in this area were recently weakened in order to support the Moung Soui operation..." ¹⁸

Despite movement of Meo units from San Luang, and the Military Region Three parachute battalion from Ban Na, to within three miles of Moung Soui, there were many formidable obstacles with which to contend: many determined enemy lay between the forward battle lines and Site-108; there was still no tangible support from hundreds of FAN at Xieng Dat and Phou So; recent intelligence from several different sources revealed that vehicles carrying fresh Vietnamese battalions equipped with armor had moved onto the Plain of Jars; and lastly, adverse weather closed on the region to curtail or drastically limit air strikes on the eighth.

With "fat" Frank Fee now his Flight Mechanic, Jarina attempted to fly around the weather. He managed one trip to Ban Na Then (LS-249) three miles south of Moung Kassy (LS-153) on Route-13. However, further work was impossible, so he aborted and returned to Sam Tong with less than two hours logged.

¹⁸ CIA Daily Bulletin, 07/10/69. Laos: The week-old effort to recapture Moung Soui has made little progress.

Improved weather enabled Mike to work more than half a day on Wednesday. He conducted flights to the Xieng Dat area and Phou So (LS-57). Some of the work likely involved VP's officers attempting to urge FAN to participate in the Moung Soui operation.

Clearing weather conditions also allowed more productive air strikes on the Plain of Jars. One flight claimed a destroyed vehicle and a gun position producing large secondary explosions east and north of Phong Savan (LS-21) near Route-7. Other destruction of enemy supplies was achieved south of Lima-22.

FAG Quiet Man once again reported TIC while maneuvering between Xieng Dat and Moung Soui.

The next day was even more productive for Jarina, with forty-seven landings. He began with refugee work at Moung Ao Neua (LS-227) south-southeast of Moung Cha in the Nam Han Valley. Then he moved northwest to support Padong and Ban Na areas.

On Thursday, I deadheaded upcountry via Wattay Airport with Ellis Emery and Glen Woods in Papa Foxtrot Foxtrot. Our Special Mission involved an upper Military Region Two infiltration of a road watch team to UH928307, located on the western slopes of the towering and unique 6,821-foot Phou Pan range. The landing zone was selected between alternate Routes-68 and 73, likely chosen to confirm reports of enemy moving south out of Sam Neua Town toward the Ban Ban Valley and the Plain of Jars. We would use this same area to gather intelligence many times in 1969.

After our return to Alternate, I deadheaded to Udorn on C-123K 613.

Friday morning, Mike returned to Site-227. Then he moved west to Phou So (LS-57) and Phou Fa (LS-16-Agony). Improving weather conditions enabled him to fly the entire day while conducting forty-four landings. Despite Jarina's efforts, 11

July 1969 was a sad day in the annals of Lao aviation. Mike flew Hotel-49 to Udorn on Saturday for inspection and required maintenance. ¹⁹

TO DIE AND BECOME A LEGEND

After piloting T-28s for a year and a half, and, depending on sources quoted of his flying between 800 to 5,000 missions or sorties, Lee Lieu became yet another T-28 RLAF pilot statistic while contesting enemy AAA gunners near Mounq Soui. Lee Lieu was considered one of the best T-28 fighter pilots, a great warrior, and true hero. Considered Vang Pao's right-hand man, his death constituted a major loss to VP, his men, and all hands involved in the Lao war.

T-28 pilot Kham Phiou Manivanh, known by his call sign "Chaophakao Red", had known Lee Lieu from the time he trained in Udorn. Kham flew with Lieu on the first day after he earned his wings and checked him out in actual combat flying. Lieu had a great personality and a broad smile. He was a highly intelligent individual, kind to all, ready to aid with other peers' problems. However, on the dark side, Lee Lieu was a dedicated communist hater--fierce, deadly, and merciless against Vietnamese and Pathet Lao opponents.

Over time, Lee Lieu earned Kham's trust and they enjoyed flying in the same flight during dangerous and difficult missions, especially ones dueling AAA guns and cave bombing. Kham admired Lieu's intellect (he had been a teacher) and ability to learn quickly. This admiration was mutual. The two

¹⁹ Segment Sources:
EW Knight Emails, 07/01/00, 09/26/00, 09/29/00, 11/16/00.
Dick Elder Interviews.
Mike Jarina Interviews.
Extracts from ABCC Reports.

men shared many common items and Lieu admired Kham's skill and experience.

One prized flying with Lieu, for he was intimate with Military Region Two's geography and terrain. He never used a chart, but always arrived at the designated target. Most of the time they worked for Vang Pao within the Meo sector of operations, therefore, it was less difficult and more expeditious to allow Lee Lieu to conduct two-way communications with the ground troops.

Despite Lee Lieu's unorthodox flying techniques, he ranked among the top and most excellent combat T-28 pilots. Many times, after breaking rules, high ranking Royal Lao Air Force or senior officers wanted to enforce disciplinary actions and ground him. Kham often had to remind his superiors that Lee Lieu belonged to Military Region Two, and General Vang Pao would not accept Lieu's or any of his Meo pilots being unnecessarily grounded. Referred to as the "Red Baron" or "Golden Boy" by Americans, Lee Lieu became the untouchable one. He received special promotions so often that he outranked many Lao RLA pilots and officers.

Kham Phiou participated in the operation and was an eye witness to Lee Lieu's death:

"It was clear day after a rainy night. Following an RON at Luang Prabang, while relocating to Long Tieng, "Chaophakao Red" called the tower requesting landing instructions. At the same time Lee Lieu led a flight of three north from Vientiane. While abeam the "Dam Site," he heard Chaophakao Red's transmission and asked if he would join his flight to support Vang Pao and endeavor to destroy AAA positions in the Xieng Dat area."

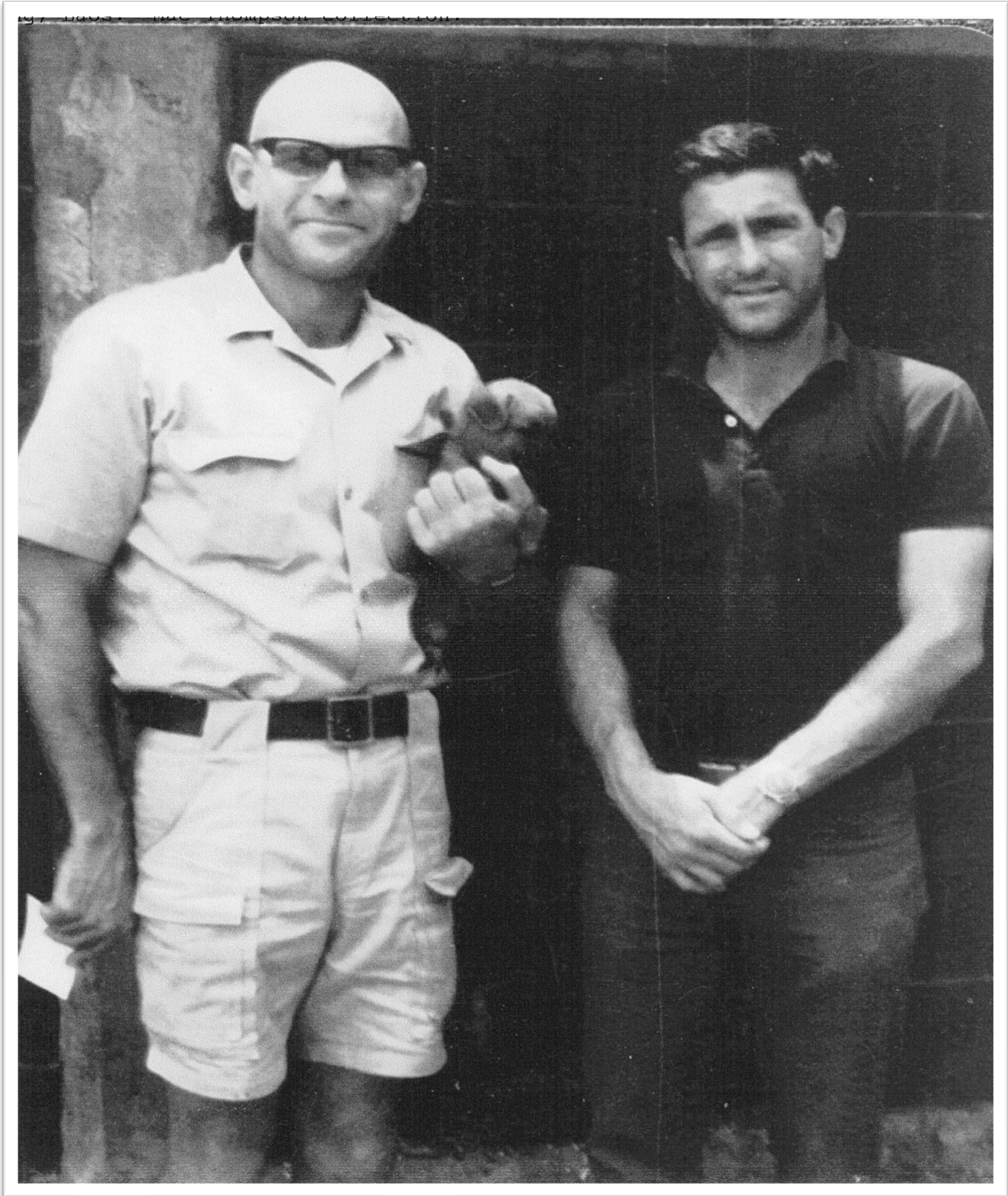
While en route to 20-Alternate, Kham had passed near the target area, which looked quiet. Kham agreed to assist with the strike, but first his flight required arming. Therefore, he told Lee Lieu to set a course for Long Tieng, and called the tower

again requesting two 500, two 250-pound bombs and 2.7 rocket pod sets made ready for immediate loading. After reaching the parking and loading area, his plane was fitted with ordnance. There was no time for fueling, but an oil check was conducted by ground personnel.

By the time Kham launched, Lee Lieu's flight was south of the field headed toward Moung Soui. Despite a target area located only ten minutes from Long Tieng, Kham had difficulty joining the flight. Heavy, not wanting to spend precious time climbing, he remained at a lower altitude attempting to overtake Lieu's planes. He radioed Lee Lieu requesting the flight to circle to enable him to catch up and assume the number four slot.

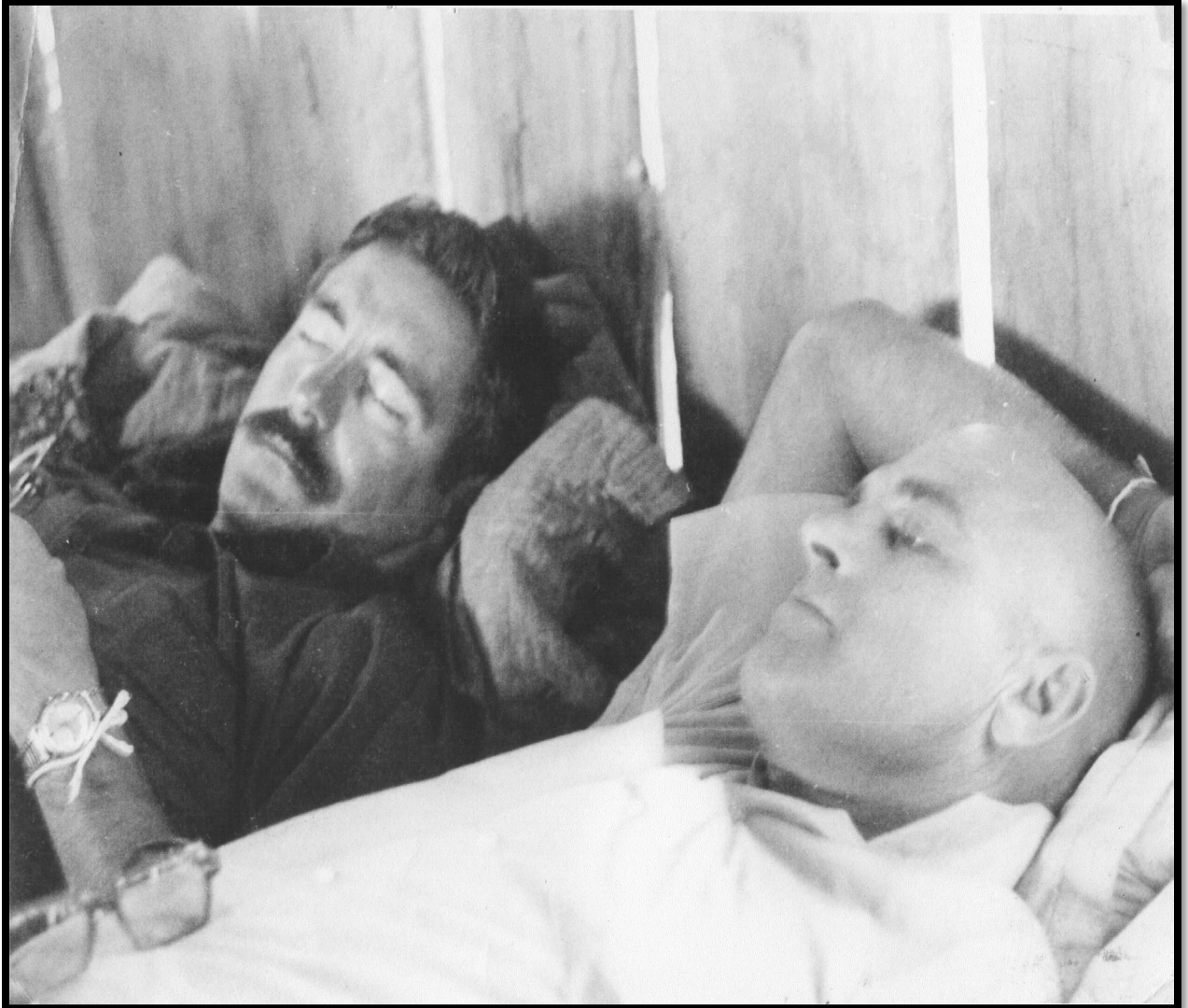
In the meantime, Vang Pao, call sign White Star, was at his San Luang forward outpost headquarters directing the operation. Advising him were Case Officer Burr Smith, also known as "Clean" or "Mister Clean" after the television cleaning commercial, and ARMA Captain Bob Nelson, who called with the latest information that described the location of 14.5mm ZPU and 12.7mm AAA guns.

The excitement of combat and his modus operandi tended to whet Lee Lieu's enthusiasm to commence an immediate strike. Having attained a reputation of rarely waiting for anyone, he called "in hot" (weapons switches activated). As Lieu aligned his aircraft and dove toward the battery with the intention of eliminating all the guns in one pass, heavy AAA fire began. Wingman Vang Sue rolled in on a different direction. Number three was Somnuk. Lee Lieu salvoed his ordnance and pulled off the target. The first bomb hit one gun, but the second landed ten meters short. During the run, four tracer rounds were



Left to right: Long Tieng Case Officers "Burr" Smith and Jerry Daniels.

Thompson Collection.



Hog and Burr resting after a baci party. Note the good luck strings attached to their left wrists.

Thompson Collection.

observed striking Lee Lieu's plane from nose to tail.²⁰ As the plane soared straight up trailing white smoke, Kham yelled for Lieu to bail out. Radio calls were also issued from Smith and Vang Pao for the pilot to head south and bail. There was no response. When the plane caught fire, Kham attempted to contact Lieu again. Nothing..

As airspeed bled off in a climb that would eventually lead to a hammerhead stall, and with lift rapidly depleting over the wings, the plane began banking right, diving toward Kham's location. While crossing close beneath the aircraft, Kham noticed Lee Lieu's head slumped forward in the front seat. The back-seat pilot was holding high and dry out of harm's way. Lor Neng, another Vang Pao relative, recently graduated from flight training in Udorn, who was flying his sixth observation-familiarization flight, was leaning backward with his head askew to one side. Red splotches, either blood or hydraulic fluid, were splashed on the canopy. From all appearances, the men were unconscious, dead, or mortally wounded from the deadly AAA fire.

Kham followed the aircraft and occupants toward the ground and their final life's journey. Panicked and highly emotional, Vang Pao frantically continued calling Lee Lieu's name. At this point, an overwhelmed Kham, unable to talk, banked left and observed the plane crashing and exploding a few hundred yards from VP's operation site.

Monitoring the radio, enemy radio operators realizing something of great importance had just been achieved, passed the information to their officers. Within minutes, red flares began erupting to herald the event.

²⁰ Tracer rounds: Depending if AAA ammunition was belted or magazine fed, red or green tracer bullets were normally included every four to five rounds.

It was past time for payback. Bent on lethal revenge, Kham called the other pilots in the flight. Vang Sue had already jettisoned his bombs and departed for Long Tieng, without checking out. Somnuk answered, indicating that he was three miles southeast of Moung Soui with the target in sight. For this reason, Kham told Somnuk to assume the lead. As they approached the gun, heavy volleys of fire resumed. Chaophakao Three rolled in on the gun position. However, fearing for his safety, he dropped his ordnance early, missing the target.

Next, number four began a near vertical dive directly over the gun. As tracers tore by his plane, Kham lined up the bombsight cross hairs and pickled two five-hundred-pound iron bombs. While still in a dive, he encountered number three's propeller wash and speculated the turbulence would influence the bombs landing point. Therefore, he made small adjustments to the dive angle so the cross hairs lined up over the gun barrels. Then he released his two remaining 250-pound bombs. To remain in the safe cone, one where it was impossible for the gunners to fire vertically, pulling a lot of "Gs," he pulled up sharply and made a hard-left turn. Over his shoulder he observed that his bombs had impacted the gun, spinning it into the air. Adding further insult to injury, one of his bombs struck an ammunition stockpile igniting a sizeable secondary explosion.

Seeing the excellent hits, Vang Pao called, concerned that Kham might become a second casualty of the day.

Flushed with success, wanting to expend the remaining ordnance, with number three reluctant to conduct another pass, Kham rolled in for a last pass. He strafed with .50 caliber machinegun fire and salvoed all fourteen rockets. Bingo. Another ammunition dump blew up in flames and explosions. A concerned and confused Somnuk thought another gun was firing at them.

Before RTB, Kham returned to the still smoldering and smoking hole designating Lee Lieu's crash site. Except for the engine, not much remained to define an airplane. To commemorate the T-28 pilot's death in the form of a final military salute, he conducted a low-level aileron roll. As he departed the area, friendly troops were already advancing on the site.

Kham landed, taxied, and secured on the T-28 ramp while his crew chief closely examined the ship and discovered several bullet holes. Vang Pao's helicopter pilot arrived, touched down, and taxied to the same ramp. The two men met and, commiserating with each other in their sorrow, walked to VP's house. Spirits were low among all who knew and admired the intrepid aviator.

In honor of Lee Lieu's accomplishments, General Vang Pao grounded his T-28 fleet for three days so all could mourn and attend the funeral. The crash site had been scoured, resulting in only bits and pieces of flying equipment and cloth being recovered. Still, these items were venerated and placed in an elaborate coffin. A hero's funeral was accorded the fallen warrior, perhaps the largest one since Na Khang's Commanding Officer, Colonel Tong, died after being shot during a 1965 SAR attempt with Phil Goddard and the Author in North Vietnam. Top ranking FAR General Staff members such as General Ouane attended, some visiting the Long Tieng base for the first time. Americans attended and speeches abounded. Some good will resulted from the T-28 pilot's death that would soon be evidenced in cooperation for a gigantic operation.

Emulating the T-28 pilots' graveyard humor, "*fly until you die,*" Lee Lieu's fate was preordained. He may have hastened his demise by his stubbornness to disregard others' admonition to reduce the number of daily fatiguing combat sorties he was flying and his low slow passes over AAA. Moreover, perhaps he harbored a latent death wish, for in his consummate desire to

engage and destroy the enemy, he employed questionable techniques shunned by most other combat pilots. These had resulted in previous shoot downs or aircraft losses. In the previous months, I had retrieved Lee Lieu twice from the weeds, but I am uncertain if he could be accorded the title of a "Black Ace," for no records exist attesting to how many more of his bails existed. ²¹ ²²

On the same day as Lee Lieu's death, despite some positive movement of other government forces toward Moung Soui, many skittish and unreliable FAN troops at Xieng Dat finally began advancing--in a different direction to the south away from Moung Soui.

An intelligence bulletin distributed on 14 July, devoid of real time information, stated:

"Government troops captured [on 10 and 11 July] a number of strategic hill positions within two miles of the base late last week, but little progress has been made to follow up these gains. At least one close-in position has since been lost to the enemy. Bad weather is severely curtaining air support--on which the government heavily depends--and is enabling the communists to truck in supplies and possibly reinforcements from the Plaine des Jarres.

²¹Black Ace: In American aviation terminology, contrasting with an "Ace," who downed five enemy planes, a "Black Ace" was considered a pilot who had lost five aircraft due to various reasons. I had a World War Two Marine pre-flight engine instructor at Pensacola who claimed this "honor."

²²Heroes are the staff of life in a society, and everyone requires a hero to cherish as an aspect of well-being. From an individual's actions "above and beyond the call," legends are created. However, with time, reliable and valid facts tend to become skewed to create a storyteller's agenda. Therefore, it is incumbent on a writer to introduce reliable eyewitness accounts of an incident if possible. In Lee Lieu's case, the Author hopes he has achieved this end.

Meo General Vang Pao is considering committing additional battalions to breathe new life into the Moung Soui campaign, A sharp communist counterattack, however, appears to be only a matter of time.

In recent days enemy troops have been moving in on Bouam Long...and Xieng Dat, where neutralist troops have been holed up since retreating from Moung Soui two weeks ago.

Government leaders, meanwhile, are apprehensive about what they regard as a growing threat to the royal capital of Luang Prabang. The communists and rebuffed the government's attempts to clear the lower portions of the Nam Ou Valley and probes have been made as far south as Pak Ou on the Mekong River. Although it is too early to tell how serious the flurry of activity is, three North Vietnamese battalions appear to have moved south from the Nam Bac area for this campaign, raising the possibility that the communists man intend to isolate Luang Prabang..."²³

Despite Lee Lieu's death and the substantial depression and decline in morale it fostered throughout the Meo nation and allied aviation ranks, government troops were still in the field and moving, but without a grieving Vang Pao to muster their courage. During this period, the Vietnamese counterattacked with tanks, artillery, and infantry. The Seno battalion was attacked from several directions. With their logistic route severed, remnants of the battalion departed the field and were redeployed by helicopter to Ban Na to establish defensive positions against pressure that was building in the area. This withdrawal, the FAN desertion, and the inability of air to save the day, finalized a high-level decision to terminate the Moung Soui operation. Meo troops either slowly withdrew to San Luang or other sites

²³ CIA Daily Bulletin, 07/14/69. Laos: The government's effort to recapture Moung Soui shows signs of floundering.

forming the northern defensive line protecting Sam Tong and Long Tieng.

"...communist forces appear to be moving to clear the remaining government elements which threaten their supply lines south of Moung Soui.

Although there has been no new fighting west of Moung Soui, there is increasing evidence of an enemy troop buildup along Route-7. Government units operating in the area observed a large number of trucks moving a few miles west of Moung Soui in mid-July.

...King Savang, with unusual forcefulness, has tried to bolster the depressed Lao military leadership. Reacting sharply against the government's alarmist views of the military situation, the King urged the military to stop sulking and move to strengthen defenses at the junction of Routes-7 and 13 at Phou Khoun. Loss of this road junction would deny the government overland access to the royal capital of Luang Prabang via Route-13." ²⁴

With weather cooperating on the 21st, massive air strikes were conducted in the Moung Soui area. One flight recorded thirty-five secondary explosions and eleven KBA at Site-108.

The pair of defeats in two weeks capped a long streak of losses since the first of the year. We had encountered reversals before, but never with so many enemy troops in place at forward positions to march at will, penetrating further into Meo land, or along main routes toward the royal capital at Luang Prabang or the administrative capital at Vientiane.

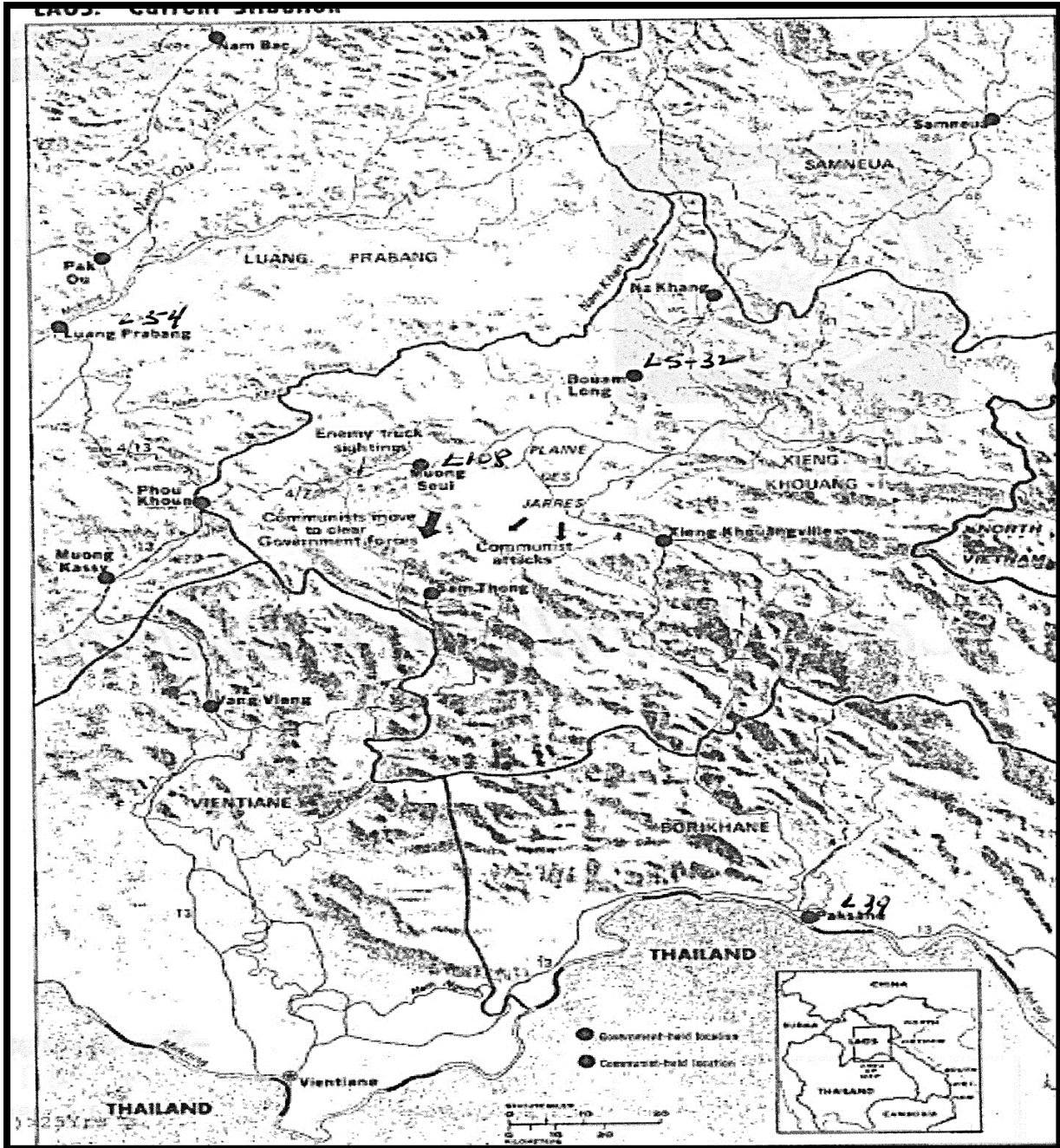
Now with FAN definitely out of the picture except at Moung Kassy, and Vang Vieng and with Meo troops fading on the Moung

²⁴ CIA Daily Bulletin, 7/19/69. Laos: There are signs that communist forces may be moving to expand their holdings in the Plaine des Jarres area.



Mid-July graphic of enemy and RLG movements around Mung Soui (L-108) in lower Military Region Two and Luang Prabang in eastern Military Region One.

CIA Map, 07/14/69.



Enemy movements at the end of Vang Pao's attempt to recapture Mueang Soui.

CIA Map, 07/19/69.

Souei front, it became a matter of too few government (Meo) troops available in Military Region Two to man critical defensive positions on the southwest, southern, and southeastern perimeter of the Plain of Jars in order to ward off existing enemy pressures. The lack of necessary resources, or an answer to existing problems, presented a grim scenario indeed for Laos.²⁵

²⁵ Segment Sources:

EW Knight Emails, Including Flight Records.

Mike Jarina Interviews.

Bill Leary Notes-Interviews with Former A-1E pilots Richard Drury and William Bagwell Regarding Operations on 06/28/69.

Victor Anthony, *The War in Northern Laos*, 302-303, 306.

Tom Ahern, *Undercover Armies*, 318-320.

Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 214.

Air America XOXO 07/01/69, McEntee.

Air America XOXO 07/07/69, Goddard.

John Pratt. 104.

Kham Phiou, A Comprehensive Description of Lee Lieu's Shoot Down.

CIA Bulletin, The government apparently has terminated its campaign to recapture Moung Soui, 07/15/69.

Christopher Robbins, 182.

Extracts from ABCC Reports.

A decision had been made to abort the two-week joint effort to recapture Moung Soui. After extremely foul weather generally curtailed air support, FAN opted out of the operation, and Meo morale dropped to low levels after Lee Lieu's death. Therefore, General Vang Pao elected to withdraw his guerrilla and FAR units from the immediate battlefield to concentrate on defensive and offensive measures in other areas.

On Monday 14 July I deadheaded to Long Tieng on C-123 556 to support and conduct a second Moung Soui evacuation. My assigned ship was Papa Foxtrot Foxtrot with Glen Woods as my Flight Mechanic. During preflight, I discovered a sizeable hole in the underside of the tail cone. Either Ellis Emery, the last PIC, or an errant piece of ground handling equipment, had damaged PFF. Woods claimed to know nothing about the damage. I thought Glen's input unusual; wasn't the Flight Mechanic supposed to conduct a thorough post flight and preflight, and know everything about the aircraft he was crewing? Because the Bell tail cone was attached to the cabin section by only four bolts, I considered any damage to the component an intangible that, if not properly addressed, might increase the possibility of metal fatigue and failure.

Glen liked to fly and obtain stick time with pilots who believed Flight Mechanics should know the basics of flying the Bell in the event of an emergency, or if they became ill or were wounded while conducting the work. Glen was an excellent gunner and an aggressive Flight Mechanic. For this reason, I preferred that Glen remain in the cargo compartment where he belonged, to monitor loading and help provide tail clearance if required. Only rarely did I allow him to fly, like on an extended ferry

flight. Besides, I did not want to contribute to any factor that might lead to another Bill Wilmot episode. ¹

Disgusted, I called Udorn, described the nature of the damage, and was informed that because of the weather and lateness of the day, ground personnel would not be dispatched until the following morning to inspect and repair the ship.

CPH Knight was not keen regarding any aircraft abuse, citing several instances where an outgoing pilot would leave an obviously damaged ship for the relieving pilot. Reasons could be many and varied: no post flight, embarrassment, haste to return home, selfish disregard for a peer, or a host of other causes. It moved a person to speculate as to what other harm the offending pilot might be subjecting the machine.

Aircraft abuse could be subjective due to ignorance or lack of experience. As we were not all formerly from the same military services, training background, or had been test pilots, standardization was far from equal; and this did not take into account varying ability. Moreover, some pilots, thinking they were pleasing the Customer, would fly the aircraft at high speeds, with maximum loading at altitude, and wonder why they developed adverse vibrations. They were either just unaware of these effects, or simply did not care. It also seemed that there was little peer pressure to care for our scarce assets.

Wayne also maintained that damage was bound to occur from time to time, and it was a judgment call by the crew as to the airworthiness of the helicopter. This concept was difficult for me to accept. Regardless of the threats from management about damaging a machine, I would never leave an aircraft in such a

¹ Bill Wilmot, a former Air America Flight Mechanic returned to the States and obtained a commercial helicopter license and some bush flying field experience. He returned to the Company as a pilot and was killed in 1966 during a poorly conducted operation to retake Na Khang.

condition for an incoming pilot. That was just not acceptable to me.

Later that day action was heating up closer to our main base with TIC and heavy gunfire on northern Meo positions at Tha Tam Bleung (LS-72). Raven-49 worked four flights against the enemy, but the site was still receiving fire when Cricket departed station.

Well to the east, San Tiau (LS-02) was attacked. Numerous KBA was claimed by a Firefly flight. Action continued in the vicinity of Site-02 with an A-1 Hobo flight in support.

Weather still created a problem for all important aviation resources on Tuesday. Consequently, the Udorn repair team was delayed arriving at The Alternate. The tail was not patched to airworthiness specifications until late afternoon. At that time, I was dispatched to the east, where Meo forces were engaged in reinforcing and supplying defensive positions in the mountainous Khang Kho (LS-204) area bordering the southern Plain of Jars.

With PFF airworthy and considered acceptable, except for early morning fog delay, I flew most of Wednesday. During part of the day, we moved Meo troops back to the San Luang defense line. Later, I worked the Padong-Khang Kho salient. I shuttled a number of goods into one elevated forward landing zone until the dew point spread narrowed and the ceiling began descending over the pad. I continued to work the position until late, when a cloud layer settled over the hill's southern slopes, negating a proper approach angle. From below the cloud layer I could see upslope to the top. Anxious to receive supplies, the NCO in charge of the unit on the ground insisted his pad was open. Yes, it was likely open from his perspective, looking over the lip of the precipice and if one approached low and slow and hovered up the slopes to the pinnacle at or below translational lift. I was not heavily loaded and probably had sufficient power for such a

marginal approach, but there would be no go around capability, unless one considered flying IFR in a mountainous area feasible. No matter how much the man attempted to cajole me to land I refused and told him I would see him tomorrow. ²

SITUATION

Little went unobserved in lower Military Region Two. Reliable intelligence reports poured into friendly hands and Vang Pao had always prided himself on the work of his road watch teams positioned deep within enemy territory. Moreover, spies, villagers, visual airborne reconnaissance, prisoners, and defectors also provided valuable information in regard to the enemy order of battle.

By July, there were 12,000 Vietnamese reputedly inside northern Laos. This constituted a new high for a monsoon season or any previous season. The Ban Ban area contained two Vietnamese battalions, two Pathet Lao companies with anti-aircraft artillery; five battalions invested the Plain of Jars including supporting artillery; off to the west, elements of seven battalions, an enemy tank company, and a AAA unit with 85mm guns controlled the Moung Soui area.

After collating and distilling this latest information, a more cohesive picture began to unfold depicting near term communist intentions and their wet season goals. In order to inhibit activity at the Meo bases of Long Tieng and Sam Tong, their next thrust would likely be directed south, intersecting Route-13 toward Moung Kassy and Vang Vieng. This included movement west to seize the Sala Phu Khoun junction and other portions of the Royal Road linking Vientiane and Luang Prabang.

²EW Knight Email, 09/26/00.
Extracts from ABCC Reports.

There was some doubt that this move could be contained. Another movement would likely commence from the Xieng Khouang Ville Valley down Route-4 through Tha Thom and Borikhane toward Paksane.

While communist forces consolidated gains and reinforced troops at Moung Soui and continuous attempts to dislodge guerrilla troops from outposts south of the Plain of Jars during periods of inclement weather proved largely unsuccessful, concerned Lao military and government leaders feared and contemplated the worst for their country.

President Nixon was planning a public relations trip to the South Pacific where he would view the splashdown and 24 July water recovery of the Apollo 11 command module containing the astronaut crew of Neil Armstrong, Buzz Aldrin, and Mike Collins after the successful moon mission. Taking advantage of the trip, he also intended to conduct "show the flag" stops at Guam, the Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand, South Vietnam, India, Pakistan, Romania, and Great Britain.

Calculated to brief Nixon on current events in Laos, CIA Director Dick Helms forwarded a comprehensive memorandum to the President on 18 July:

"...I want to bring to your attention what I see to be a deteriorating situation on Laos..

Since 1962, this Agency has played a major role in support of United States policy in Laos. Specifically, we have developed and maintained a covert irregular force of a total of 39,000 men which has borne a major share of the active fighting, particularly in Northeast Laos. In this latter area, under the leadership of General Vang Pao, guerrilla units formed of Meo tribesmen have been engaged for more than eight years in a seesaw battle with the North Vietnamese Army and Pathet Lao troops.

Up until this year the fighting in North Laos has had a cyclical nature with friendly forces advancing during the rainy season from July until November and enemy forces advancing during the following dry season. This year the pattern has been broken. We are several weeks into the rainy season and the North Vietnamese have continued to attack. They have captured and held, using elements of the two North Vietnamese Divisions, including tanks. The former neutralist stronghold of Moung Soui on the edge of the Plain des Jarres [was lost] and they are now advancing west along Route-7 toward its junction with Route 23 which links the capital city of Vientiane with the royal capital of Luang Prabang. There are also indications that enemy units are moving south and west of the plain in a direction which would threaten the major Meo bases of Long Tieng and Sam Thong. The Lao Cabinet, somewhat leaderless with Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma vacationing in France, is in a panic over this situation and has been belaboring the United States Embassy in Vientiane with requests for action, particularly heavier air strikes against the enemy. ³

The Embassy is working with the 7/13th Air Force ⁴ to provide a considerable increase in tactical air strikes directed against enemy lines of communication in hopes of inhibiting any major enemy move west of Moung Soui. Although air strikes in the past have exacted a heavy toll, the North Vietnamese forces

³ During a 16 July cabinet meeting, General Staff representatives demanded that the Prime Minister sever diplomatic relations with North Vietnam, order a general mobilization, arrest the Pathet Lao in Vientiane, and seek additional U.S. help, even B-52 strikes. Newly installed Ambassador, Mac Godley, sympathized with the demands but, except for additional air support, considered the other requests too extreme at the time.

⁴ Subordinate to the 13th Air Force at Clark Air Force Base in the Philippines, the 7th Air Force was located in Saigon, with a subsidiary unit in Udorn, Thailand.

appear so far in their current campaign willing to pay the price. They may also have chosen to keep moving because tactical air sorties are limited by the extremely bad weather prevailing in the area at this time of year.

On the ground, the neutralist forces which formerly occupied Mounng Soui are dispersed and completely ineffective as a fighting force. The Force Armes Royale (FAR) is tied down in defense of other areas and incapable of stopping regular North Vietnamese divisional units. The Meo units under Vang Pao have been forced into a defensive position to protect their key bases. Moreover, these irregular forces are tired from eight years of constant warfare, and Vang Pao is unable to find the manpower resources to do more than keep up with his losses...We think Vang Pao will fight hard to maintain his headquarters in the Northeast highlands, but as the military pressure on it increases, it will be more and more difficult for him to control his tribal elders, some of whom are already talking about evacuation to safer areas in western Laos.

The Department of State is aware of the problem and is moving diplomatically to urge the Soviets to intercede with the North Vietnamese to slow their advance. Preliminary Soviet reactions are not encouraging.

North Vietnamese intentions are unclear and their current advance may have only limited aims but there are many Lao, including Vang Pao, who believe the North Vietnamese plan to encircle and threaten the royal capital at Luang Prabang and move down Route-13 to Vang Vieng and the edge of the Vientiane plain. Should they do this, they would be able to negotiate from a position of strength. In these circumstances the Lao Government might not be able to hold together and Souvanna could be forced to make some accommodation with the Communists. The North Vietnamese goals may be:

(1) either a partition of Laos giving them full authority over the areas they control at the point of a future cease fire or

(2) the reconstitution of the Tripartite Government but consisting this time of a coalition they control: Souvanna Phouma on the right, Communist controlled neutralists in the middle, and the Neo Lao Hak Sat front group on the left.

The North Vietnamese now have the option, if they choose to exercise it, of provoking a most serious political crisis in Laos. In this situation the limits have largely been reached on what this Agency can do in a paramilitary sense to stop the North Vietnamese advance in Laos which is now threatening [the country]."

As with major losses in Laos, the current situation fostered considerable concern in neighboring Thailand. After solicitation from Lao leaders for assistance, high level considerations in Bangkok centered on sending 3,000 Thai infantry units across the river to recapture and hold Moung Soui--if the U.S was willing to support such an operation.

With the Prime Minister in Paris and not present to moderate disputes, Moung Soui's loss fostered disagreements between Lao military and civilian leaders. Some in the military sought a total break in relations with North Vietnam and China. Civilian types desired a bombing halt and negotiations with the political wing of the Lao communist party.

Initial information did not always prove correct. Despite the battlefield area considered generally quiet with Vietnamese units regrouping around Moung Soui, on the 22nd, enemy battalions overran several government outposts, which forced VP's troops to complete a withdrawal toward the San Luang stronghold. An attack on Sala Phu Khoun and enemy build-up to battalion strength near the junction stimulated action by the

General Staff in Vientiane. During a staff meeting, plans were formulated to reinforce weak points along Route-13, with particular emphasis on the vulnerable stretch between Sala Phou Khoun and Vang Vieng. In addition, a clearing action was planned by Luang Prabang FAR units along the road south of the royal capital. Before RLA plans could be fully implemented, small enemy probes continued attacks on FAR defenses. Whether the assaults were calculated to keep demoralized government forces off balance, or as part of a larger plan to move into Military Region Five, was not yet known. ⁵

JARINA IN MR-1

The same day I left for The Alternate, Mike deadheaded to LP on Hotel-39 with Captain Boonrat and Flight Mechanic Pigot. Arriving late, the crew was assigned to work ten miles south in the Sala Ban Thin area below Xieng Ngeun.

The next day developed into a no-fly situation for Mike,

⁵ Segment Sources:

Victor Anthony, 307, 309.

Ken Conboy, fn, 213-214.

Central Intelligence Bulletin, The Government apparently has terminated its campaign to recapture Moung Soui, 07/15/69.

CIA Bulletin, 07/17/69, Government leaders are badly shaken by the failure to recapture Moung Soui.

CIA Bulletin, 07/19/69, There are signs that communist forces may be moving to expand their holdings in the Plaine des Jarres area.

Foreign Relations, Memorandum from the Director of Central Intelligence Helms to President Nixon: The Situation in Laos, Document 99, 07/18/69.

Central Intelligence Bulletin, 07/22/69, The government is sounding out Bangkok on the possible use of Thai troops in Laos.

CIA Bulletin, The government is taking steps to blunt further communist encroachments in north Laos while enemy forces continue to mop up around Moung Soui, 07/24/69.

CIA Bulletin, 07/28/69, Although no new major communist attacks have taken place in north Laos in recent days, there is little indication that the enemy intends to ease its pressure against government outposts near the Plaine des Jarres.

except for a recon flight in 62G in anticipation of a Special Mission.

The FAR had abandoned the Mekong River town of Pak Beng under pressure in April. Consequently, labor intensive construction work proceeded virtually unimpeded on Route-46, also called the Chinese Road, envisioned to thrust south along an old trail through the Beng River Valley from Moung Sai to the Mekong. Naturally, Agency, Embassy, and Royal Lao Government people in both high and low places were quite interested in the new road's progress. On the sixteenth, to provide Agency personnel current intelligence regarding the road, Mike and crew shuttled teams fifty-one miles north of Luang Prabang to an elevated landing zone nine miles east of the enemy-held logistic center at Moung Sai (L-27). Two Special Missions followed into the Beng Valley closer to the construction project around Moung Houn (L-34) and southwest of the actual work.

Thursday was a complete washout and the crew of Hotel-39 was grounded the entire day. ⁶

TRIPLE WITCHING DAY

Who said trouble never comes in threes?

In addition to withdrawal from the Moung Soui operation still an ongoing process, the 17th became an especially eventful and stressful day for me. Adverse weather generally invested the entire region. About mid-morning, an air operations Customer entered the hostel and asked me if I thought I could get to Phou So (LS-57) to work. Still distressed over my two days on the ground because of the pylon damage, I was anxious to launch and indicated that I was willing to attempt the Phou So trip. With

⁶ Mike Jarina Interviews.

few aircraft in our Bell inventory, and with the low flight time pilots were logging, it was incumbent on those of us upcountry to fly whenever possible. Moreover, as a senior pilot who knew the area and terrain reasonably well from years past, I generally volunteered to fly anywhere, anytime.

There was no briefing. The Customer, who had merely received the request for a helicopter over the radio net, professed absolutely no knowledge of the situation there, and said to check with someone on the ground when I arrived. However, I knew that a definitive briefing at the site was problematic. Meo people controlling Site-57 spoke no English and would not be able to adequately brief me. I would have to point to the map, employ what few words I could, and sign language to determine enemy locations. From previous experience, I knew this was not likely to work well, and had previously caused problems in the form of battle damage. As an alternative, I asked for an interpreter to accompany me to the site, but no one was willing, or available to go with me. Perhaps the Meo were still mourning Lee Lieu's death, but the reluctance to help should have turned on the proverbial light bulb and constituted a warning signal.

At the time, although aware enemy forces were likely swarming the area, I was not totally aware Site-57 had been selected as a primary jump-off site for a Neutralist unit rotated there to form a northern pincer arm during the latest fiasco. Predictably, FAN troops failed to move toward their assigned objective. Also concerning me was the fact that if unable to fly north over Xieng Dat, I would have to cross enemy territory near or over Moung Soui, Route-7, and whatever AAA weapons were located in the vicinity. Of course, this was only possible if the ceiling was high enough to allow clearance.

I consulted with Woods, briefing him on my concerns, cautioning that he should keep his weapon handy and maintain

vigilance throughout our endeavors. Glen was an experienced trooper. I knew he would do everything in his power to comply with my instructions and seize the initiative if the situation required.

I departed Long Tieng with the intention of working as long as conditions permitted. Low clouds shrouded hills and invested valleys covering my flight track over Indian country. Nevertheless, I was able to achieve an adequate cruise altitude to evade most small arms fire. During the entire trip, no radio chatter or checkpoint calls were heard on Company frequencies from other aircraft. Apparently, I was alone in this portion of western Military Region Two, and that in itself was lonely and stressful.

Although largely obscured by low clouds, I passed somewhere between Site-108 and Site-117. Then, after scooting over what I believed was Route-7, I turned northeast toward the definitive but semi cloud-sheathed 6,000-foot heights of Phou So. The grass strip, located on the lower northwest side of the mountain range at 4,600 feet was exposed and open.

Satisfied that the correct signal was displayed and with people visible on the ground, I landed and shut down. The squat, porcine Meo leader who met me at the aircraft looked familiar. Perhaps we had crossed paths before, or he was yet another Vang Pao relative who worked as a trouble shooter at other area sites like "Agony," or was just a Meo look-alike. As I feared, no one spoke any English when I asked, *"Where the bad guy?"* Usually, I took pride in making myself understood to the point I was able to perform a job. However, in this case the lack of communication was particularly frustrating and aggravating. I finally resorted to voice, Pidgin English, Thai, and sign language. This included the pistol like international thumb and forefinger gesture used by children in their cops and robber

games. I laced my imaginary gun with a vocal bang-bang or two. After several attempts at communication, the man, certainly not the sharpest tack on the corkboard, grunted and waved his hands like a prophet toward the Plain of Jars. Depending on my interpretation, this could have indicated no enemy troops were present or perhaps everywhere on the mountain. This heightened my suspicions. Knowing a little of the situation to the east, I chose to believe the latter and assumed enemy was all around.

Chief wanted me to take a load of ammunition to a forward outpost somewhere near the mountain top of Phou So, or perhaps on the forward south slope facing Moug Soui. I was not sure which. Since I could not see where he was pointing, I whipped out my chart and attempted to have him point to the position. Despite my efforts, this part of the drill also failed. Porky had no expertise at map reading and probably assumed I was telling a joke or talking about the weather. Still, I had flown all this way to work, so I relegated my concerns to the backburner and elected to conduct a "look-see" run.

After briefing Glen on the unknown aspects of this mission, I launched. Since low clouds prevented ascending to an altitude where I could properly see a pad, I remained low and proceeded slowly upslope to a point where I considered the fort might be located. With clouds and wisps of fog hanging in the trees and swirling about, I cautiously approached the mountain top. Suddenly a single shot rang out. Normally, the sound-suppressing quality of my helmet prevented me from hearing ground fire, unless I had the ICS button on the cyclic depressed. In this case, the report was loud and clear, indicating the shot was very close. It could have come from friendly or enemy. I did not believe we were hit, but that was immaterial. I did not care, for I had already concluded that my assignment at Phou So was finished that day. They could haul the supplies to the position

by pony or on their backs like the enemy. At least we had made an attempt. I returned to the strip and had Glen offload the cargo. The folks there were not happy when I pointed south saying, "*I go Long Tieng.*" That was fine, but now I had to negotiate a return flight to The Alternate over hostile territory with known AAA batteries and adverse weather with which to contend.

If anything, cloud layers had increased in the immediate area, obscuring much of the hilly terrain, trails, and potential checkpoints. For this reason, I was unable to climb to altitude or even proceed at treetop level. Usually, during conditions like this in or between clouds there were always openings, holes, or light spots indicating clearing beyond. I would just have to take advantage of what the elements provided. An upside to foul weather was the fact that it would be equally difficult for a "duck hunter" on the ground to see or shoot at me unless he popped blindly at the loud wop-wop-wop sound of my rotor system.

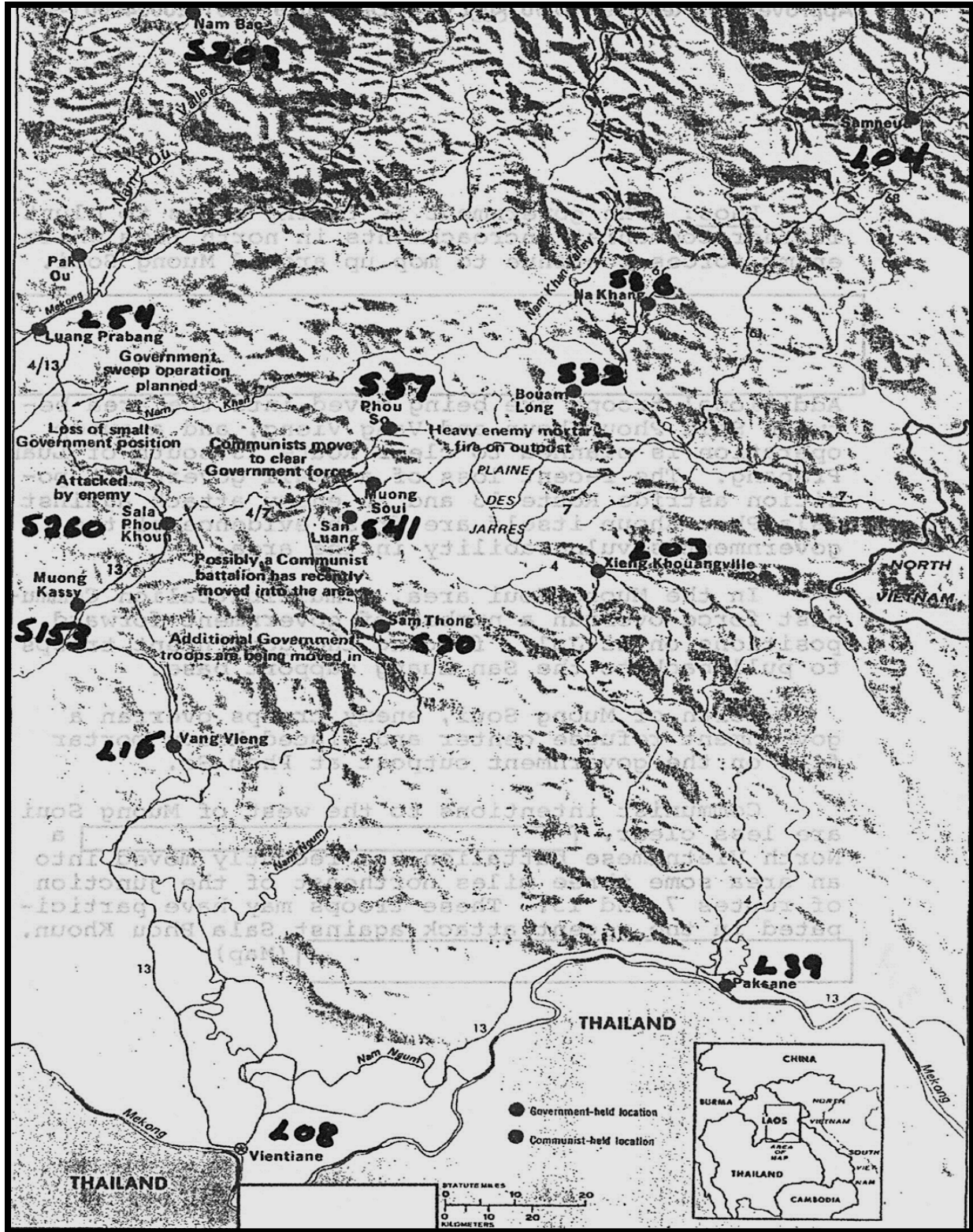
I proceeded west for a few miles, and then turned south hoping to depart the hills to lower terrain where I might encounter better conditions. Wham! Shots rang out as we passed low over a ridge containing a trail or invisible secondary road leading south from the Phou Fa range. I had plenty of experience over the years with the impact and resonance of projectiles striking a helicopter fuselage. This one was quite definitive. After looking around the ship's interior and out the left cabin door, Glen could not determine the extent of damage. It really did not matter, for I had no intention of landing in that area unless absolutely necessary. What really concerned me was that I still had not heard an aircraft in the area. We were alone with a half an hour or so of flying left to "home plate."

Once "safely" out of the shot pattern, the weather cleared somewhat and I began recognizing familiar landmarks. After landing at Site-20A Glen determined that the battle damage to PFF from both incidents was superficial--if that was ever a good term. While Woods continued to inspect the ship for additional dings, I ambled back to the hostel to rest, drink coffee, and ruminate on my "good" luck that day. I was not a happy camper. The other pilots were out flying, so I had no one with whom to commiserate. Moreover, my nerves were on edge, and I recalled the saying that bad things happen in threes. Therefore, calculating odds that appeared negative, I possessed little incentive to fly anymore that day. ⁷

However, after a good lunch and conversation with peers like Captain Lloyd Higgins who filtered through the dining room, I reconsidered my status. By mid-afternoon, feeling considerably better, I was ninety percent ready to work again. Little did I know at the time that this would be a really bad decision.

The Air Operations Customer proposed a work requirement at Tha Tam Bleung (LS-72), a site not far northeast of either Sam Tong or Long Tieng. Given acceptable weather conditions, what could possibly happen in a familiar area I had worked many times? Located in a relatively narrow valley between two high, sprawling parallel mountain ranges, the northern hills soaring to almost 7,000 feet, Site-72 was a unique place. The high valley floor was not flat. Sloped downward to the east, the sides were interlaced with deep gullies, thickly wooded ravines, and heavy jungle. Several forested karsts guarded the west end of the valley leading toward Sam Tong. The 1,000-foot dirt strip

⁷ My instincts proved correct, for within a few days a refugee center was overrun and the Phou So outpost was the victim of heavy mortar fire.



07/24/69 CIA map depicting communist mop-up operations around Mung Soui and attack to the north on Phou So (LS-57).

perched on a 4,500-foot denuded ridge sloping eastward toward 6,900-foot Phou Pha Sai, located at the northwest end of an eleven-mile extension of what we called Padong Ridge. The village of Ban Hintang nestled at the lower end of the valley. At one time a Catholic priest resided and worked at a leper village there.

The main purpose of my assignment to Tham Tan Bleung was to shuttle 105-millimeter ammunition to a Meo landing zone on a pinnacle generally known as the Victor Pad. Four miles southwest of the southern Plain of Jars, overlooking a sizeable trail, the position was maintained as a forward listening and observation post for unfriendly movement toward our two important bases. During past months, this outpost had become increasingly important since our withdrawal from Xieng Khouang Ville and now the loss of Moung Soui. Called, "the back door to the PDJ," we had long used this lower area as a "safe" alternate in foul weather to negotiate terrain when navigating toward Padong and other eastern sites.

I had supported the site and howitzer team before. One time, while working the landing zone in a 204, I experienced something shockingly unusual that scared the devil out of me. A little fast on final approach to the narrow ridge, I simultaneously rounded out and topped out (demanded maximum power). The aircraft began twitching and yawing both left and right until the collective was reduced. Upon return to Udorn, I discussed this disconcerting tendency with people familiar with the Bell and found that this was a characteristic of the underpowered -1100 engine, one never designed to function at the high altitudes we worked. Better planning and lighter loads was the only answer.

Because of the elevation, it was not always easy to carry loads out of Site-72. I learned to be careful working there

early while carrying newly cut green lumber from a portable sawmill in an H-34 for Case Officer Vint Lawrence. Therefore, with nearly a full fuel state, I told Glen to load a normal amount of loose shells not to exceed 1,000 pounds. As was my custom, when we burned off sufficient fuel heavier loads could be carried.

From what I could see from my position, area weather was good in the direction of the landing zone. When Glen flashed me a thumbs up signal, I hovered and departed down strip to the east for the approximate twenty to thirty-minute roundtrip. Noticing a slight RPM droop while flying through translational lift, I increased the N2/Nr RPM (on a console gage depicting engine and rotor RPM) switch on the collective to maintain one hundred percent. Once established in a sixty-knot climb attitude, while dividing my attention in and out of the cockpit, I began reducing power to maintain the climb, and simultaneously beeped the RPM switch down slightly to retain one hundred percent. Then I began focusing on the flight path toward the objective.

Suddenly chaos erupted. The low RPM audio activated and the red caution light illuminated in the cockpit. When I glanced at the tachometer gage, the N2/Nr RPM needle had decreased and seemingly stabilized at ninety-one percent. An instant glance at torque and gas producer instruments revealed the problem did not constitute an engine failure. Immediate attempts to beep the RPM back to acceptable levels produced nothing tangible. Particularly disconcerting, in a semi-blade coning configuration we were losing lift and rapidly falling out of the sky. Since we had just taken off and were fairly low, unless I could produce a viable solution, within seconds we would crash into the trees or roll down a ravine in the inhospitable terrain.

As there was little published in the pilot's manual describing such an emergency, I was confused while scanning the instruments and searching my memory banks for an immediate answer to counter the problem. Obviously, technique, common sense, and a lot of luck would have to prevail to survive. Then like a light bulb being snapped on in a comic strip, I recalled Bill Hutchison relating a similar incident he had experienced while taking off downhill at Padong. Losing power and about to crash, to avoid a nasty incident, he switched directly to the manual fuel control mode to regain power and save his bacon.

Normally, the published procedure to employ before activating the red emergency manual fuel switch aft to bypass the FCU automatic feature, involved first reducing the throttle to flight idle and then reducing collective before switching to manual. This was tailored to prevent a surge of fuel to the combustion chamber engine and create an over temperature and transmission overspeed.

For night work and to allay focusing too much attention in the cockpit, pilots deal a lot with sensory items, particularly touch. There were two red switches next to each other on the center pedestal with different shaped heads, one round, the other triangular to identify and differentiate between main fuel and manual fuel switches. But one still had to use care not to choose the round head switch and shut off the fuel supply to the engine.

I had already cleared the strip and no open forced landing terrain unfolded ahead of me. Every helicopter pilot is acutely aware that forward speed kills. Therefore, while still low and slow, in a situation like this, it was a far better decision to continue in a relatively straight line than to turn, which would accelerate a descent and possibly cause one to end up in a ball. By using the first method, one could rapidly decelerate at the

last second to zero ground speed directly over the trees, and allow the aircraft to descend vertically to the ground. It was not a perfect solution and a variable not available to me was level terrain. A squadron mate in the Crotch had performed such a maneuver in the HUS-1 (H-34) on a night cross country out of MCAF New River, North Carolina. The crew survived, but with the HUS-1 cockpit seat considered the worst in aviation, the PIC incurred a back injury. I would accept a back injury any time in lieu of the alternative.

This event seemed yet another never-ending Casterlin "moment of truth." With giant hardwood trees looming larger and larger in the windscreen, I was simply out of time and ideas. Something had to be done even if it was wrong--we would worry about the end result later. Without further delay, I flipped the red switch to manual mode. It worked. Hutch was right. An instantaneous increase to 101 percent resulted and we ceased the plunge toward the ground. Now simple throttle manipulation provided fuel to the engine--like the opening and closing of a water faucet. Not sure that the emergency situation was fully over, I manually adjusted RPM and power and commenced a hard-right turn to return to the upper strip.

I had no time to alert Woods during the emergency, but my abrupt maneuver captured Glen's attention. After glancing into the cockpit and seeing the governor emergency segment illuminated on the annunciator panel, he shouted, "governor emergency." Then he began pitching loose artillery rounds out the open door. Within seconds, he discharged the entire load. As far as I was concerned, the emergency was over, but his unsolicited action lightened the ship.

During semi-annual proficiency checks at Udorn, for familiarization, we practiced takeoffs and landings in the manual fuel mode. I concluded this training had provided

valuable experience as I gingerly landed the ship. After deeply inhaling and exhaling to reestablish my stability, and waving off native loaders who wanted to place more rounds in the ship, I returned the manual fuel switch to normal in the proper manner that I had been taught, first retarding the throttle to idle. Once again in the automatic FCU metering mode, I attempted to duplicate the malfunction. It was not possible. Everything worked by the book. When activated, the beeper switch travelled the full range from ninety-one to 101 percent and back down to the minimum setting. Extensive hovering provided no further insight into the problem.

Both Glen and I agreed that during the rapid introduction of fuel, which produced ten percent additional RPM, the turbine operating temperature (TOT), must have risen dramatically, perhaps high enough to produce damage to the engine gas producer or power turbine wheels. Fortunately, since I had the collective still raised in a power demand state, I had likely avoided any serious overspeed to the drive train. At any rate, suspecting damage, I did not want to continue working the machine in the field without a through maintenance examination and investigation. Therefore, after another series of hovering and landings and exercising the throttle, collective, and beep switch, not wanting to spend the night at a questionable outstation with no creature comforts, I ferried PFF to Long Tieng and called Udorn to report my incident and suspicions. It was too late to return the questionable ship south before dark, so I was told to RTB the following morning for maintenance to conduct a hot end inspection.

It had been quite a day, full of excitement and stressful incidents, not one I relished as a steady diet. Realistically, I was lucky. Results of the final incident could have been tragic had the loss of power occurred at a more inopportune time, one

in which I would not have been able to react and recover the aircraft.

The challenging day and surprises was not over. Upon entering the hostel, I learned from other crews and a RONing investigating team that Hotel-34 Captain Jerry Booth and old timer Flight Mechanic Moon Centeno had crashed and burned earlier in the Khang Kho area. This revelation rendered my temporary, unique, and now seemingly insignificant problems irrelevant. Disclosure of the crew loss resulted in a remorseful night. Booth was a relatively new pilot, who I did not particularly care to know well. Having flown with him many times over the years, I did know old timer Montano Centeno, a Filipino from Iloilo City, Panay Island, PI, fairly well. Moon was a sincere and nice person, often reverting to ground mechanic duties at times when someone was injured or killed and he was reluctant to fly in Laos. However, saddled with a sizeable family and responding to a Maintenance Department requirement existing for capable Flight Mechanics, Moon had returned to flight duties.

DEATH AT KHANG KHO

The XOXO and Aircraft Accident Review for Hotel-50 and crew stated that the weather had cleared by 1100 hours, and Jerry Booth was assigned at Long Tieng to work 713 missions out of Padong and surrounding area. The accident occurred at about 1240 local time at the 5,700-foot Tango India landing zone near Khang Khao. Depending on which "witness" one believed, the crash occurred after two aborts. During a third approach attempt, and with strong windy and gusty winds from the west, the H-34 struck the landing zone hard. The tail pylon separated and the fuselage section rolled 400 feet down a steep slope. The resulting fire consumed both Booth and the ship. Centeno was thrown clear

during the tumble and killed. A passenger who survived was also ejected from the aircraft. Remains of the crew were flown to Udorn, where Doctor Kao made a positive identification of the men, Booth through his dental records.

The weather continued foul the following day during the investigating team's first attempt to land at the primary landing zone. Moreover, there was no signal displayed or people sighted. Since security at the site was considered questionable, after taking photographs, the team returned to The Alternate to brief the Customer and await better weather.

A second attempt to land was successful at the lower pad, where locals managed to gather small pieces of the tail pylon.

The commanding officer, who professed to have witnessed the crash, provided another more detailed, but somewhat questionable account. He indicated that there were no clouds present (apparently clouds were reported). With winds very strong from the west, the PIC of Hotel-50 made a right turn from a high approach, then dropped rapidly and impacted 250 feet down slope from the pad and slid another 200 feet (a right turn would indicate a downwind approach and explain the abort attempt).

In the final analysis, the probable cause of the accident was stated as *"the failure of the pilot to maintain sufficient airspeed for the degree of bank and the existing downdraft and downwind condition resulting in the loss of translational lift at too low an altitude to effect recovery."*

This finding by the investigators effectively implied without actually saying that Booth's accident was pilot error. I was not privy to the investigations and XOXOs, but the findings failed to tell the "rest of the story" (a la Paul Harvey). When I had worked the site a day previous to Booth's crash low clouds prevented a proper approach. In addition, the English speaker at



Air America Flight Mechanic Montano "Moon" Centeno, killed in Hotel-50
on 17 July 1969.

Air America Log, Volume 3, #4, 1969.

the pad kept insisting that his position was open. That might have been the case if he was looking directly downhill, but that was not good enough for an experienced helicopter pilot who knew his mountains. I was not about to climb underneath clouds to a high pad at a place I knew always had adverse winds. He continued an attempt to convince me to land. Finally, tired of his drivel, I departed the area.

When I heard about the crash my first thoughts were that Booth had been sucked into a situation he could not handle by the same individual I had dealt with.

The H-34's engine developed even less power than a Huey engine while working at altitude, but in the hands of an experienced pilot, technique could be employed to perform safe approaches. Booth, a former U.S. Army pilot and fairly new pilot, was not considered a particularly good H-34 driver. Experience was the key ingredient while working in the mountains. We were all relatively inexperienced when we began working in Laos. We all committed mistakes, but we tended to learn from these errors and attempted to never repeat them. Those that did survived to fly another day; those that did not...

Booth was not the first helicopter pilot to crash on this difficult ridge; he would not be the last. ⁸

I ferried PFF home on the eighteenth for a hot end inspection. I had never experienced a partial power failure like

⁸Segment Sources:

Air America XOXOs, 170755Z, 171445 07/17/69.

TPEX 171034 07/17/69.

Air America XOXO, 181200 07/25/69.

TPX 180930 07/18/69.

Air America XOXO 212028.

Air America XOXO 210145.

Base Manager MAB Bangkok Vice President PM Udorn Captain Gerald Booth (Deceased), 07/22/69.

Air America Aircraft Accident Review, 10/11/69.

the one at Site-72, nor apparently had anyone else. I attempted to discuss the circumstances in the CPH's office, but we had no base line or background data to assess, and because the condition could not be duplicated, I felt my evidence was weak. Furthermore, my story sounded strange, and I could tell there was a great deal of doubt among the listeners as to what actually happened. No one could relate to the incident. Confused and embarrassed, even I had minor doubts as to what actually occurred, and wondered if I had done something wrong.

The engine and turbine wheels revealed no visible damage from the certain over-temperature. During the trouble shooting process, maintenance personnel changed an FCU or governor and the ship was released to Ellis Emery for upcountry work on the 19th. While in cruise configuration abeam Vientiane, without any pilot input, the N2 RPM again bled off to ninety-one percent. Ellis returned to Udorn. I was vindicated in the actions I took to save both the ship and crew from a serious crash.

I never learned what components were changed on PFF to solve the problem, but I received a commendation memorandum from Assistant Manager of Flight Rotary Wing 204B/205 (AMF/RW), Phil Goddard dated 20 July 1969:

"On 17 July 1969 while flying XW-PFF you experienced a governor malfunction shortly after takeoff, over poor terrain. In spite of the resultant power loss in close proximity to the ground, you quickly and accurately analyzed the problem, rapidly applying corrective action in a most professional manner. Your action was instrumental in saving the aircraft from serious damage and in preventing possible injury to you and your crew.

It is with great pleasure that I congratulate you for a job well done." ⁹

PROBLEMS IN UDORN

While I was upcountry enjoying enormous fun, there was considerable rain in Udorn, causing the front klong (ditch) to overflow into the yard. According to a debris watermark on the front porch wall, it appeared the water level had reached between six to twelve inches. To preclude further flooding, our landlord was having workers spread laterite dirt throughout the yard to raise the level. The effort had the effect of killing what little grass existed. Despite previous repairs, the roof still leaked, but not as much. The wood façade on the outside walls was being stained producing a horrible odor.

Despite the projects, it was preordained that flooding would continue because of a more inherent reason. There was not a sufficient capability for water runoff in our part of town. In addition, the klong alongside Benjarn Road was clogged with vegetation, soil, and other debris. Additionally, restricting flow, there was only one concrete culvert through the dirt drive from the street. It was obvious that the city needed to do something, but procrastination and rationalization were the watchwords in our area. This was punctuated by a purported lack of municipal funds that probably found their way into town officials' pockets.

Although often garbled, I was able to receive some coverage of the moon landing mission on my Zenith Transoceanic Radio. I speculated that with the excitement, world problems would be temporarily forgotten for a time. After discussing the event

⁹ Before ACPH Marius Burke departed Southeast Asia to attend school in California, CPH Wayne Knight recruited Phil Goddard to take Burke's place. Jerry McEntee was also an ACPH, but only for the UH-34D program.

with Ricky, he decided to attempt the journey. As his mode of transportation, he asked for his shower shoes. After we convinced him that Bata footwear was inadequate for such a long trip, he settled on using his red papier-mâché pig for transportation.

My parents thought this anecdote was hilarious and marveled at the youngster's imagination. Dad wondered if he recalled the "Hey diddle the cow jumped over the moon" riddle.

UPCOUNTRY

Road watch missions entailed several day flights in Military Region Three. The same day I returned to Udorn with PFF, Mike Jarina deadheaded to Savannakhet on Hotel-44 with Captain Boonrat and Flight Mechanic Siaotong. After arrival at Lima-39, the crew was scheduled for missions to two landing zones. Flying less than half a day, the crew returned to Udorn.

Two days later, during a day flight, Mike deadheaded to Thakhet in Hotel-57 with Ivar Gram and Joe Galulais for two Special Missions, after which he deadheaded back to Udorn in the same aircraft.

Early the following morning Mike departed for Savannakhet in Hotel-48 with Joe Siaotong. The projected mission was cancelled, so he was redirected north-northwest to a point near Ban Tha Si (LS-61) in the Tha Thom Valley. He worked between Tha Si and up the valley nearer Site-11 at Ban Vang An. After completing the work, he flew south to Paksane, refueled, and reached Sam Tong to RON just before dark.

On Tuesday Mike only flew two and a half hours before being relieved. He conducted a trip to Phou Fa (LS-16), then San Luang, and Site-20. After the incoming pilot ferried Jarina to

Alternate, Mike caught a ride to Wattay Airport on Caribou 401 and to Udorn on Volpar N9157Z.¹⁰

Deadheading north on Helio Courier XW-PCS, I departed Udorn for The Alternate on the 22nd. The first stop was Wattay Airport, where I checked in to operations looking for a trip north. A C-123K crew was leaving shortly for Site-20A. From Alternate I caught a ride across Skyline to Sam Tong, where Phil Goddard and John Simmons patiently waited in PFJ. Phil had been working with the team investigating Booth's accident. Because of the time-consuming deadhead involving three aircraft changes, I only logged a little more than four hours and had to work until almost dark.

On Wednesday, flying solo, I supported area defense measures in and out of Long Tieng.

Curtailing a planned ground offensive, the next two days were lost causes in non-flyable weather. I did not crank a blade on Thursday and only a little more than an hour on Friday.

While preparing my ship for a second fuel load, I was relieved on Saturday. I was able to cage a ride on CASI C-47 WX-PDE directly to Udorn. It had not been a successful RON, except for the fact that this time no battle damage or mechanical problems were experienced.

Jarina did much better than me on Friday, but at a slight cost. There had been trouble at Pac Lac near the hydroelectric Nam Ngum Dam site on Thursday when a Pathet Lao patrol shot up the USAID compound.

IVS representative Fritz Benson had arrived in Laos in 1968. He worked mainly around the Dam Site project where construction was still in progress. During the spring of 1969,

¹⁰ Mike Jarina Interviews.

people living in the valley north of the Ritaville extension where the dam was being erected, were evicted and relocated to villages in the Ban Keun (LS-44) area.

Both Benson and USAID rep, Loren Wagoner and family were present during an unexpected attack. Japanese engineers and workers were also present, but the enemy had good intelligence and only American houses were struck. ¹¹

Mike left Udorn in Hotel-64 that morning with Flight Mechanic Tolentino. He stopped at Wattay Airport, where he loaded people to investigate the attack on the USAID compound and enemy movement in the area. In the process Mike's helicopter was superficially hit by ground fire. In a twenty-one-landing day, of investigations and moving people around, he went to Ban Keun, Ritaville (LS-53), Ban Na Then (LS-249), five miles south of Moung Kassy, Vang Vieng, and then returned to Vientiane to RON.

The next day was similar, but without numerous stops at various sites. Instead, he shuttled FAN troops to the Nam Ngum Dam Site area to establish area security. At the end of the day Mike RTB Udorn.

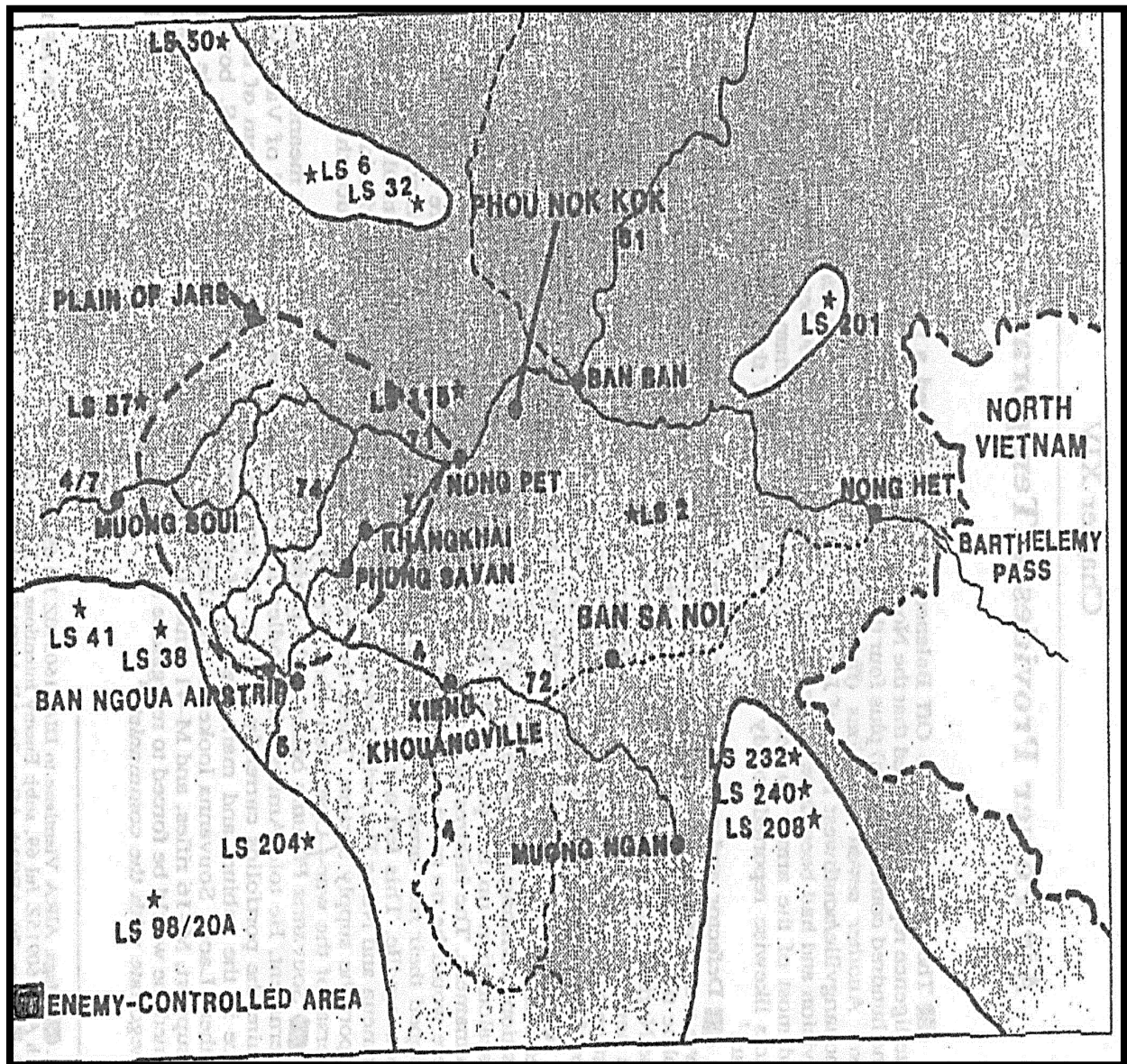
¹¹ Mike Jarina Interviews.
Fritz Benson Interview.

With the Lao military situation rapidly sliding down a slippery slope toward the point of no return in lower Military Region Two, and pressure mounting at high Royal Lao Government (RLG) levels to reverse the disconcerting tide, the powers who be conceived a massive air interdiction campaign against relatively exposed enemy lines of communication. Two hundred sorties a day would pound the section of Route-7 between Ban Ban and the strategic Nong Pet Road junction (known by pilots as the 7/71 split) day and night with 2,000-pound laser directed iron bombs and Bullpup missiles. In addition, delayed action bombs would be dropped and the road system seeded with antipersonnel mines to discourage rapid LOC repair efforts. LOCs from Barthelemy Pass to Ban Ban would be traversed by armed reconnaissance aircraft. In addition to targeting supply bases, truck parks, and bivouac areas located in and around the Plain of Jars, Long Tieng-based Raven FACs would direct sorties allocated for troops-in-contact and targets of opportunity. The combination of constant bombing and the unusual amount of rain was calculated to slow the extended logistical support line to front line troops to a minimum.

The maximum enemy push on the Moung Soui complex, except for noncombatant support types and largely ineffective communist Deuanist FAN types, had rendered enemy rear areas and critical logistic LOCs nearly to the North Vietnamese border exposed and virtually devoid of combat troops.

VP'S PLANS

Concurrent with the bombing campaign, Vang Pao, his advisors, et. al. proposed sound, but pragmatic military plans to launch a short-term diversionary ground operation against



Map depicting the area of Vang Pao's August northern Plain of Jars battle plan, calculated to harass and interdict the 7/71 "split" at the critical Nong Pet Road junction. Dubbed About Face, the operation intended to secure areas of vulnerability, choke points, and temporarily thwart enemy supply efforts and troop movements into the Mung Soui sector. Dotted lines define the Plain of Jars territory. Stars adjacent to sites indicate government positions controlled by Meo forces.

Anthony.

the critical supply line of Route-7 near the Ban Ban Valley. Once implemented, the action would hopefully influence Vietnamese units to withdraw from the Moung Soui area to the north, which would relieve pressure on the northwestern San Luang-Houei Ka Nin-Xieng Dat defense line and the Sala Phou Khoun road junction, so critical to government traffic between Vientiane and Luang Prabang.

In a two-pronged operation, originally conceived to secure the southern and western flanks around Long Tieng, north of the Plain of Jars, troops advised by Case Officer Frank Odum (call sign Bag) from Bouam Long, and at times Jerry Daniels (Hog), would walk or be air lifted nine miles south over the expansive Phou San Range to the elevated Phou Kheo (LS-115, 5,700 feet) site. Once organized at the rally point, and at a propitious time, they would move five miles further south to high ground overlooking the Nong Pet junction, where they could shell, harass, and interdict the crossroads at will.

From the 7/71 crossroad, Route-7 thrust south toward the major towns of Khang Khay, Phong Savan, and other important points to supply forces on the lower PDJ. Route-71, the western branch of the enemy-controlled supply line proceeded westerly along the northern portion, not considered the Plain of Jars proper, toward units located at Moung Kheung (L-109). No one expected a total shut down of the heavily fortified junction, but any partial slowing of traffic was sure to have an adverse effect on future enemy plans in lower Military Region Two.

Not solely relying on an offensive thrust from the north toward Nong Pet, a second pincer movement included a western push to seize the commanding heights of Phou Nok Kok. Located on the south side of Route-7 near the western end of the Ban Ban Valley, the long, narrow ridge overlooked a generous portion of the important LOC that wound through a deep gorge leading to the

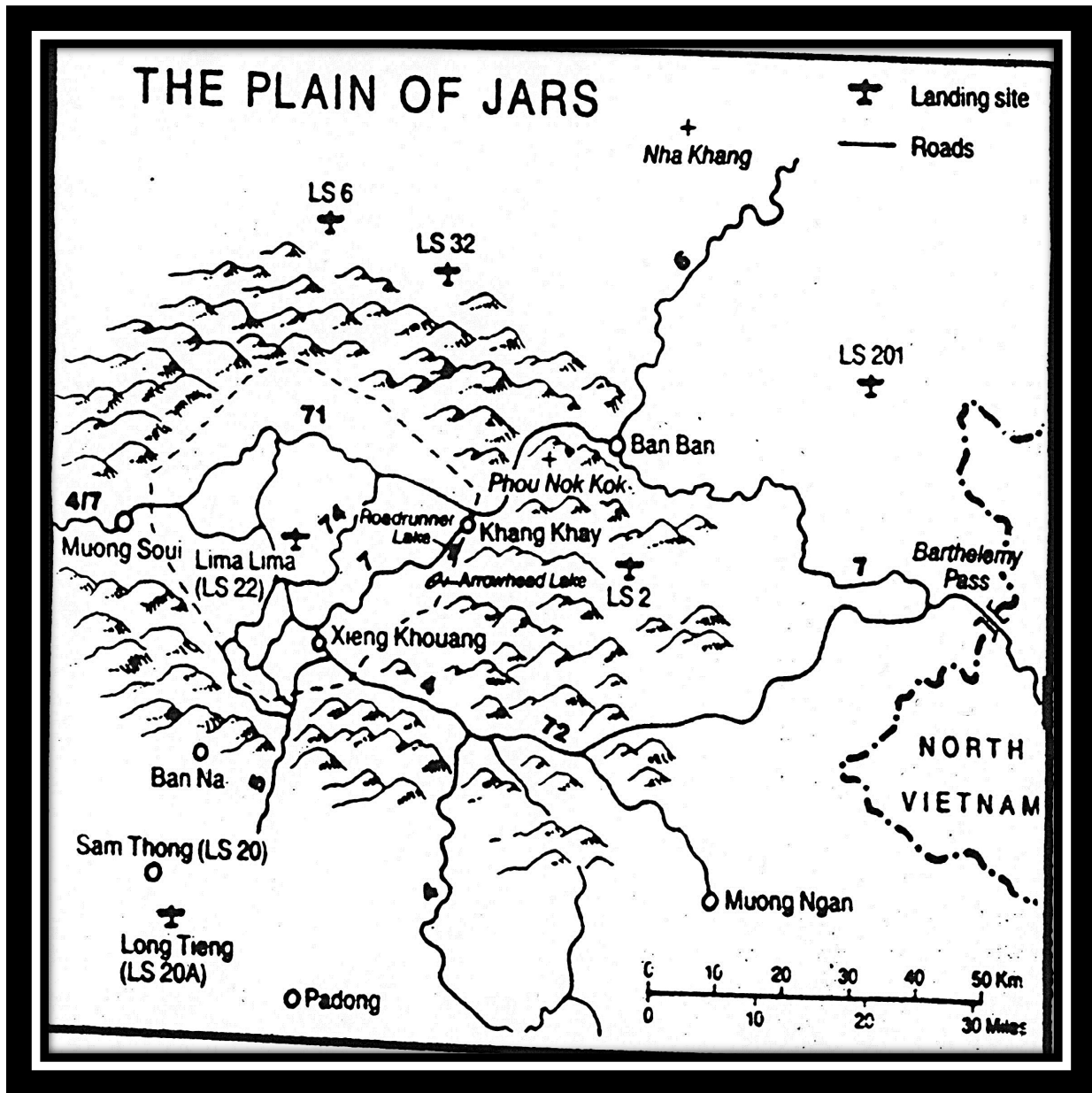
northeastern reaches of the Plain of Jars. If successful, movement to and the control of this elevated high ground would not only support the Nong Pet operation, but present a formidable deterrent and interdiction with artillery, mortar fire, and harassing patrols to thwart enemy infiltration by either vehicle or foot along Route-7. In addition to denying resupply, the plan would also serve to curtail supply efforts southwest toward Nong Pet.

Jim Adkins, Mounng Mok Case Officer in the Zone Steel region, was briefed at Long Tieng to muster a Meo ADC battalion and another Meo SGU battalion at San Tiau. This force, supplemented with 2 SGU Battalion from Military Region Four, would walk from Site-02 twelve miles northwest to an assembly point near the Phou Nok Kok ridgeline (Woodpecker Hill) from which they would move onto the mountaintop and hold for about two weeks.

To the south, as a potential third prong to the operation, minor diversionary measures entailed movements north toward the Plain of Jars from the Ban Na (LS-15), Tha Tham Bleung (LS-72), and Khang Kho (LS-204) areas.

The final plan would seek to secure Long Tieng's northwestern flank and apply pressure on the Mounng Soui area without actually moving on the site.

As 1969 continued a particularly discouraging year for the Meo people from a territorial and manpower viewpoint, vast areas had been abandoned or lost and many irreplaceable individuals killed or displaced. Wearing two hats, chief warlord, Major General Vang Pao, involved with not only military duties, was also saddled with the politics of tribal and clan civic affairs. Vang Pao's unpredictable personality occasionally presented a study in contrasts, which caused the man to enter a blue funk



Graphic displaying principal government (Meo) sites and bases located around the mountainous surrounded Plain of Jars (dotted lines). Shown also are some enemy targets on the PDJ mentioned in the narrative. Robbins, *The Ravens*, cover overleaf. Also appeared in the Air Commando Association Newsletter.

when negative events coalesced to evidence seemingly unsurpassable problems. The U.S. military has a term coined to describe exactly such a situation; overcome by events (OBE).

Arriving on the heels of earlier military reversals, Lee Lieu's recent death, and termination of the failed Moung Soui operation, the innovative wet season battle plan tended to reenergize the dejected Vang Pao, who for some time had been under tremendous pressure from chief Meo elders, including village and clan chiefs fed up with losses of their people, to relocate much of the Meo nation to supposedly safer climes in Sayaboury Province.

Always an aggressive person, concurring with his mentors' monsoon season plans, Vang Pao added his own velvety touch to the mix. He proposed moving sizeable units forward to the southern periphery of the Plain of Jars to seize the high ground at Phou Theung and Phou Seu. Bordering both sides of the Plain where it gently squeezed south toward foothills leading into the mountains, the former range commanded southeast ground, while the latter peak overlooked southwest and southeast sectors.

Because of heavy Meo losses, battalions were solicited from other military regions with one SGU battalion from Military Region Three and one from Military Region Four eventually forthcoming. In addition to this support, several of Vang Pao's battalions were equipped with M-16 rifles to cope with and counter the always-impressive and superior AK-47 enemy firepower.

In order to stem enemy advances, it was incumbent on Vang Pao's people to commence at least the first part of the operation without delay. Originally slated to commence on 24 July and last about three weeks, the ground portion of the undertaking was curtailed by the same adverse weather pattern

that grounded most allied air activity except for a few USAF bombers with all-weather capability. Foul weather continued a problem that plagued the operation well into August. ¹

BAD DAY AT BOUAM LONG

"My lousy luck is holding as I had another moment of truth on the 30th. I lost my hydraulic boost system on a final approach to a strip. It was quite exciting trying to get the machine down. Brute strength was about all that did it. It was caused by a faulty line that some wonderful chap had installed wrong."

Letter Home, 08/01/69

Wednesday morning, 30 July, I left Udorn on C-123 293 for Long Tieng to fly XW-PFF with Jay Meyers. I arrived and assumed command of the ship just as air operations was preparing to dispatch two Bells to Phou So to shuttle troops to Bouam Long for the delayed Nong Pet operation. Ed Reid was PIC of the second ship. Very windy and turbulent conditions en route and at landing fostered dangerous and iffy flying, especially at higher elevations. We conducted one round trip to Site-32 and conversed over the FM radio about the weather being too adverse to continue safe operations. We eventually decided to attempt another trip, but continue to evaluate the situation.

After the second trip Ed landed and departed. While carrying ten troops, to avoid downdrafts, I cleared the windy

¹Victor Anthony, *The War in Northern Laos*, 307-310.
Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 214.
Tom Ahern, *Undercover Armies*, 321.
Bill Leary, Article in *Vietnam Magazine* Regarding Wil Greene.
Central Intelligence Bulletin, 07/28/69.

lip of the Bouam Long bowl a little higher than normal and began a deceleration to final approach. Low and slow, while rounding out with winds kicking the ship about, the flight controls froze. The governor emergency annunciator segment was illuminated on the center pedestal, but I did not have to see that to realize that I had a problem--I had just lost hydraulic pressure under the worst possible conditions. As part of the semi-annual proficiency process, I had practiced hydraulic off takeoffs and landings. However, these always took place under controlled, optimum conditions, with a check pilot in the left seat and involving no payload. If airborne, the procedure was tailored to avoid hovering and fly the aircraft to a sliding landing. I always found the controls very stiff and difficult to manipulate.

Now I had a sierra sandwich confronting me. My initial reaction was to attempt a go-around, get as much control of PFF as I could, and perhaps with Jay's help if possible, conduct a standard emergency skid type landing. Wrong decision. Application of a small amount of collective resulted in a distinct left roll correctable only with maximum right cyclic force. High banks on either side of the runway and a massive hill at the end, convinced me that there was insufficient room to maneuver and I had instituted the wrong decision. Now committed to an immediate landing, I realized that I had only a few seconds left to wrestle the machine to the ground before smashing into the mountain.

We had not experienced many hydraulic malfunctions in the Bell program. During one that I recalled, Robby Robertson, while in cruise configuration, experienced a failure in the Ban Houei Sai area. Pat McCarthy, the Flight Mechanic, was either sitting in the left seat or had sufficient time to transfer from the cabin section to aid Robby wrestle the Bell to the ground.

Another time, while at 10,000 feet over Route-911 on the return leg from a long road watch mission in Military Region Three, Phil Goddard experienced hydraulic problems. Since helicopter control was difficult in a rarified atmosphere, he descended to a lower altitude where the controls were not as mushy, and continued on to Savannakhet.

However, the nature and urgency of my emergency provided no luxury of altitude to think and maneuver.

As the end of the strip loomed ominously ahead, becoming larger in the windscreen, I forced and willed the frozen collective down with all my remaining strength, while simultaneously attempting to correct the tendency of the machine to roll over to the left.

I made it to the ground with room to spare. However, true to the law of physics, the machine contacted the dirt strip very hard and bounced high into the air. Except for slowing ground speed somewhat, I had failed miserably during my first attempt to plant the helicopter. Flashing through my mind were confused words, *"Dickie boy, this is it! Either you get this hunk of metal down now and stopped, or you are going to end up a pile of junk or ashes against the mountain."*

Initial ground contact and friction associated with the recoil, and efforts to adjust the cyclic toward the rear tended to decelerate the aircraft. During the second attempt I managed to touch down and, with the aid of friction, slid to a stop in a straight line. I cannot recall, but the troops probably disembarked unaware the landing was anything but normal. Or, like when an R-1820 engine cylinder swallowed an exhaust valve and exploded while I was part of a HMM-261 troop life, the troops took off for the hills.

At first, I was too mentally and physically exhausted to secure the engine and rotor blades, and exit the cockpit.

Instead, drained of all characteristics that define an alert human, I slumped in a dull funk, while heavily perspiring, and not attempting to consider what might have been. Ed Reid's relief pilot, Captain Nikki Philippi, who had been watching my death struggle from a lower slope east of the strip, ran around the aircraft nose, opened the cockpit door, and excitedly shouted in Nikki's own unique way, "*That was the worst landing I have ever seen anyone make!*" Then looking at my chalk-white face and the illuminated caution light, he realized something of dramatic proportions had just occurred.

After I recovered sufficiently to function, we attempted to determine what had caused the life-threatening emergency. Meyers removed the metal plate covering the transmission tunnel to expose the irreversible hydraulic valves, part of a system that provided boost to relieve the enormous control forces. These pilot valves were a type that, when lacking sufficient fluid, stuck in a position that would cause control problems. (The system was later retrofitted to up-to-date valves.) In our case, there was no fluid visible on any valves to indicate an excessive leakage that might lead to a total control lock-up. Further investigation of the fuselage tunnel revealed that a bracket securing a woven metal flex line had been badly misaligned, with the line installed against the airframe. Over time, normal vibrations had gradually caused chaffing of the line and created a hole. Naturally, Murphy, the aviator's nemesis, picked the worst possible time for the hydraulic system to malfunction.

The Bell transmission tunnel was difficult to thoroughly inspect without sufficient time, patience, and labor. Except for a cursory look at the transmission cover for an oil cap and the security of fluid lines, further inspection was often overlooked on preflight. A flashlight was required to look deep into the

dark recesses of the tunnel from the top. Even after conducting that inspection, some recessed areas were still hidden from view. A multi-screwed plate that covered the bottom of the tunnel provided another access to what we called the hell hole. Removal of this plate to allow a stand-up inspection was normally reserved for periodic maintenance. It was obvious that no one had performed this, or the chaffing problem might have been discovered. I was really angry with the Maintenance Department, and considered that I had been let down. After all, with weather, enemy, and normal work, we had enough problems to contend with upcountry than to worry about component failures. The incident further pointed to a subject I frequently expounded on later when an instructor pilot: It was not a specific item you could see that would kill you. It was one you could not see.

Further examination of the ship revealed that I had damaged the helicopter skids during the first hard landing. The largely uncontrolled impact had pushed the fore and aft cross tubes up into the belly. No other damage was evident, but that was a decision for an inspection team.

After I briefly explained what had happened to people in Udorn over the high frequency radio, another helicopter pilot ferried us back to Alternate. I was not a happy camper, for I truly loathed damaging any helicopter, particularly our dwindling supply of Bells. Still, on the other hand, I realized that we had escaped injury or death without a scratch during the worst mechanical incident. The old pilot adage and truism of "*any crash you can walk away from is a good one,*" rang loud and clear in my mind.

Field repairs were accomplished the following day. After clearance by maintenance personnel and extensive FCFs, I ferried PFF directly to Udorn. With two rather unusual incidents in less than two weeks, the latest being a damaged ship, I do not

believe management was too happy with me. This even though I had not wrecked a machine beyond repair or incurred injury to myself, crew, or passengers. Naturally, there was no "atta-boy" forthcoming for the latest incident, and I hoped I was not becoming the program's Albatross.

That evening in the Club bar, I spied Gary Gentz in the corner. Aware that he was a lead man for Huey maintenance, feeling that they all had a hand in my latest incident, I engaged in a heated shouting contest. I was out-of-line and probably would not have said anything had I not been in my cups. After I got that off my chest, the uproar was over and we all became amicably drunk. ^{2 3}

GETTING RIGHT WITH THE WORLD

Since I had experienced two nasty life-threatening incidents close together, considering the machine jinxed, (as if an inanimate object could evoke this thinking) a bad feeling for PFF crept into my consciousness. Largely because of the declining military and now the disconcerting Bell maintenance situation, I was increasingly becoming more superstitious, and tended to calculate my odds of survival more frequently. On the

² Wayne Knight indicated there was some confusion regarding this rare problem. There may have been issues with irreversible valves, but at least two severe hardover incidents were caused by the hydraulic quick disconnect in the tail boom section. This unit, a military field expedient, was installed so controls in the hydraulic system could be cycled on the ground without engaging the engine or rotors. There were no portable hydraulic mules in the field, and maintenance personnel did not use the connection to pressure and energize the system in the hangar. Hardover problems were eventually traced to leakage on one side of the valve pressurizing the system. To eliminate the possibility of future malfunctions of this type, the line and valve were removed. This may have been a problem for some individuals, but not in my case.

³ EW Knight Emails, 09/29/00, 10/08/00, 11/19/00.

advice of Khun Yai, my wife invited the family fortune teller, a stooped elderly gentleman I had seen from time to time at the Nisagonrungsee residence stomping about with his ornate cane, to our house, where he would attempt to predict my future. At that point I did not discount help from any quarter.

Tuie and I knelt on the hardwood floor while the soothsayer arranged his shopworn white cloth embossed with black Thai squiggles, approximating something that looked like a Zodiac horoscope. Then the old man lighted candles. He asked specific questions about me--birth date and so forth--and consulted his book. Naturally, this part of the ritual was dealt with by my wife, for I was not familiar enough with the Thai language to participate. Finally, after considerable concentration and mumbo jumbo, without specifics, he stated that I was going to have a bloody year. From a psychological aspect I concluded this revelation did not bode well for me or the family. Already considerably stressed, I inquired if anything could be accomplished to alter this prophesy. Yes, corrective action could be taken. I could journey to a wat and attempt to have my demons purged.

One of my wife's relatives, Mrs. Wongwhathant, the former Udorn Province governor's wife, knew the location of a unique wat near Nong Khai. The elevated order had a renowned monk with the "proven" ability to eradicate an individual's undesirable spirits. Although a bit skeptical, in order to dispel doubt the fortune teller had instilled in my mind and in my family, I considered the journey worth the effort. Moreover, it would provide new local color and constitute a new experience. After purchasing a white cloth wrap and Buddhist monk-favored presents--saffron garments, candles, etc. one offered to monks when visiting a wat--we motored north. A few miles south of the Nong Khai airport we turned right onto a dusty road and drove

through bamboo thickets and shade trees lining the narrow road. The wat was modest, not particularly impressive like well-supported ones in Udorn or Bangkok. I met the head monk, an old kindly looking person, and the situation was explained to him by Tuie and her aunt. He indicated that I was to strip naked and don the white sheet. Then a bucket of water was produced and blessed. Considered lustral water (akin to the Catholic Church's holy water), during the ceremony, the entire bucket was poured over my head. I failed to die from shock, but that was the coldest water I could ever recall. Relieved that the ritual was over, I actually felt cleansed. After paying homage and profusely thanking the monk, we departed the area feeling much better about my "bloody" future.

Many of us Americans wore 24k gold baht chains with venerated Buddhist images attached for various purposes: to please a girlfriend or wife, to use as trading material should such an incentive be required to encourage indigenous help in a forced down situation, and for religious or superstitious leanings. One of our pilots, Nikki Philippi, wore a very heavy gold chain with so many attachments that although he was a big person, walking without a forward list was difficult.

With time, and as the military situation worsened, Khun Ta obtained a monk-blessed Buddha belt for me. It consisted of nylon string wrapped with numerous rolled copper scrolls marked with religious sayings in ancient Indian Sanskrit, a language largely reserved for the Thai royalty and the Buddhist monkhood. The belt rounded out attempts to ensure my survival in the combat areas. The rest would rely on my common sense, expertise, but mostly sheer luck.

Bell pilots continued to arrive from Saigon. Hank Edwards (DOH 07/19/66) and Bob Caron (02/08/68) represented the latest to flee CPH Bob Hitchman's clutches. Because of a lower seniority number, a program already brimming over with people, and with few Bell aircraft to fly, the transferees had to commence their Udorn tenure in the UH-34 until Bell positions opened up. This was also done to mollify those of us who had spent a long period in limbo before being upgraded to Captain. In addition to, or coupled with many FCF flights, CPH Knight conducted nine training flights with Edwards and Caron over the first three days in August. After his proficiency check on the sixth in RLAF 145780 (formerly Hotel-22), Edwards was released for upcountry work with H-34 Captains. Caron had a proficiency Check on the seventh.

Edwards had flown Air America Bells for three years in Saigon, and his reason for transferring may or may not have been representative of other individuals switching venues. After that period in South Vietnam, he was ready to either resign, transfer to Udorn, or summarily execute the generally unpopular and autocratic CPH Bob Hitchman. ¹

Edward's request for transfer came through first. Bob Caron and he began training on the H-34. Although Edwards had no experience flying the aircraft, his 1000 plus hours in the U.S. Army H-21 helicopter was helpful to his transition. The

¹ In the Author's opinion, having experience as a former helicopter chief pilot, management by intimidation never worked over the long run. Because of a different time period and situation, Bob Hitchman could not successfully emulate or conduct the same technique that CJ Abadie employed, and VPFO Bob Rousselot sanctioned, during early days in Udorn to manage Air America pilots.

reciprocating engines were basically the same, both being underpowered for the machine.

In comparison to the Saigon quagmire, Edwards could not believe how nice the Udorn facility was, particularly local Company management types. Everyone was very professional and businesslike. He considered Wayne Knight and Marius Burke among the best supervisors he had ever worked for. He heard a lot of people bad-mouthing Abadie, but equated most of the talk to jealousy, although he had not been present, when as Ab climbed the corporate ladder, he may have stepped on a lot of toes.

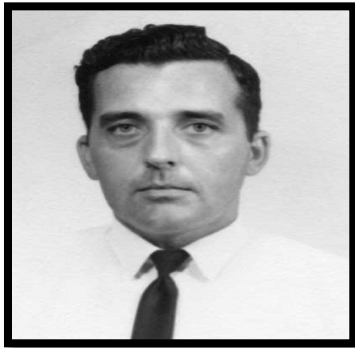
Comprising the best part of his decision to transfer, all the frustrations and nit-picking incurred in the Saigon environment were absent. In fact, Edwards believed he was on STO the first six months in Udorn. ²

During his initial upcountry training period and prior to upgrading to Captain, he flew with Tim Woosley during his Long Tieng, Sam Tong, Savannakhet, and Luang Prabang familiarization. Since he spent most of this upcountry period with Woosley, he attributes his survival largely to Tim's excellent instruction in both the machine and mountain flying techniques.

He had the utmost respect for pilots who allowed him to fly from the right seat and "let him crash all over the place." Other pilots he flew with before upgrading were JJ McCauley at Nam Yu in northwestern Military Region One and Lloyd Higgins at Pakse in Military Region Four. He believed upcountry "IPs" performed a very good job with new pilots. ³

²Of course, Hank Edwards missed the very early years and growing pains in Udorn when we endured much the same conditions.

³Instructor pilots or IPs were not specifically designated yet; nor were line Captains paid anything extra to perform this duty.



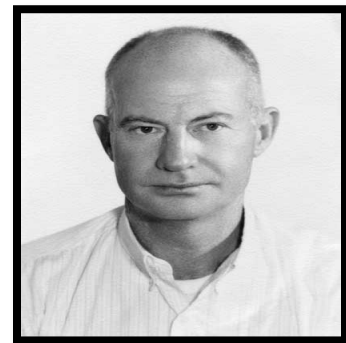
Hank Edwards



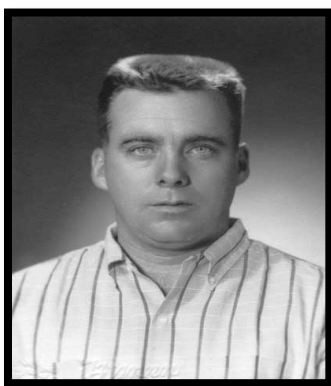
Tim Woosley



Izzy Freeman



Lloyd Higgins



JJ McCauley



Bob Caron

Bell Captain Izzy Freeman (05/29/68) arrived from Saigon during the second week and was assigned to the H-34 program. ⁴

FAN EFFORTS

On the second of August, with the long spate of foul weather diminishing and at last cooperating somewhat in lower Military Region Five, Mike Jarina departed in Hotel-15 with Flight Mechanic Baragan to support FAR/FAN efforts from Vientiane to ward off potential enemy attacks on Vang Vieng (L-16). With a small Pathet Lao unit spotted near Wattay Airport the previous week, there was also serious concern that the airport complex would soon be hit.

During a lengthy twenty-three-landing day, Mike was dispatched forty-seven miles north-northwest to Ban Donge (LS-163). He then moved thirty miles north to Ban Na Then (LS-249), south of MOUNG KASSY. He ended the day at Sala Phou Khoun (LS-260) 7/13 road junction, a place often attacked but still controlled by government forces. Enemy troop movements were noted north of the road and supposition centered on the belief that several government positions would soon be attacked along this artery. Furthermore, there was suspicion that T-28s at the Luang Prabang airfield would be hit again.

Jarina RTB Udorn, chocking in well after dark.

On 3 August, with Cricket coordinating, Raven pilots, FAG Pogo, and slow movers (prop planes) worked the San Luang area. More air was sought at dark, as the enemy continued massing in the hills preparing to attack Site-41.

⁴EW Knight Email Including August Flight Logs.
Hank Edwards Email Relating to Early Impressions of Udorn.

Two days later, under FAG Pogo's direction and Raven control, allied air continued pounding enemy concentrations with acceptable BDA reported.

By the sixth both San Luang and Houei Ki Nin were declared under friendly control. However, the fighting was not over. Impacted adversely by heavy monsoon conditions, enemy units took cover in local caves and abandoned hooches. Discovered by trolling Raven FACs and Meo patrols, on the 15th, several A-1 flights supported Pogo, pummeling enemy locations.

Since the push to capture Moung Soui was over, on Thursday, FAN troops in the Xieng Dat, San Luang, and Phou So areas were alerted that they would be relocated southwest to reinforce Moung Kassy where enemy units were reputedly moving. Three days later on the 10th, while evacuation was underway at Site-117, Vietnamese troops attacked New Xieng Dat numerous times. Over the next few days, the remaining troops were scattered to the winds.

"...neutralist forces have abandoned the outpost at Xieng Dat following several sharp enemy attacks." ⁵

In time, FAN regrouped at Moung Kassy and were flown to Thailand for refitting and retraining.

All the activity at Kassy drew the attention of a Vietnamese battalion maneuvering in the upper Vang Vieng Valley. By the 15th, TIC was reported at Ban Na Then (LS-249), a few miles south of Site-153.

Because the FAN departure from Xieng Dat caused an enormous void in the western defensive posture, troops at San Luang withdrew just south of the Nam Ngum to more acceptable

⁵CIA Daily Bulletin, 08/16/69. Laos: Although no major attacks have been mounted since the fall of Moung Soui almost two months ago, the communists are still maintaining pressure on government forces in north Laos.

positions. ⁶

THE OFFENSIVE

The high upland plateau, generically called the PDJ (Plain of Jars; French, Plaine des Jars), was located about a hundred miles north of Vientiane approximately in the center of lower Military Region Two in Xieng Khouang Province. Shaped somewhat like a wide funnel draining into the lower province, the Plain of Jars was ringed by mountains. With an elevation averaging 3,500 feet above sea level (ASL), the grassy flat savannah like terrain and rolling hills provided essential fodder to maintain herds of cattle to feed limited numbers of Kha, Meo, Yao, Vietnamese, Chinese, and Lao living in or around the 500 square-mile area. Streams and rivers, replenished annually during the monsoon season, provided adequate moisture to green the Plain for most of the year, except at the height of the dry season. Two major towns--Khang Khay, situated on the plateau's northern reaches, and Phong Savan on the eastern fringe of the Plain--were long considered major centers of market and cultural activities. Other smaller towns, waxing and waning in importance as the period and situation dictated, dotted the Plain.

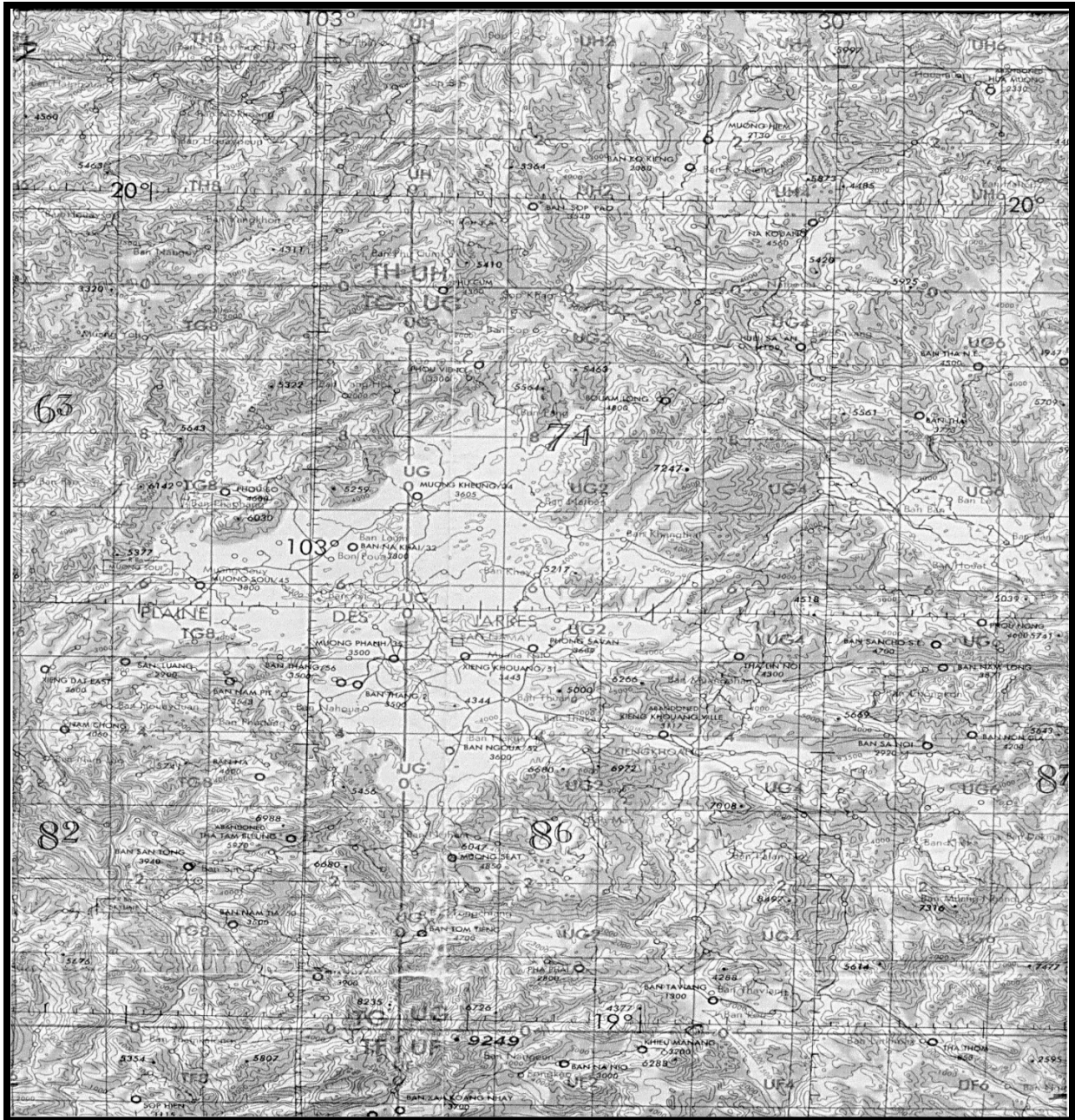
Throughout recorded history, because unique transportation arteries in the form of footpaths, trails, and dirt roads crisscrossed the area, and porous borders prevailed, the Plain of Jars region was prized as an economic crossroads and perfect invasion route leading to the more heavily populated lower Laos.

⁶Mike Jarina Interviews.

CIA Bulletin, The Military situation continues to be quiet but there are some signs that the communists may increase their activities along strategic Route-13, 08/06/69.

CIA Bulletin, 06/18/69.

Extracts from ABCCC Reports.



USAF Pilotage Chart, scale 1:500,000, oriented north and south. The map displays a portion of the lower Military Region Two in Laos. The center of the map shows the diamond shaped Plain of Jars plateau almost completely surrounded by mountains. At the bottom is "The Nipple," where part of the 1969 PDJ operation began; to the east (right center) is the Xieng Khouang Ville Valley containing Route-4; on the west side Moung Soui sits astride Route-7; upper northeast PDJ, Route-7 flows past Phou Nok Kok into the Ban Ban Valley.

Author Collection.



A portion of the southeastern Plain of Jars, Laos. Topography depicts semi-wooded savannah, streams, ponds, and rolling low hills. Well-watered rice paddies supported substantial agriculture. On 6 July 2019, the Plaine of Jars was inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Author Collection.

Perhaps still fresh in Vietnamese memory, during ancient times prior to the French Indochina colonial era beginning in the 1800s, the naming of the Plain for its mysterious and conspicuous stone jars, and the official formation of a neutral Laos state in 1954 during the Geneva Accord agreements, the region was considered part of a vast Vietnamese dynasty.

History records that the Vietnamese were no strangers to Laos. In fact, during the almost hundred-year French colonial period, because of the indolent Lao nature and a deficiency of civil servants, trained Vietnamese were imported to manage the country. This also applied to agriculture in central Laos, where more than one crop of rice could be harvested by motivated and energetic farmers from Vietnam. Therefore, for a time until the French civilian and military departure from Indochina, the end result became a majority Vietnamese population living in southern Mekong River towns.

Since late 1960, when FAR troops were ejected from, or willingly abandoned their last bastions on the Plain of Jars, and the Neutralists later divided into leftist and neutral factions, the entire plain belonged to and was controlled by Pathet Lao and Vietnamese forces.

According to a tenured USAID representative stationed at Sam Tong, who knew and claimed to understand General Vang Pao's reasoning well, his reasons for moving onto the Plain of Jars were somewhat more complicated than could be explained in a few words. Vang Pao and everyone else in the loop were well aware that conducting large operations in the strategic region would foster a major reaction from the enemy at some point. But because of the recent losses of territory, under constant military pressure and severe criticism from Lao generals, the general felt obligated to accept the risks and proceed with an ambitious offensive. The Plain of Jars had long been considered

a national treasure. Although it had not been controlled by the RLG since 1960, Vang Pao wanted to restore it, if possible, to King Vatthana and Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma.

From a tactical perspective there were several factors involved in moving onto the Plain of Jars:

"If VP's troops could coax NVA battalions into the open, then U.S. air assets could strike enemy concentrations with impunity and greatly reduce losses to Meo units already greatly diminished from years of fighting.

Removal of all civilians from the area would deny the NVA and PL their support base for sustenance and manpower to conduct future operations.

The action would release guerrilla forces to maintain an important flank, as VP referred to it, 'the corridor that ringed the PDJ from Bouam Long to Phou So and west of Moung Soui and ultimately to Sam Tong and Long Tieng.'

From past experience, the general was confident the eastern flank at Padong and the surrounding area would hold.

Another major factor involved in the decision to attack the PDJ were ongoing Paris peace talks regarding a Lao bombing halt and ceasefire along patterns established during the 1954 and 1962 Geneva Accords. The Plain was clearly on the Pathet Lao side of the theoretical demarcation line. Moreover, much of VP's "corridor" also lay on the PL side. Thus, if a ceasefire reached fruition, VP wanted to be positioned to negotiate the PDJ for

*his protective "corridor."*⁷

Intelligence regarding enemy movements on the Plain of Jars was already well known and collated. With this information in hand, Vang Pao recognized a choice opportunity to advance on northern chokepoints to sever communist supply lines. This movement, coupled with offensives against enemy positions on the southern Plain of Jars, would tend to deflect and stymie enemy advances beyond Moug Soui. However, troops for this operation would have to be stripped from existing sites, making these positions more susceptible to enemy probes.

Taking advantage of his sizeable and reliable helicopter assets, the weather, and in conjunction with USAF efforts, Vang Pao acted.

By early August, northern strike units were staged at Bouam Long and San Tiau in the Zone Steel area, ready to move south toward the Nong Pet junction and west toward the commanding heights of Phou Nok Kok. However, monsoon weather and extraordinarily prolific torrential rains, surpassing previous years by almost 200 percent over short periods, failed to cooperate. This greatly hampered ground progress toward objectives. The temporary ground delay worked both ways and actually proved opportune in that it allowed Air Force air

⁷ On most points, Vang Pao later affirmed he had been correct. This was especially the case involving the last fact. When the ceasefire was later implemented in 1973, the Vietnamese and their Pathet Lao surrogates controlled not only the Plain of Jars, but also the "corridor" from the west and south of Phou So and north and east past Bouam Long. What Vang Pao had feared had occurred. He lost a large share of his "corridor" that he considered so important to contain future hostility had a ceasefire not been honored.

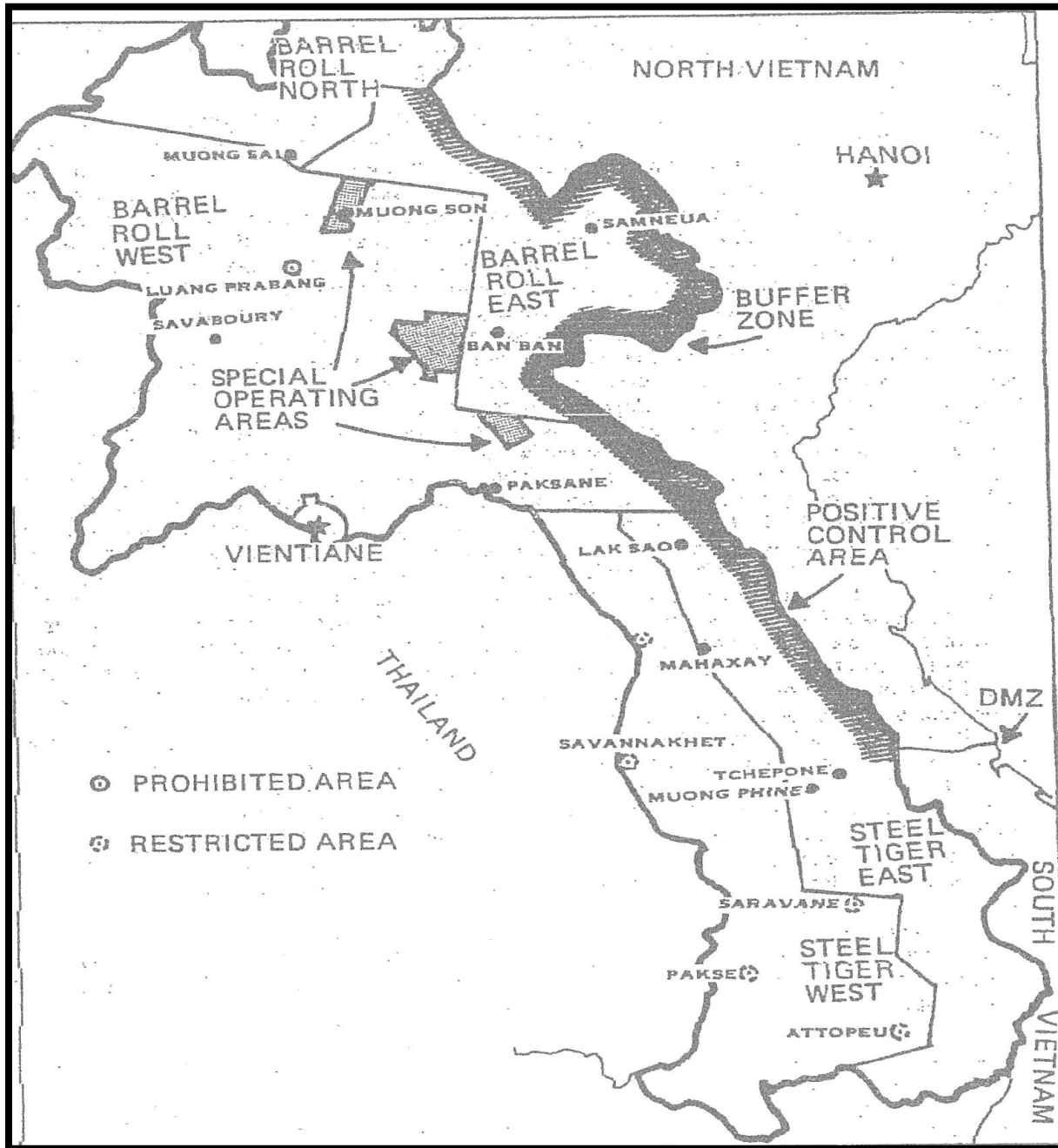
Blaine Jensen Letter: Had not South Vietnam fallen to the communists in 1975, one can only speculate as to how long the Lao ceasefire would have existed. If not, perhaps the Meo would have struggled many more years to retain and regain their territory. Additionally, there likely would have been panic among Thai and military leaders, leading to a large influx of regular Thai troops into Military Region Two.

strikes to continue despite foul weather. Vastly improved in accuracy, all weather bombing employed radar, LORAN D, and pre-selected aiming points to interdict narrow portions of hairpin turns known as vehicle chokepoints. This would slow and reduce enemy incursion in Barrel Roll East, an area containing Route-7, the primary logistical route leading from North Vietnam.

The three sections of Xieng Khouang Province encompassing Vang Pao's operation included Barrel Roll (BR) East, West (this also included parts of Military Region One), and designated zones on the eastern Plain of Jars known as Special Operating areas. Work in each sector involved separate rules of engagement (ROE). They specified what could be hit and what limited targeting was permitted. Airborne FACs or ground-based FAGs were generally required for positive control in both areas except Special Operating areas and for SAR missions that required immediate action. Armed reconnaissance along LOCs was sanctioned in eastern Barrel Roll with validation required for anything outside the proscribed limits. Except for specific Joint Chief of Staff (JCS) approval, the established ten-mile buffer zone between the Lao and North Vietnamese border was entirely off limits.

Bombing within the western portion required U.S. Embassy validation in addition to Long Tieng-based Raven FAC and FAG control. Khang Khai and Phong Savan towns were still temporarily off limits to air strikes.

Because of recent enemy activity, strikes in the Special Operating Area required no FAC control outside populated villages. Napalm was authorized in target-of-opportunity cases. Although advised to follow similar USAF ROE, RLAF T-28 pilots, who did not fly the same number of sorties as the Americans, were under no similar constraints, often bombing whatever targets they chose.



August map of Laos depicting USAF targeting areas. The upper portion displays the Military Region Two Barrel Roll area involved in General Vang Pao's August Plain of Jars offensive. MR-2 Barrel Roll is divided into specific sections, each with their own rules of engagement.

Anthony, 312.

In Military Region Two, Meo pilots flying under Vang Pao's control enjoyed a special rapport with the general that stimulated them to fly more sorties than Lao (and Thai) pilots in other military regions. Employing a personal touch, Vang Pao conducted the following day's targeting briefing at the daily meeting held at Alternate. At that time, he would personally instruct his backseat O1 FAC observers and pilots regarding the results he desired. In lieu of a military fragmentation (frag) order or a divert, Vang Pao had both the incentive and ability to hustle to the flight line and personally brief pilots regarding an urgent requirement for close air support at a certain location or on a time-constrained basis. During August, despite substantial weather delays that caused flooding and temporary closures of Wattay Airport to commercial flights, Air America cargo operations continued to pump supplies upcountry.

On the sixth, the same day the northern task forces finally began slowly advancing south toward their objectives, several battalions proceeded from various directions toward the Plain. In order to destroy perishable targets, during T-28 bombing close to the southern Plain of Jars, Vang Pao often observed and directed strikes.

I managed to arrive late at Long Tieng on C-123 293, where I took control of Papa Foxtrot Juliet with Flight Mechanic John Melvin. Marking what I could only call a little flight time and a boring five-day RON, I flew less than one fuel load before securing for the night.

Thursday dawned to yet another day of accomplishing less than one fuel load of flying. I should have been happy with the two hours and forty minutes logged, for I did not crank a blade during the following two days.

The weather cleared sufficiently late Sunday afternoon, allowing almost four hours of flying into the evening. During this period, Terry Dunn replaced Melvin.

On the eleventh, by the time the bowl was open for fixed wing, C-123 293 landed with my replacement pilot. Since the aircraft was returning to Udorn, I took advantage of the ride. Little had been accomplished. The RON had been miserable in that wet, damp valley with just nine hours logged and only one third of that as project time. ⁸

"The heavy monsoon rains are having a substantial impact on the level of ground fighting. On the government's side, poor flying weather and the difficulty of moving troops overland have forced the temporary postponement of General Vang Pao's efforts to cut Route-7 and move against the enemy in the southern portion of the [PDJ]. Weather and heavy airstrikes are also causing the communists some difficulty in supporting their front-line troops. There is no sign, however, that major enemy units are pulling back from forward positions." ⁹

With adverse weather still drastically hampering flying and ground operations in Laos, on Tuesday, Mike Jarina deadheaded to Luang Prabang on C-123 616 to fly Hotel-45. Regional weather was no better on Wednesday, which curtailed flying.

On Thursday, the fourteenth, flying less than two hours, Mike, Captain John Fonburg, and Flight Mechanic Leveriza crewed a H-34 to TH0080, a point forty-five miles north of Luang

⁸ Segment Sources:
Blaine Jensen Letter, 02/01/97.
Ken Conboy, 215.
Victor Anthony, 310-313.
Tom Ahern, 324.
John Pratt, *CHECO*, 107.
Project CHECO: Southeast Asia Report: Rules of Engagement November 1969-September 1972, 12, 03/01/73.
CIA Bulletin, 08/08/69.

⁹ CIA Daily Bulletin, 08/16/69.

Prabang. On the return leg, they stopped at Phou Dam (LS-256), ten miles north of Luang Prabang, just south of the Mekong River.

Monsoon conditions impacted the region on Friday grounding most flights in the area.

Weather continued iffy on Saturday when Joe Lopes and Flight Mechanic Alor arrived late with Hotel-59. Flying a little past sunset, the crew journeyed to Phou Dam, returned to Luang Prabang, and then launched for a position seventeen miles west on the north side of the Mekong.

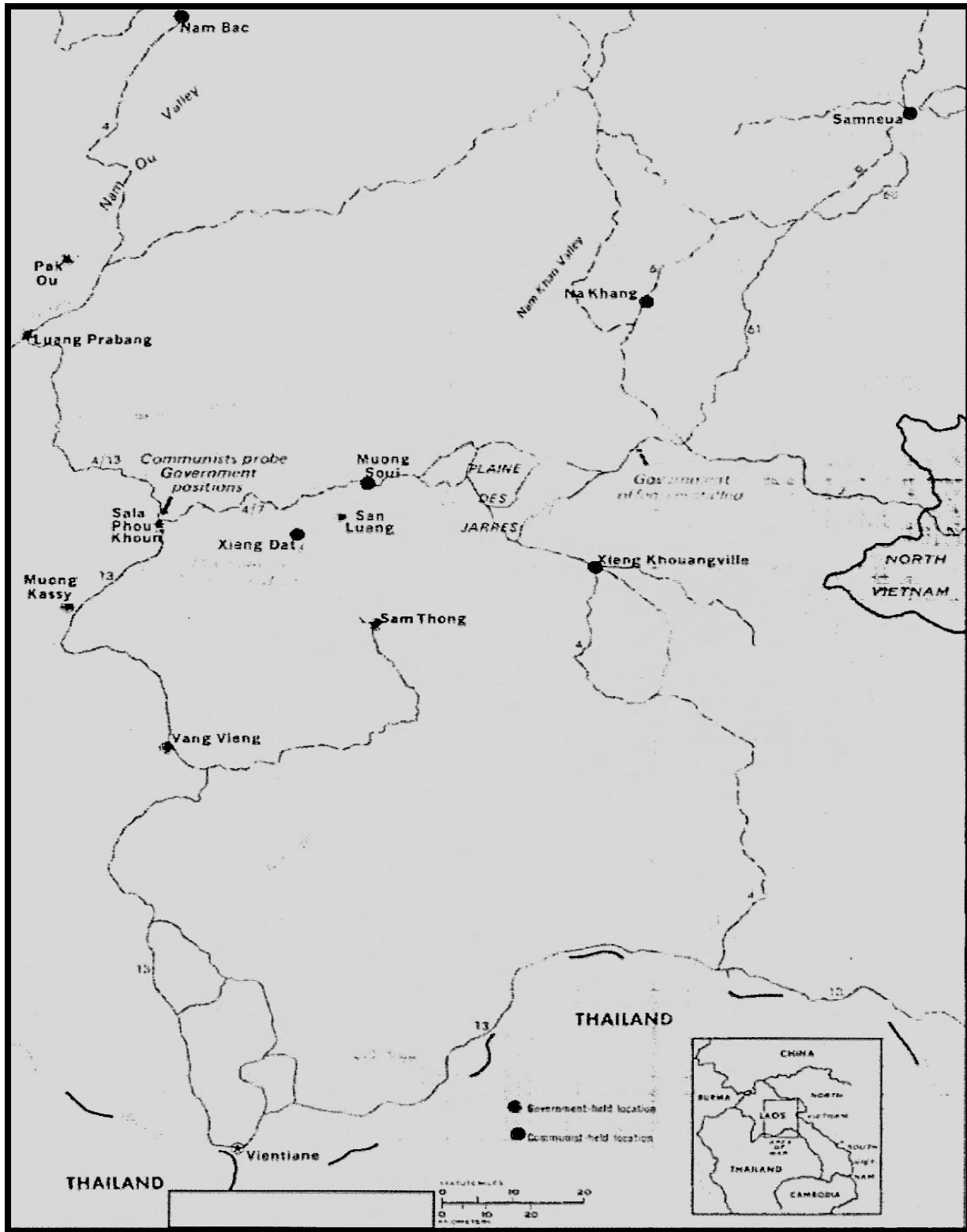
On Sunday, the seventeenth, during another short day, working close to the royal capital the crew conducted two flights to Phou Dam. Another short mission was assigned to a high mountain range seven miles southeast of Luang Prabang near Ban Long Houay Noi. This was followed by a trip three miles southeast and north of Route-13. Expected since the fall of Moung Soui, a heavy enemy probe on the Sala Phou Khoun junction had been conducted two days previously, but failed to dislodge FAR units. The pressure was believed intended to convince government troops to abandon the site.

A final trip was assigned across the Mekong eleven miles southwest to Ban Muang Khay on Route-1. ¹⁰

NORM AND GLEN CASH IT IN

After departing Wattay Airport about 0700 on Thursday morning for Long Tieng, Bell 204B XW8511F crashed on the north slope of Skyline Ridge, killing Captain Norm Grammer and Flight Mechanic Glen Woods. Ironically, 11F was the same aircraft that claimed Jim Campbell's life and injuring Jim Rausch while

¹⁰Mike Jarina Interviews.
CIA Daily Bulletin, 08/16/69.



The enemy attack on the Sala Phou Khoun 7/13 road junction was rejected by government troops.

CIA Map, 08/16/69.

practicing autorotations in South Vietnam. The ship was subsequently delivered to Udorn, rebuilt, and eventually entered our inventory. Norm had flown Vang Pao to Vientiane the previous evening in order to attend a final meeting with principals in regard to commencement and support of the delayed PDJ operation. Perhaps, after consulting a soothsayer, although often relying on his own extrasensory perceptions, Vang Pao announced that the weather would clear sufficiently on the 15th for his troops to move forward and begin the operation. In the morning the general had another one of his premonitions of impending doom (perhaps in retrospect), so he elected to delay his return for better weather and a flight on a fixed wing. Consequently, after reports of holes developing in the area low ceiling, 11F crew departed empty at 0700 hours.

Following the accident, ground and PIREPs reported adverse en route conditions. Clouds in the Alternate area were reported as broken layers at 6,500 and 3,300 feet. Ground conditions were five miles visibility in fog and three miles visibility in light rain at Site-20. Since Long Tieng was socked in, apparently Grammer overflew Skyline to check Sam Tong and the viability of conducting a descent underneath the existing ceiling.

Crews of Hotel-52 and PFF arrived on scene about an hour after the crash to recover remains. A preliminary report indicated substantial fire damage. Woods had been decapitated by part of a retreating main rotor blade that sliced the left cabin top and entered the cockpit.

Later investigations revealed that at the time of the accident indigenous eyewitnesses heard two to three explosions and then observed 11F descending rapidly through a hole in the clouds. Observers reported seeing parts of the helicopter flying off prior to the crash. The aircraft impacted the slope nose down in a steep angle, ending up inverted in soft dirt. Pieces

of the helicopter were discovered 300 feet north of the crash site. At the end of the day, these items were returned to Udorn for analysis. However, without additional evidence no cause for the accident was forthcoming.¹¹

Investigation and aircraft recovery continued on Friday. The 204 was moved out of the dirt with the assistance of a heavy lift helicopter. The main gear box rotor blade shaft was discovered severed, and area searches failed to uncover the rotor head system, or the tail rotor gear box. The engine appeared to be in relatively good condition. A teardown later failed to produce evidence of engine failure. An expanded area search was planned for the sixteenth. As parts were discovered and delivered to Udorn, they would be added to those in an off-limits section of a hangar.

Because of a lack of discussion forthcoming by management regarding the cause of the accident, aircraft sequestering in a hangar, and the mystery attached to the crash, circumstantial evidence gave rise to conspiracy theories among rank-and-file field crewmembers:

Since Vang Pao was slated to return to The Alternate in 11F, and explosions were purportedly heard by individuals on the ground and evidence of fire damage discovered in the oil cooler compartment, the possibility of sabotage was discussed and later discounted as erroneous.

Another conspiracy theory speculated that because Glen claimed downing two NVAF AN-2 Colts at Phu Pha Thi in early 1968 and was identified by name over Hanoi Radio, he was targeted for assassination. Additionally, Glen enjoyed flying and was reputed

¹¹ Author Note: 11F. Many years have elapsed since the accident, and detailed documentation, of the rebuild is not forthcoming. It would be informative to know what rotor system components were changed after the Campbell crash in Saigon. This would pertain particularly to the rotorhead mast.

to have been sitting in the left seat at the time of the crash. When a cockpit examination revealed the manual fuel control switch in the manual mode, it was opined that during the initial confusion of compressor stalls, or whatever occurred that morning, the switch was either consciously or inadvertently activated, causing an overspeed of massive proportions that wrenched the main rotor head off the splined mast.

Probably noncontributing, but a fact that I recalled, was that Norm was another former confident Army instrument pilot like John Cooney, who earnestly believed that flying IFR in the relatively uncharted Lao mountains was a justified and viable procedure.

Following my six-day RON, I entered the hangar where the forlorn torn and battered fuselage and separate pieces of 11F were roped off. We could look at the wreck, but were forbidden to touch it. As additional components and individual parts of the Bell were found and shipped to Udorn, reconstruction slowly proceeded. Neither Wayne nor anyone else associated with management was willing to discuss, comment, or commit to any speculation regarding the accident. This was quite frustrating for those of us flying the Bell and who wanted immediate answers for our own survival. Moreover, aberrations of the FCU, governor units were still an unresolved concern. Remembering the USMC officer code, "to always keep your men informed," my personal view at the time was that management handled this accident unprofessionally regarding the pilot force, and acted like they were unconcerned. ¹²

¹² Since fatalities were involved and no immediate cause could be determined for the accident, perhaps silence was mandated by higher-ups. In addition, Bell, the major helicopter manufacturer of the aircraft with its considerable military and civilian political influence, was involved and like the Charlie Jones incident in 1965, litigation was sure to follow.

Doug Dreifus was chief of the Air America Safety Division. When the Company Safety Department was formed, the investigative procedures used attempted to conform to those of the U.S. military, CAB, NTSB, FAA, and ICAO. Patterned after these organizations, a comprehensive manual was assembled and normal safety procedures established for all flight and ground mishaps, including Air America, Civil Air Transport, Southern Air Transport-Pacific Division, and for all the many operating bases. As the unit was enlarged, safety personnel were hired for each major base: Udorn, Saigon, Vientiane, and Taipei. Safety personnel included: Dreifus, George Keller, Dee Huffer, Ross, Phil O'Brien, and Ground Safety Officer, Yale Naliboff.¹³

The procedure in place stipulated that all mishaps would be investigated, followed by a full report compiled and delivered to the headquarters review board in Taipei. Of course, the chain of command included CEO George Dole in Washington, D.C. Copies of the report were filed in Taipei and Washington. Each base was accorded a copy.

In the case of any U.S. "N" registered aircraft, a copy of the accident findings was sent to the FAA and CAB/TSB in Washington. These duplicates were locked in a safe in the investigation section of the CAB.

CPH Wayne Knight honchoed the investigation team which recovered much of the fuselage and the all-important data plate. Wayne and the Company investigator devoted considerable time to studying cockpit switch panels, some sufficiently intact to determine the position at the exact time of impact. However, in other cases, the damage was so catastrophic that switch positions like the manual fuel control toggle were largely

¹³ Yale Naliboff was an Israeli citizen.

ignored. Wayne's involvement in the incident largely ended with termination of the investigation.

Over time, the eventual findings in Grammer's accident became clear-cut in Wayne's mind. Although a rare accident in the world of Bell aviation, mast bumping caused by an abrupt negative "G" pushover became the Air America review board's final determination in 11F's destruction. Tangible proof for mast bumping existed, but no actual cause for the condition ever surfaced. Exhaustive searches produced the ship's main rotor head several hundred yards from the wreckage. This was consistent with eyewitness reports, as the component was observed by villagers separating from the helicopter in flight. Inspection revealed the severed shaft severely pinched on both sides of the mast.

To line pilots, unfamiliar with the term, we had no idea what mast bumping could do to an aircraft. In fact, information related to the phenomena was just being disseminated. For obvious reasons--litigation--Bell was not forthcoming with facts regarding the subject. However, U.S. Army sources produced some material. The Army information was complicated because it related to the 540-rotor head on gunships. Causation and analysis of the mast bumping problem related to exceeding parameters of the operating envelope while conducting high speed and abrupt pull up or bank maneuvers. This could cause the main rotor collar to hammer and pinch the main mast off when the blades were aligned with the direction of flight.

Site-20A had been generally closed to much air traffic by monsoon conditions for a very long period. With the Plain of Jars operation about to start and aircraft required, there was pressure to arrive at the site. On the morning of the 14th, the weather began to clear. However, when Grammer entered the area, very few holes in the clouds existed. Investigators speculated

that while attempting to penetrate the cloud layer, he pitched the nose down with enough force to cause severe mast bumping and separation of the rotor head.

The formerly little-known facts regarding the mast bumping potential when conducting negative "Gs" in the Bell was eventually passed on to the line pilots. Also, Air America proposed changes to the Army flight manual regarding the issue, but corporate liability prevented immediate changes.

Later, the mast bumping issue became a "real hot potato" and a number of legal cases ensued.

Although the Maintenance Department had the capability to rebuild helicopters, repair of 11F had been difficult to ascertain. According to Chief of Technical Services Udorn, Jack Forney:

"...if a significant portion of 11F was recovered, it was likely it was utilized as the start of a rebuild or repair for either 11F or another 204 aircraft. Destroyed aircraft were frequently rebuilt and returned to service. The restoration often involved constructing an aircraft from disparate, similar, and locally manufactured structural parts around a salvaged data plate. ¹⁴ The practice included Lao registered 205 and "N" registered Bell 204B helicopters rebuilt in Udorn. Rebuilds conformed entirely to specifications and their performance and airworthiness as compared to non-traumatized aircraft was never in doubt. A UH-1H structural assembly or two have crept into the rebuild of a 204B or vice versa. Forney was surprised to find minor structural differences between the two aircraft at the time, but the differences had nothing to do with form, fit, and function."

¹⁴Some problems with Helio Courier and Pilatus Porter planes arose employing this practice, though the aircraft were normally rebuilt in Tainan.

Both Norm Grammer and Glen Woods were sorely missed by all of us.

Glen Woods, from Phenix City, Alabama, evolved from a very old and patriotic American family. Members had fought in every war involving the U.S. since the late 1700s. All members of the family were trained sharpshooters, even the women.

Prior to his death, Glen had visited his family in Alabama. There he told his brother, a retired Naval aviator, some of the story regarding his shoot down of the AN-2 Colts at Site-85 that he called "the camp." Glen's brother thought he had "the look" on his face, the one that defined when pilots felt the next flight would be their last. His brother's wife thought Glen appeared shell shocked.

When asked why he was returning to Southeast Asia, Glen said he and his Thai wife had a daughter and he had to go back.

Should he be killed, Glen's will stipulated his internment in Saint Mary cemetery on the Sakon Nakhon Highway outside of Udorn Town.¹⁵ He believed this method would prove advantageous in lieu of hauling his body around for long periods of time. Although provided an opportunity to have his remains repatriated, Mrs. Woods respected his wish. Burial in Udorn was a wise decision, for Glen's elderly mother was in the throes of early Alzheimer's disease, unable to deal with the situation. Instead, Glen's mom was flown to Udorn to attend the funeral along with Glen's wife and daughter. Afterward they all returned to Alabama, where the family gathered to meet Glen's Thai family. Ensuing discussions, all erroneous, regarding the incident varied widely. There was even a fallacious rumor that the helicopter was shot down. Glen's wife had heard that a bomb

¹⁵ Saint Mary: The same place Charlie Carlson and the Nadalini family infant were buried.

was placed on the ship; placed there by Filipino mercenaries in retaliation for Glen's two alleged Colt downing's. ¹⁶ ¹⁷

Norm Grammer was a soft spoken, intelligent individual from Waverly, Virginia. He came to us, along with five other former U.S. Army Bell pilots to act as what we referred to as our "safety pilots" during our 1967 transition to the Bell. I flew with Norm on many infil/exfil missions and thought highly of his skills and pleasant demeanor.

Years of living in Udorn, talking to the same people day after day, resulted in a dearth of items to discuss. Conversing about weather, flying, the situation in Laos, and the sort became boring and mundane. Therefore, we sought to find outlets like trivia to break up the monotony. One day Norm was present in the CPH's office while Wayne and I engaged in a friendly disagreement regarding a verse in Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* containing an old English term, gat-toothed. Waxing contrary for discussion purposes, Wayne maintained there was no such word as gat and it had to be gap-toothed. Unfortunately, there was no immediate proof available in the form of the printed word.

Norm was a reader. Much later, while visiting the USAF base library, Grammer discovered a copy of the *Canterbury Tales* and settled the almost forgotten issue between Wayne and myself. During my freshman year at Duke University, I endured a semester studying English authors, so naturally I won the argument, but

¹⁶ In July 2000, the Author conversed electronically with Glen's nephew, Steve Woods. Steve was interested in information regarding his uncle, the incident, and Glen's final resting place. Steve was interested in perhaps repatriating Glen's remains.

¹⁷ The Author has a photo taken by John Lesnak showing John and former Customer Tony Poe cutting weeds in front of Glen's gravestone at the Saint Mary cemetery in Udorn, Thailand.

without undue gloating or excessive exuberance. ¹⁸

FINALLY, MOVEMENT IN THE WESTERN CAMP

Although called the Plain of Jars operation by Customers and us line pilots, on higher American levels and in ensuing print it was referred to as **About Face**. ¹⁹

Despite skepticism among USAF meteorologists regarding the return of fair weather for several more weeks, Vang Pao's uncanny prediction of clearing on 15 August actually occurred, producing the first sunny day in months. Relatively good weather prevailed for weeks, allowing government forces to maneuver on and around the Plain of Jars with relative impunity behind rolling air artillery. Marking a change from guerrilla unit deployment to battalion-sized forces, the government troops surged forward, encountering only weak rear echelon Vietnamese forces.

Not only was Vang Pao's intuition regarding future weather outstanding, his offensive was spot on for the current situation. Vietnamese history recorded:

"...During the 1969 rainy season, because we had not correctly assessed the enemy's plans and capabilities, the units of the [PL] Plain of Jars Military Region were pulled back and

¹⁸Sequence Sources:

Air America XOXO 08/14/69, 0515Z, Phil Goddard,

Air America XOXO 08/14/69, 1400, Assistant Base Manager.

Air America XOXO 08/15/69, 1520.

EW Knight Emails, 10/08/00.

Jack Forney Email.

Doug Dreifus Email.

Bill Leary August 1969 Notes of Communication with Wayne Knight, 01/05/92.

Steve Woods, Nephew of Glen Woods, Emails, 07/24/00 (2), 07/25/00, 07/26/00.

¹⁹In Lao called Kou Kiet or Redeem Honor. The Author will use the acronym PDJ terminology for Plain of Jars.

concentrated at Moung Kheung [Lima-109 on the northwest corner of the PDJ] to rest and regroup. Vietnam's main force units were withdrawn back to the Vietnamese border to regroup and reorganize because they had fought continuously throughout the entire dry season. The only forces left in the [PDJ] were two Vietnamese volunteer army battalions and Lao provincial local force troops..." ²⁰

UPCOUNTRY

The morning of clearing monsoon conditions, I deadheaded to Long Tieng from Udorn on C-123 293. Weather permitting, C-123 crews conducted almost daily shuttles to The Alternate with "bullets, beans, and bandages" from the vast Peppergrinder supply depot, a logistical munitions stockpile and conduit previously established in the early sixties. The mechanism was tailored to bypass Lao Geneva Accords stipulations, prying eyes, and wasteful and greedy FAR echelons. Now, as the Plain of Jars operation appeared ready to commence, adequate supplies would serve as the operation's lifeblood to sustain the envisioned three-week action.

I joined Flight Mechanic Roman "Ski" Olkowski on my now-perceived nemesis aircraft, Papa Foxtrot Foxtrot. Having to rely on their tools of war, military men often formed close attachments to their machines, often fondly referring to them in the feminine gender. However, my attitude toward this inanimate machine was entirely negative. It was something new to me, very difficult to resolve, and causing me to wonder when the next incident would occur. Had I been a practicing Buddhist, I might have encouraged monks to bless PFF with strings, chants, and

²⁰ *History of the Vietnamese Volunteer Groups and Vietnamese Military Specialists in Laos, 1954-1975: Group 100-Military Advisors; Group 959, Military Specialists.*

lustral water, like what was performed on a T-28 at Luang Prabang to eradicate troublesome spirits. I prided myself in always caring for my machine by remaining within published operating parameters and not abusing it in any way. Like the western cowboy, I considered my helicopter a faithful steed, an entity that, if cared for, would preserve my life and always get me home. I had to believe this in order to function.

To assure myself that PFF was airworthy to the extent I could determine, I inspected the machine in minute detail before cranking a blade, and enjoined Ski to check the ship frequently during shutdowns for obvious abnormalities.

We spent the day and early evening shuttling supplies into Bouam Long, and to forward elements south of the site moving toward Phou Kheo. Equivalent to USMC pathfinder teams when I was in the Corps, this spearhead unit was tasked to quickly establish site security, scope out the area, and report current intelligence. Although I had occasionally worked in the vast mountainous areas of Phou San and Phou Lat Tai in past years, I knew the location, but could not actually recall landing at Site-115. As the lift was underway, Case Officer Frank Odum's mixed units of Meo ADC and a battalion from Savannakhet laboriously proceeded south over mountains, ravines, and through wet, harsh terrain.

At the same time, employing the benefits of high ridgelines overlooking the Ban Ban Valley, the San Tiau force moved closer to Phou Nok Kok.

Saturday work was much the same. After cloud layers lifted to allow helicopters to launch, I returned to Site-32 for another day of supporting the Nong Pet offensive. PFF held together with no maintenance abnormalities and once again I slowly gained confidence in the bird, but Ski and I still closely checked the machine during refueling periods. As planes

landed or dropped supplies in the bowl, using the precious kerosene fuel (A-1) delivered and based there, I remained in the field and distributed stores to troops moving south.

Sent north early the following morning, with main force troops moving closer to the first objective at Phou Kheo, I shuttled troops and supplies out of Bouam Long for more than eight hours.

Reports were slowly funneled to General Vang Pao from road watch teams and advance patrols in the north. Information gathered from observation and conversations with lowland villagers and a captured road laborer, revealed that more than two weeks of unprecedented rainfall, and numerous daily Air Force bombing sorties had combined to achieve almost total cessation of vehicular traffic between Ban Ban and Nong Pet. That "*400 [NVA] troops and coolies have been tasked with moving supplies by foot to Nong Pet.*" ²¹

This fact was confirmed by electronic devices seeded by air along the LOC. In addition, villagers reported that large numbers of Vietnamese had moved east toward the border in mid-August, indicating that they were headed for North Vietnam. ²²

Apparently, enemy troops still remaining in the area had withdrawn into the hills anticipating resupply. Unlike the well-provisioned Meo troops, denied adequate food and medicine to sustain their forces, Vietnamese rank and file were suffering from endemic disease and malnutrition. This proved the case not only north of the Plain of Jars, but also on the Plain and at Moung Soui, the extreme end of the supply line. In their current

²¹ CIA Daily Bulletin, 08/25/69. Laos.

²² This tallied with scuttlebutt I heard that troops were withdrawn from MR-2 to help repair Red River dikes destroyed by monsoon rains. There were also unsubstantiated accusations by Hanoi leaders that the U.S. was intentionally bombing the dikes.

enthusiasm to deny government forces prime territory, Vietnamese leaders had violated previous rainy season policies of withdrawing into the northwest military zone of North Vietnam in order to rest and refit for a new round of offensives during the next dry season. Now, it was becoming more evident they would have to "pay the piper."

As during previous monsoon seasons, relying on Air America and USAF helicopter support, Vang Pao could rapidly move troop units close to and envelop areas considered vulnerable to either guerrilla action or larger unit attacks. With this unique tactic available, at a propitious time, the general prepared to probe the southern PDJ.

The weather in the Long Tieng bowl again turned sour on Monday. Unable to launch, held on the ground in reserve for the Site-32 operation, PFF sat unused on the ramp until middle afternoon, when I was assigned local flying missions to Ban Na, where three FAR battalions awaited Vang Pao's final marching orders for movement eight miles north-northeast to Moung Phan (L-106), FAN Commander Kong Le's former 1963 headquarters on the western PDJ periphery. Working as usual up to dark, my late efforts resulted in only two and a half hours flight time.

Since better weather prevailed at the bidding of the intuitive meteorologist Vang Pao, allied air under the direction of Raven FACs had been working to support friendly troop movement on and around the Plain of Jars. As the force from Site-32 moved closer to Site-115, enemy troop concentrations were discovered on lower elevations west of Phou Kheo. On the 18th, Raven-40 directed Poncho and Hobo flights against these targets. Battle damage assessment (BDA) claimed that fifty meters of trench line and three bunkers had been destroyed.

As opposed to my poor contribution to the war effort, Mike Jarina was far more productive, flying almost ten hours and

conducting twenty-eight landings. Sent down from Luang Prabang as one of the H-34 crews converging on the Long Tieng-Sam Tong complex, Mike managed to land at The Alternate, where he retrieved a load for Ban Na. Following the short trip, he returned to Site-20 to refuel and obtain a sack of ham and cheese sandwiches. Then he was assigned work in eastern Zone Steel. After landing at the Moung Moc regional headquarters for a briefing and instructions, he flew fourteen miles northwest of Site-46 to Phou Ngieu (LS-232). Accomplishing other work around Moung Moc, he returned to Sam Tong. Finding the hostel filled to capacity, Mike proceeded to Site-20A to join us Bell pilots for the night.

Weather cooperated on the nineteenth and I returned to Bouam Long for a full day of work. While San Tiau troops assembled near the foot of Phou Nok Kok for a final thrust to its summit, after air had eliminated potential resistance the previous day, Site-32's main force moved into Site-115 without encountering resistance.

Far to the southwest, strikes on enemy concentrations were conducted near Sala Phou Khoun (LS-260) in response to movement toward the strategic 7/13 road junction. Strikes in support of the Plain of Jars operation were conducted north of San Tiau and on a cave complex northeast of Ban Ban containing a 37mm anti-aircraft gun mounted on tracks.

On 20 August, encountering no resistance, the Meo and MR-4 SGU battalions from San Tiau ascended the slopes of the 4,700-foot Woodpecker Mountain. However, the enemy reacted, counterattacking within two days, but with insufficient strength to achieve a reversal.

"...In a belated reaction to the government offensive against Route-7, communist forces on 22 August mounted several sharp probes against government forward positions south of the

road. The communists will almost certainly continue to exert pressure against the government positions in order to safeguard the flow of supplies into the [PDJ] area." ²³

T-28 pilots out of Long Tieng and Vientiane, directed by a ground-based Forward Air Guide (FAG), provided adequate close air support for the operation. With this assistance, the strategic mountain was secured and a 75mm pack howitzer mountain gun delivered for added support.

By the 25th, all enemy resistance had ceased and Phou Nok Kok was firmly in government hands.

The previous day, Site-32 elements had moved south toward lower hilltops within five miles of their objective.

Jarina worked at Ban Na, Tha Tam Bleung, and Vang Vieng areas before being relieved at The Alternate, where he deadheaded to Wattay Airport on C-123 555 and 13-Foxtrot, a new Bell 204B addition to our Udorn helicopter fleet from Saigon. ²⁴

CAPTAIN RALPH DAVIS DIES

As I touched down on the Long Tieng parking ramp near twilight, Case Officer Chuck Campbell opened my cockpit door with the news that Porter N196X had crashed and burned on the slopes of Skyline drive while the pilot was repositioning people to Sam Tong for the night. Chuck wanted me to fly him and a few

²³CIA Daily Bulletin, 08/25/69. Laos.

²⁴Victor Anthony, *The War in Northern Laos*, 313.
 Tom Ahern, *Undercover Armies*, 325-326.
 Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 215.
 John Pratt, *CHECO*, 108.
 Mike Jarina Interviews.
 CIA Bulletin, Government forces have chalked up some substantial gains as they continue to press their counteroffensive in the North, 08/30/69.
 Extracts from ABCC Reports.

people up to the crash site in a late attempt to search for possible survivors.

Air America ground mechanic Dan Williams, stationed at Alternate had recently repaired a fuel control problem on 196X and released the plane to service. Davis, a recent arrival to Udorn as a constantly swelling number of fixed wing pilots, then taxied to the air operations shack, where he was loaded with Requirements Office (RO) Major Philip Werbiski, Assistant ARMA Captain Bob Nelson, and ten indigenous passengers for Sam Tong. He was light on fuel, but still likely overloaded.

At approximately 1655 hours, with rain showers scattered throughout the area, Davis lined up on the runway and departed down strip and climbed out the south gap. About five o'clock, while reversing course and still climbing to overhead Skyline, Williams and others observed the aircraft gyrating in an unusual fashion. A crash and immediate fire on the hillside followed the unorthodox maneuver.

That morning, Mike Jarina had deadheaded upcountry to fly Hotel-52. During the day, he conducted eighteen landings, shuttling troops to forward positions in the Site-72 area in support of the Plain of Jars operation. Later, several attempts were made to land at the uneven Porter crash site. Mike also delivered people to the accident area. Located on the side of the hill unsuitable for an H-34, he placed one wheel on the slope to discharge the passengers. He then returned to Udorn.

Occurring on the heels of the Grammer and Woods fatalities in 11F, the new crash was not good news, and the almost identical setting a little ironic. Moreover, I was somewhat upset when I discovered that the pilot, "Cotton" Davis, was my temporary next-door neighbor. Although rarely verbally acknowledged by us pilots, in order to forestall a bad phi (Thai word for a spirit) event, death or serious injury were constant

threats in our line of work. Therefore, adhering to my policy of not becoming too friendly with another pilot after Charlie Jones' devastating death in 1965, except for greetings we tended not to visit each other.

The crash site lay on the southern downhill side pointing toward the 20A Valley, consequently, I had to find a suitable semi-level spot to land, close enough to the plane to allow access. This proved all the more difficult as both north and south slopes of the ridge had been heavily mined or strung with barbwire. It was almost dark when Chuck and the others climbed out of the cabin section and moved downhill toward the still-smoldering wreck to search for individuals who might have been ejected at impact. Since I landed on a gentle slope, I remained at the controls to prevent PFF from rolling over. Before long the low-level fuel light began winking at me when the team returned with negative news. In the relatively short time the team had roamed the vicinity of 196X, no one from the aircraft was discovered. Moreover, the small portion of the plane still remaining, or its interior, was far too hot to approach or touch. Satisfied that no one was still alive, plus the danger involved in moving about in the dark, possibly discharging ordnance, precluded further investigation until daylight. After all souls (SOBs) were onboard, within a few minutes, we were in the chocks with the blades unwinding.

While we were eating supper, Chuck or another Customer drove down from the hill inviting us to the SKY bar to drink beer, as a courtesy of Major Bob Moberg to mark the memory of his good buddy Major Phil Werbiski. Ski and Bob, who was well known for his FAC moniker of "Jack the FAC," were both working as advisors to the FAN and Thai forces at Moung Soui during the fingernail biting, "nut-cutting" time. Although tired from the long day, amplified by the stress of the last mission, but

wanting to commiserate over the deaths, I walked up the hill to join the wake.

Set among other buildings, the Customer bar overlooked the strip and lower valley. An adjacent iron cage housed Ralph, a full-sized honey bear, who had been captured as a baby after his mother was killed by a native. Well-fed and stoked with his beloved brew, Ralph was no longer small and cuddly, so we were admonished never to poke our hands through the bars to pet the unpredictable beast. A visiting Customer discovered this the hard way one evening when he lost his gold Rolex watch and almost his arm. A favorite pastime for Bag and Hog was to climb on top of the cage and pour canned beer into Ralph's uplifted open mouth. Although the bear did not smack his lips, you could almost hear him remark a satisfied "ah" after quaffing a can of Olympia suds.

Several Case Officers including Chuck Campbell had been reassigned from other river stations to Alternate specifically to supplement advisors during the Plain of Jars operation. Jim Butler, known as the "Gray Fox," was dispatched north from Pakse where he acted as the air operations officer. Jim served as the bartender.

After a few drinks the normally upbeat Moberg waxed maudlin, making asinine and shocking threats that we better have searched the crash area well. If his buddy Ski was discovered outside the aircraft in the morning and there was a chance he or anyone else might have survived the crash, he would kill everyone involved in the search. Moberg was a large former White Star Special Forces individual, someone who no one in their right mind wanted to tangle with. However, he kept pushing the same theme, and soon alienated everyone within earshot. Thinking only about the loss of his friend, he never mentioned Cotton, so I reminded him of the recent 11F accident and the fact that

Davis was well liked among the pilot force and also my next-door neighbor.

Next Moberg and Jim Butler, considerably older, but more Bob's size, entered into a heated discussion regarding the accident. The vitriol reached such a peak that I thought at one point they would engage in blows. We were all sympathetic to Bob, but his personality reversal was puzzling. He had invited us to celebrate Ski's life, now was threatening us with bodily harm for doing what we could after the crash. Too much beer had been consumed and it was past time to depart before the electric situation erupted into something of uncontrollable consequences. Although I tried to understand his reasoning, I never harbored much use for Moberg after that night.

Early the following morning, I ferried a recovery team to the crash site and returned to the parking ramp. What was left of the Porter was examined. Both the vertical and horizontal stabilizer were found intact in a relatively remote location from the fire source. Burned at the roots, the wings had sustained substantial damage. No one survived the crash. With the cockpit and cabin sections mostly destroyed, all the bodies were badly burned, fused together into a large charcoal death mass.

Since PFF was due for a hundred-hour inspection, I ferried the ship to Udorn.

I later learned from a report by Doctor "Jiggs" Weldon that a messy autopsy revealed that "Cotton" had sustained a bullet wound to his heart. At first, since weapons were carried in the plane, speculation revolved around an accidental discharge or heat from the intense fire cooking off a round. However, the latter failed to explain the cause of the crash. This was later refuted when Vang Pao had a soldier summarily shot for reputedly firing at, and by chance, hitting the Porter from the ridgeline.

Shooting at helicopters by mentally sick or bored "friendly" troops was not unheard of in Military Region Two, and had occurred before. However, Meo justice was swift and one trooper was dispatched for shooting at Charlie Weitz from an outpost at Na Khang. Still, the circumstances of the accident were suspect and not broadly believed by the pilot force.

News of the autopsy result was not well received. It was incredulous, for some of us had traversed the same area hundreds if not thousands of times over the years. One could accept combat hazards working in enemy areas--that was part of the unwritten job description, but battle damage resulting in death between Long Tieng and Sam Tong? Even the Customers were perplexed, for they were constantly ferried over Skyline Ridge. Indeed, further reflection on the two recent crashes caused some people to realize how a life could be instantly snubbed out during the best weather and flying conditions.

Consistent with Air America policy not to permit the deceased crew member's family to remain in Thailand and cause dissension or demoralization of others, Cotton's wife and son were immediately repatriated to CONUS. ²⁵

GRIFFIN ESTATES

While flying a Porter below small arms altitude (1,500 feet AGL) north of Luang Prabang, Captain Hal Griffin had been wounded in the wrist. When queried about this insane low-level flight tendency, he replied that his ear drums were damaged and

²⁵ Air America XOXO, 08/19/69, 1115Z, Thurston.
Air America XOXO, 08/20/69, 1045Z.
Air America XOXO, 08/20/69, 0102.
Joe Leeker, Air America Porter N196X.
Bill Leary 1969 Notes.
Blaine Jensen Letter.
EW Knight Emails, 10/08/00

he could not tolerate higher altitudes--unusual for a fixed wing pilot. Some considered Hal un poco loco. ²⁶

Likely with his ailment and pilot longevity in mind, he arranged a long-term lease on a large tract of land from a Thai landowner south of the Air America and Thai Army facilities. Then like similar projects in Vientiane, he began an ambitious plan to create a family-oriented compound for Air America, CASI, or any other American so disposed. At considerable expense, he began erecting a high chain-link security fence around the site perimeter, with a large guarded gate. An oval road was built in the middle of the property. The tree-shaded land inside this elliptical area was reserved for a recreation area, a pool, horse stables, and other future creature comforts. The entire area outside the center road was subdivided to accommodate sizeable lots where buyers could erect homes of their own size and design.

"Cotton" Davis had previously purchased a lot at the "Griffin Estates" while it was still in its infancy. One of the first, his plat was situated at the far end of the compound. The outline of the house was already roped off and foundation footings begun for the structure where he soon expected to live, pending available materials and sufficient construction money.

Although considering the project a little too remote, lending itself as a prime target for quemoys and communist terrorist attacks, I was still curious to view the project. ²⁷ We did this one day while Cotton and his wife journeyed to Bangkok on STO, leaving their son with the maid. We cranked up the Cortina and took the Davis boy and Ricky to "The Estate." A wide dirt road to the right of the Friendship Highway led through encroaching jungle and thickets to the unguarded main gate. To

²⁶ A Spanish idiom for a little crazy.

²⁷ Quemoys: Thai word for thieves.

encourage interest living there, Hal was in the end process of erecting and living in the first house-sort of a model home. Texan Betty Griffin, who some called "Little Orphan Annie" coined from her red frizzy hair style, was present to monitor the activity. After looking at "Cotton's" lot, we repaired to the children's playground where the children enjoyed the swings and bars.

When "Cotton" Davis died, Hal was anxious for someone to purchase his lot at a discount. One day I drove to the project to look at the property again and assess the progress. Although tempted when squeezed by a landlady, I never seriously considered living there, for several cogent reasons: The obvious lack of reliable security was still an overriding issue with me. Moreover, it was very late in the Southeast Asian War timetable. From the beginning of my Air America hiring, I never expected the job to last as long as it had, and I harbored no illusion that our services would still be required after it was over. The cost of erecting a house with highly taxed western amenities would be quite high. Finally, no American that I knew had ever maintained a satisfactory relationship and positive outcome with a Thai partner. If a project looked too tempting, greed, and skewed government laws influenced the Thai to appropriate it from the farang. For this reason, I vowed never to invest with a Thai in Thailand.

The project was slowly progressing, but as the war wound down, bored individuals had more time to dream. They also became restless and sought other outlets for their energy. Also, after the union was approved, additional money became available for projects like building a house or investing in outlandish schemes doomed to fail. This point lent credence to the maxim that doctors, lawyers, and pilots were some of the worst investors in the world.

Beside Griffin, pilots like Mick Prulhiere, Brian Johnson, Ben Densley, Bill Hutchison, and others did eventually build houses and lived at the complex.

Each pilot who bought lots and built at the Griffin Estates displayed his own technique and initiative to the structure. Densley had his father journey to Thailand to help erect a windowless cement block house for ease of cooling and security purposes. The interior of the house was later gutted by a fire during suspicious circumstances that occurred while he was working upcountry. Never proven, some thought his wife Kippy had started the fire to collect property insurance.

Mick began construction on a strange looking place with a roof edge that extended well past the norm to prevent slanting rain from entering the building. Meticulous to the letter, he ordered items from Sears and Roebuck, substantially slowing completion, so the family had little time in the house before we were obliged to depart Thailand.

Interest continued to be generated in the compound. Mike Jarina visited people's houses there several times, but with his family living in Bangkok and children attending the American school, he never seriously entertained building or living there.

Hal invited Dick Elder and Mike to use the pool and three-meter diving board anytime they wanted. They were enjoying swimming and diving when Betty charged out of her house and furiously chewed them out for being there. When they interjected that Hal had invited them to use the pool and no mention was made about asking her beforehand, she countered, no, they had to obtain permission from the homeowner's commission first. Chagrined and insulted at the squirrelly Texan's outburst, they left and never returned.

A security issue arose when the project was in its infancy. Hal drove a motorcycle, which stimulated people to joke, "Hal,

don't you take enough risks living in the compound without driving a motorcycle?"

He retorted, *"These cycles are perfectly safe if you operate them properly."*

One day Griffin arrived at the Air America facility with his leg in a cast and using a crutch. Presupposing he had incurred severe "Honda Rash," they asked what happened. Hal replied, *"Well, it wasn't the motorcycle's fault."* He then explained that while driving out of the compound in the morning, two Thai men standing in the road began waving for him to stop. When he pulled over to the roadside, they demanded his watch and wallet. An older man and vastly outmatched, there was nothing he could do, so he relinquished his valuables (likely a gold Rolex watch that was so prized by Air America pilots). After relieving him of his goods, he was informed by the men that he was free to leave. So angry over the encounter, he "poured the coal" to the powerful machine, torquing it over and injuring himself. ²⁸

As expected, by 1974, when Air America terminated flying operations in Udorn, and even before passport visas were voided by the Thai government, homeowners walked away from their costly

²⁸ I witnessed just such an event in Udorn Town one evening when Billy Palmer performed the same pirouette that resulted in painful cuts and abrasions, often called "Honda rash."

ventures, some much wiser for the experience, some not. ²⁹ ³⁰

THOMPSON RETURNS

Having attained permanent USAID employee status, with advanced training and upgrading complete, Mac Thompson returned to Laos in late August. Since Tony Cataruchi ³¹ had departed Ban Houei Sai on home leave in the States and subsequently resigned, Mac was assigned there as a replacement to work for senior AID representative Joe Flipse and Thai air operations specialist Piak. Mac had worked with Joe at Luang Prabang for a short time when Flipse returned to replace Dakan who had left for home leave. Then, when Rickenbach left, Joe split his time between Lima-54 and Lima 25.

Piak was an interesting individual. He had originally joined the Thai Army, but when considered too short to be an officer, he settled for a non-commissioned officer (NCO) rating. For this and other personal reasons, Piak was considered

²⁹ Aftermath: In later years during our visits to the Nisagonrungsee family home, curiosity regarding Griffin Estates arose. When the subject was broached, knowledgeable people would shake their heads in wonder. Betty and Hal had split, with Hal going to Alaska to work. Inexplicably, Betty Griffin still lived there. Although abundant time was left on the original lease agreement, seeing enormous profit, the landowner was anxious to obtain his improved and more valuable land back. To satisfy annual lease payments, she sold horses, sections of fence, and anything else deemed valuable. When we visited Griffin Estates, it was obvious to me that the aging woman teetered on the edge of poverty. Still wearing the frizzy hair style, effecting an aggressive Texas drawl, she was living with the younger "house boy." Betty seemed to put up a good front, but the thought occurred to me she might not be entirely sane and would come to a very bad end.

On one of our visits to the compound we were allowed entry into Brian Johnson's house to see a waterbed he had installed. The house was kept locked, for Brian still visited on occasion.

³⁰Jarina Interview.

³¹ Known as Tony #2 so not to be confused with Tony Poe.

the black sheep of the family and was not on friendly terms with his father, a ranking general in the Royal Thai Army (RTA). Piak's dad looked like him, a skinny working type, not the typical chubby general. During the fall of 1969 the father arrived at Chiang Khong and boated across the river to Ban Houei Sai. Tony Poe, who knew the general, came down from Nam Yu for a reunion.

Mac initially lived in the USAID house. The AID warehouse was already established at the airfield. Soon after he arrived the runway was resurfaced with gravel and oil. While this was being accomplished, the soccer field was used as a Porter strip and helicopter pad.

About the same time, C-130 flights ceased arriving at Nam Yu. The USAF person in charge of overseeing Air America pilots had a panic attack during his first landing there. Observing from the jump seat, the check pilot was unduly agitated by the surrounding terrain and the strip's slope. He told the pilot to go around, but the pilot landed instead. The strip was then closed to further C-130 flights, and cargo was flown into Site-25 and shuttled to Nam Yu by STOL planes and helicopter pilots.

Mac never RON at Nam Yu and did not know Tony Poe well. However, Tony did know Mac's reputation as the consummate parachute man while he worked at Hong Sa and Xieng Lom. When he first went to Ban Houei Sai, Tony and Joe informed Mac that they did not want him jumping, for they did not want to lose an asset.

Thompson occasionally ventured to Site-118A to discuss common problems and the native feeding situation. Through this and other meetings he became friendly with George Kenning (Kipper) who he spent time with at Chiang Rai. It was customary that if a man was not too badly wounded, they would wait until the end of the day to load him on a Porter for the flight to the

Chiang Rai military hospital. Often Mac and George would go along, and as it was too late to return to Ban Houei Sai, they would overnight in Thailand to enjoy a little human pleasure.

Mac did not have much contact with regular AID people, as many were not field types. Oriented toward refugee work, Mac travelled throughout the area flying to outlying sites up to ten hours per week, checking on situations, and delivering food.

There was not much happening in northwest Military Region One except in the Xieng Lom area, where a joint Thai-Lao operation called Syagon was underway supporting border villages south down the long axis of Sayaboury Province to Ken Thao on the Lao-Thai border line. While this operation was underway, he worked out of Xieng Lom supplying Thai troops with substitutes for the disliked sticky rice. During this phase, he accompanied the troops along the border, monitored air drops, and oversaw people movements in and out of the villes.

There were isolated sites far to the north of Ban Houei Sai containing refugees or ADC dependents. Thompson considered the areas "a little spooky."

Teams-37, A, B, and C were situated on high ground around the Tha River, the physical demarcation line between Houa Kong and Luang Prabang Provinces that was generally respected by opposing parties. Like all other sites in the area, Alpha Team was located on the west side of the river; Bravo and Charlie Teams on the east bank. In a burst of aggressiveness not often seen in northwestern Military Region One, Lao Theung, led by Captain Khamsene, had recently moved across the river, liberated the territory, and established the sites.

Out of all government fighting men in the province, Mac considered the aggressive Lao Theung the most interesting to work with; they were the actual fighters--Yao did not do much, Meo even less.

One morning, Mac, his interpreter, and a Lao NCO journeyed northeast on a H-34 to a T-37 site by H-34. After dropping his charges, saying he would return later, the pilot departed to conduct other tasks.

Team-37 soldiers had killed four Pathet Lao and two Vietnamese during an encounter the previous night. The dead Pathet Lao were unceremoniously rolled down the hill. However, before sharing their brothers-in-arms fate, the Vietnamese livers were summarily excised and consumed. The people apologized to Mac for not having any left to eat, but while walking around meeting people, a man approached Mac proffering a clear bottle of Lao Lao containing a few pieces of fresh human liver on the bottom. Not requiring his enemies' strength, Thompson politely declined the offer.

The Chinese Road in the upper Beng Valley provided a viable target, but was also deemed an undesirable choice to attack, for that would certainly create an international incident with Chinese civilian and military hierarchy. Hence, no one seemed willing to do anything about it. Moreover, to further ensure that there were no international repercussions, USAF ROE restrictions stipulated that no bombing be conducted within ten to twenty kilometers of the road.

Not similarly inclined to sit on his hands, sanctioned by local Agency Case Officers, Major Khamsene Keodora from Ban Houei Sai and Captain Siem Ma Noi Sirisouk (AKA-Xieng Manh Nok) formed an ambitious plan to sever the Chinese Road in the Beng Valley. Known to be considerably more virulently anti-communist than either the CIA in Vientiane or the embassy, the men began marshalling their Lao Theung guerrilla units both east and west

of the valley, while staging supplies in forward areas and stocking fuel drums in anticipation of the attack. ³²

During the delayed operation, geopolitics intervened while the units were still preparing for the offensive, and the two leaders were ordered by superiors to stand-down.

Khamsene complied with the directive, but Siem Ma Noi was so incensed at the RLG's and CIA's lack of interest in striking the enemy at a vulnerable location that he deserted his mountainous area with two battalions. He was subsequently fired as commanding officer of his SGU unit and was ordered to relinquish all guns. Bucking authority, he refused, saying, "Come and get me." Then he moved south to a mountaintop in the Moug Ngeun area in Sayaboury Province, where he and his people remained quiescent for a year, until allowed back into the fold. (He never departed Laos.) ³³

The Chinese Road was never severed. ³⁴

ONTO THE PDJ

"I hope that our mishaps are over for a while. I know I am particularly sick of them. They just kept happening every time I went out to work. It could have been a lot worse, for I have lost three good friends in the last three weeks..."

³² Two of Khamsene's Lao Theung units included Lahu and a small number of KMT Chinese.

³³ In contrast, Mac believed Khamsene was dead until he surfaced at a Thai refugee camp in 1981. Khamsene remained until late 1986 performing some cross border work. He finally immigrated to the Seattle, Washington area.

³⁴ Mac Thompson Interview, 12/29/96.
Mac Thompson Email, 04/10/97.
Joe Flipse Email, 04/09/97, 05/30/97, 04/10/69.
Ken Conboy, 315-316.

We have made some gains on the PDJ and should shake up the NVA plenty. We are working in areas where I have never been and it is interesting work. I'm sure we won't be there for very long. I understand the rains have hurt the enemy's supply lines and malaria is a problem."

Letter 09/01/69 Home.

Vang Pao's Plain of Jars offensive from the south commenced on 20 August, with movement north toward the perimeter of the PDJ. Involved were: three battalions of FAR troops from Ban Na (LS-15), three Meo SGU battalions from the Tha Tam Bleung (LS-72) area, and three Meo battalions from Padong (LS-05). In addition, two Meo and one FAN battalion moved overland toward Moung Soui. Many were armed with 4,000 of the new M-16 rifles and ammunition recently distributed to the FAR. Success of the operational plan depended largely on minor enemy resistance encountered while Vang Pao's units advanced toward planned objectives.

Thursday morning, August 21st, I returned to Alternate on Caribou 851 to fly my recent nemesis PFF with Flight Mechanic Rusty Irons. After I ferried the ship to Udorn on the 20th, the ship had undergone a rapid hundred-hour maintenance inspection and was released to the flight line that same afternoon for FCF. Declared airworthy, it was returned upcountry to participate in the PDJ operation.

Since Khang Kho (LS-204) abutted and overlooked the southeastern PDJ, the site had long been utilized as a traditional launch position for operations on the periphery of the Plain. Therefore, I was involved in the daisy chain of mixed Bell and H-34 helicopter crews lifting troops from Long Tieng and the Padong area to the site. From there the mustered troops would descend north from the foothills toward "The Nipple,"

where, the current conditions and situation permitting, the regiment would continue moving north until establishing contact with the enemy. ³⁵ Operations in "The Nipple" would not constitute a precedent, for Meo had previously established a temporary boots-on-the-ground posture there during the earlier Xieng Khouang Ville operation.

Flying on the 22nd was considerably reduced when, mid-morning, I was assigned to fly General Vang Pao north-northeast to a hilltop where the general could monitor and direct his troops moving north toward "The Nipple."

The remainder of the afternoon was devoted to shifting troops and supplies into and around the Khang Kho area.

Already mentioned, on the northern front, entering the final phase of capturing Phou Nok Kok, Black Lion ³⁶ reported troops-in-contact (TIC). Expecting resistance, five flights had been arranged by Cricket control to assist the site. Raven FACs controlled the USAF and T-28 pilot strikes. At 1300 hours, Black Lion again declared TIC, which Raven-40, assisted by Lobo flight, successfully addressed.

Two days later at 1800 hours, Black Lion reported TIC east of the objective. Raven-41 verified the report and Raven-47 directed three strike flights onto the enemy.

The next day, after seizing the extreme top of Woodpecker Hill, Black Lion requested air support.

Action was also prevalent to the west. Except for air, termination of the Moung Soui operation and subsequent troop withdrawal generally allowed the enemy freedom of movement in that area. East of Site-108 at Ban Khay, a Hobo flight destroyed

³⁵ The Nipple: The marshy, funnel shaped lowland portion of the extreme southern PDJ leading to foothills containing our bases.

³⁶ Black Lion: The preferred name used as high esteem and respect for their original training advisor, Wil Greene.

a truck that resulted in secondary fires. During preceding days, enemy units had spread out to the north, and FAG Blue Moon reported TIC at Phou So. Strikes were directed by Raven-44 (Reinhart) and conducted by a pair of Firefly A-1 pilots to the east of Site-57 on the long Phou Fa massif. This action was silenced, but further east at Phou Fa Noi heavy TIC was reported. Raven-41 worked a mission there that thwarted the attack.

Mike Jarina returned to the field in Hotel-54 with First Officer Marquart and Flight Mechanic Nery filling out the crew. After a scheduled stop at Wattay Airport, they moved north to work for the Requirements Office Customer in the Ban Na Then (LS-249) area where defensive efforts were underway to ward off and avert enemy movement toward the new FAN headquarters at Vang Vieng. Located three miles south of Moung Kassy, Site-249's 4,700-foot strip on Route-13 accommodated C-46 and C-123 aircraft and was used later by the RLAF as a forward T-28 launch site.

Mike's recall of Marquart was necessarily uncomplimentary. Talentless, unable to fly the H-34 to any degree of proficiency, to read a map, or even to quote a correct approach speed, he wondered how the supposed aviator had ever functioned in the U.S. military. Both fixed wing and helicopter rated, the man was unable to attain helicopter Captain rank in either, and was eventually accorded permanent First Officer status like old Porter Hough in the Caribou. With the war expanding, it was indeed surprising that the Company would retain someone lacking even basic proficiency skills in the machine. There was a good reason for employing two pilots in the cockpit during hazardous missions. Should one pilot become incapacitated, the second aviator theoretically should be equally qualified, tasked to

save the aircraft and personnel onboard. This was a moot point, a TBA, ³⁷ and one in doubt as it pertained to Marquart.

Because of a large number of aircraft upcountry and the overflow of personnel at the Sam Tong hostel, Mike and his crew were again obliged to RON at Long Tieng.

On the 23rd, I flew a miniscule twenty-five minutes before returning to Udorn on Hotel-59.

Again working for RO, Jarina was involved in supporting the defense of the northern Nam Ngum flank. He landed at Ban Na, Than Heup (LS-238) located in the hills south of the Ngum River between Ban San Luang, and Ban Nam Pit, and the surrounding area. The crew RON at The Alternate. Mike recorded no flights on Sunday.

Houei Tong Ko (LS-184) was not only the last sizeable military and refugee camp remaining in northwestern Houa Phan Province (Sam Neua) of any consequence, but also a major staging area and launch site for road watch team infiltration and exfiltration in upper Military Region Two. Without critical information obtained by these gutsy teams, Vang Pao and his advisors would be blind as to enemy movement along LOCs toward the Ban Ban Valley with the intention to reinforce units. Therefore, at this juncture during the commencement of Vang Pao's ambitious Plain of Jars operation, it was incumbent on planners to gather as much intelligence regarding enemy movement as possible, information that might prove crucial to the venture's outcome.

With this requirement a priority, on the 25th, I was scheduled on a day flight to conduct a special mission out of Site-184. The mission was short. However, the deadhead time

³⁷ TBA: Acronym for to be announced.



With natives watching from an adjoining hilltop and gathering at the fuel dump, a Pilatus Porter pilot spools up engine RPM in preparation to depart southeast from the 1,100-foot Houei Tong Ko strip.

Thompson Collection.



Because of the security Meo troops provided at Houei Tong Ko, Site-184 became the primary launch pad for Special Missions in Sam Neua Province. Three H-34 crews wait for air cover to execute a mission. Because of a lack of Bell helicopters, mixed aircraft were often tasked to conduct road watch missions. Left to right: Captain Bob Caron, Flight Mechanic Rick Sterba and Captains Dave Ankerberg, Ed Rudolfs, Boonchoo Com-Intra (unknown local behind Boonchoo), JJ McCauley, Wayne Gentry, and Don Henthorn.

Author Collection.

involved in getting to and from the site was great: almost five hours

Early in the morning I caught a C-123 flight to Wattay Airport on 617 containing numerous American personnel. As per U.S. Embassy policy which did not permit undocumented U.S. military to overnight in Vientiane, the civilian-attired mechanics and bomb loading technicians were onboard to service the Lao T-28s. From Wattay Airport I was delivered to The Alternate by "Triple Nickel," another C-123 with a side number of 555. Following a long ride on Hotel-45, another H-34 involved in the mission, I arrived at Houei Tong Ko to join Phil Peyton and Flight Mechanic Demandal in PFG. After a fifty-minute mission I continued with Payton to Long Tieng. From there, I caught a ride on 389 to Lima-08 and then to Udorn on 556.

After switching to Hotel-41 with Rick Decosta as Flight Mechanic, and working for RO, Mike Jarina and Marquart supported the PDJ operation at Ban Na and the San Luang areas. During a fifty-eight-landing day, they moved refugees out of the area to Phone Sai (LS-211) and the 5,000-foot strip at Tim Bong (LS-90).

Vang Pao's troops were moving slowly north on the lower portion of the Plain of Jars. No TIC was reported, but FAGs Lulu, Hilltop, Red Tiger, and Black Lion requested air support. During the day one flight attacked and destroyed two large bunkers and reported fifty KBA.

Over the next three days, while RONing at Alternate, Jarina continued working RO, moving troops and supplies to elevated positions north of Ban Na overlooking the Plain and the Moung Soui line at Site-238. Flight time was high and short sorties resulted in landings that exceeded fifty.

On Friday, Bill Long joined the crew in a training Flight Mechanic capacity. It was good to see Bill again, as he had been a squadron member of HMM-261, and the first person from my



Bombing of the southeastern Plain of Jars seen as puffs of smoke in the distance from the Author's helicopter.

Author Collection.



Denuded, rolling hills of the Southeast Plain of Jars, under the backdrop of a monsoon cloud-laden sky.

Author Collection.

former squadron to hire on with Air America in Udorn since oldsters Charlie Jones and Roger Lawson. An outstanding addition to our helicopter crew inventory, Long would remain with Air America for the duration and become a key figure among American Flight Mechanics.

With the inception of the Plain of Jars operation and subsequent Bell losses, Udorn looked to Saigon for immediate Bell replacements. Therefore, in late August two 204 Bells--12F and 13F--were ferried to our facility, inspected by our quality control inspectors and competent ground mechanics, and sent upcountry.

Riding on C-123 556 to Long Tieng, I returned to the field on the 28th. At noon I took over N8513F, the most recent arrival to our inventory, with Flight Mechanic Andy Anderson, in order to support troop movements on the southern Plain. I flew north at a relatively low altitude over the Ban Hintang Valley, below Site-72 and foothills through "the backdoor" to the PDJ. Flying on the Plain of Jars would be a new experience for me. I wondered how the day would fare.

On the previous day, part of the southern task force had exited "The Nipple" and moved onto the lower Plain. After moving into more easily-traversed terrain, with only light enemy resistance encountered by two battalions, which were quelled by rolling T-28 and USAF strikes, troops of the multi-battalion force achieved substantial gains and captured a few items of war. At night, they established temporary positions on rolling hills common to the area. Accompanied by two Case Officers for each unit, half the GM (acronym for French-Groupement Mobile) regiment proceeded north toward Lat Sen, located six miles north of "The Nipple" entry point. The other half marched briskly along high ground and foothills on the eastern perimeter toward the obliterated town of Lat Houang (LS-09), a site located at

the junction of Routes Four and Five at the mouth of the valley leading to Xieng Khouang Ville. Before the Plain was conceded to the Pathet Lao and their Vietnamese "advisors" in late 1960 and early 1961, an International Voluntary Service (IVS) agricultural project existed at Lat Houang, where Pop Buell worked until being hastily evacuated.

Except for skirting eastern foothills of the Plain behind a lead aircraft in the early years, I had never ventured far into that enemy-controlled area. Lat Houang was also an area where Bob Hitchman and I were sent to retrieve and deliver a Soviet 85mm howitzer to the Meo position on Phu Khe in December 1963. Because of the fluid situation, I only remained on the ground in the temporarily FAN-controlled area a short time.

Now, Vang Pao's pragmatic plans called for both troop columns to simultaneously link up at Site-09, assess the situation, and then rapidly proceed north and east to new objectives if possible.

During the three-day RON, I found the work interesting and exhilarating, definitely a new high in my Lao experience.

A glowing Agency Bulletin stated:

"Meo leader Vang Pao's guerrilla forces have pushed deep into the [PDJ], taking some positions in communist hands since 1962. The government advances came with unexpected ease, suggesting that the offensive many have taken the enemy by surprise.

Originally intended as a diversion, the momentum of the [PDJ] operation may cause [VP], who has long talked about retaking the entire Plaine, to expand his objectives...

There is some tenuous evidence that the government's initial success against the Plaine may have been due to an earlier withdrawal of some [NVA] combat troops...

The military gains of the past several weeks are testimony to the resilience of [VP's] troops, as well as the difficulties the communists have maintaining combat operations during the height of the rainy season..." ³⁸

Our initial assignment was tailored to retrieve mortar ammo, supplies, and other scattered trash of war left behind by rapidly advancing troops, and shuttle the items forward to new temporary waypoints leading toward the primary objective at Lat Sen. ³⁹ ⁴⁰

Except for a modest taste of victory during the abbreviated Xieng Khouang Ville operations, following more than seven months of dismal losses in 1969, it was enjoyable finally being part of the offensive and supporting a winning team. For this reason, morale was necessarily high among Meo troops, the Customers, and aircrews. Infused with confidence over the current undertaking, Friday morning we were again assigned to work the southern PDJ with officers and men ordered to judge, police, and move whatever inanimate but useful items that lay scattered on the green hillsides. While working these areas, I took great pains to be very cautious and avoid flying debris caused by rotor downwash that would damage the blades (FOD) while landing. I avoided a problem by either landing a reasonable distance from

³⁸ CIA Daily Bulletin, 08/30/69. Laos: Government forces have chalked up some substantial gains as they continue to press their counteroffensive in the north.

³⁹ When secured, this site became Lima Site-276 for logbook entries.

⁴⁰ Because I and others did not expect Vang Pao's operation to last long, I began snapping photographs of the early offensive as a record for posterity. I continued this process until the camera failed to operate, likely because of the Bell helicopter's two per vertical vibrations. While the camera was in the shop being repaired, I lost many outstanding photos.

the litter or arriving at a high hover to blow loose items away before landing.

At one former position, part of a 75mm howitzer lay like an orphan on the ground. From my vantage point looking toward Lat Sen and Phou Thang, I could view a large portion of the Plain of Jars to the north and north-northwest. Green rolling hills predominated, punctuated by wooded ravines and flatland containing trails and well-fed streams that afforded troops excellent avenues of approach. It was apparent from the well-watered rice paddies and scattered hooches that the entire area had recently been populated, and the fertile land had provided an agricultural wonder and a virtual cornucopia of produce. It was also a place where cattle freely roamed. Now not a soul or animal could be seen.

Shedding the ineffective Marquart in favor of Hotel-46 with Flight Mechanic Alor, Jarina was assigned 713 work in the northern part of the PDJ operation. During a thirty-six-landing day, Mike flew to San Tiau and then northwest to the newly acquired Phou Nok Kok, where consolidation and defense was constantly underway. Then he shuttled people and items in the Moung Moc and Site-02 areas, arriving at Alternate after dark.

In order to throw the Site-02 operation off balance, small numbers of enemy troops pressured San Tiau. At the end of the month, Raven-40 reported TIC at the site. They subsequently were chased from the area.

After the multi-battalion column of Meo troops reached Lat Sen intact, and we moved supplies and the myriad tools of war forward, all pitiful enemy attempts at resistance faded and the way cleared to Lat Houang. By the 31st, the two regimental columns had achieved their objective, joining forces at the Route-4/5 junction.



Discarded debris on the southern Plain of Jars left by rapidly advancing government troops. Our job involved culling salvageable items from trash, and moving useable ones forward to other temporary positions.

Author Collection.



Abandoned recoilless rifle ammunition and trash littered the landscape during the Meo troops' rapid movement north on the southern Plain of Jars.

Author Collection.



Winning was infectious, and an apparently happy "red beret" Meo officer directs troops at a grassy hill position against a backdrop of a portion of the Plain of Jars.

Author Collection.



A portion of a 75mm pack howitzer left behind in the grass when Vang Pao's troops were leaping forward on the Plain of Jars. Aircrews were charged to gather items like this and deliver them to new positions.

Author Collection.



Amid the bamboo skeletons of overnight huts, Flight Mechanic Andy Anderson and other individuals sift through salvageable items left behind by rapidly advancing troops.

Author Collection.



Against the backdrop of distant mountains, lowland Plain of Jars terrain showing a stream, rice paddies, and a few abandoned houses. Foxholes at the lower left define a former government defense line employed during the rapid movement north.

Author Collection.

I was not present during this achievement, for at the end of the day on the 30th, I was recalled to Udorn. Mike remained upcountry, again working a full day in the Mounng Mok area. He was relieved the following day and deadheaded to Udorn on CASI C-47 Papa Delta Echo PDE.

I enjoyed having a few days off the schedule to spend time with my family. However, with numerous germs generated by the youngsters and monsoon rain resuming after the short dry spell, I contracted a nasty cold. Medicine obtained at the Air America clinic helped and I was feeling considerably better by Wednesday. This was encouraging because I was chomping at the bit to return upcountry and participate in the exciting Plain of Jars operation.

With Ricky harassing him, Peter was able to stand erect in his playpen, although he had not figured out how to sit down. Moreover, because he did not want to miss anything, he refused to sleep during the day. While I was upcountry Pete had an adverse reaction from a smallpox injection, cut two teeth, and acquired a cold, all at the same time. Although I knew he did not feel well, he was a tough child, adhering to the name we selected for him after Jesus Christ's favored disciple, Peter, "The Rock."

THAILAND: THE VIETNAMESE CONUNDRUM AND INSURRECTION

While I was home, Ho Chi Minh, who had suffered ill health for some time, died in Hanoi at the age of seventy-nine. Funeral services were held for the leader in Hanoi on 9 September. Among many dignitaries, Soviet Premier Alexei Kosygin, Chinese Vice Premier Li Hsiennien, and Cambodian Prince Norodom Sihanouk attended. ¹

¹ Ho Chi Minh: Even though we were on opposite sides of the military-political-ideological spectrum, one could not help but admire what the man had accomplished. It was just too bad that Washington leaders had not aided and cooperated with him when our OSS people had his ear directly after World War Two. If so, it is likely there never would have been a necessity for the costly Second Indochina War.

Following termination of the First Indochina War in the fifties, choosing not to live under a repressive communist regime, many displaced Catholic and Buddhist Vietnamese refugees immigrated from North Vietnam to settle in northeast Thailand. Some had already lived in the country earlier in the century when a young Ho travelled through the northeast in 1929, spouting the communist doctrine, while attempting to organize future cadres. ²

Over time an estimated 40,000 ethnic Vietnamese lived in Isan and their political loyalties to the Thai government were deemed questionable. The Royal Thai government, under staunch anticommunist leader, Marshall Sarit, was concerned about unfettered Vietnamese expansion in the area. Consequently, while attempting to preempt underground movements, he sponsored an airlift repatriating Vietnamese (called Gao in the Thai language) before trouble commenced. Some complied. However, problems arose from a few first and second-generation individuals who rebelled against transferring to an unfamiliar country. Moreover, those originally from the North wanted no part of a repressive communist society. Claiming they would rather be run over than leave their homes, in Udorn some individuals lay down in front of army trucks waiting to load them on aircraft bound for Vietnam. Others shaved their heads and paraded in front of the municipal courthouse pleading not to be sent away. Other ploys were successful in avoiding repatriation. When one person was returned, Plang Nisagonrungsee (Khun Ta) arranged to conceal the man's son as a houseboy. Raised and educated in the household as part of the family, the

²Ho reputedly lived in a house close to the family farm east of Udorn town.

boy eventually became an expert tailor who later crafted my son's clothes. After these incidents and other shenanigans, the government ceased repatriation efforts, allowing many Viets to remain in the country as third-class citizens. Indeed, many Thai considered them a low race of people and laughed at the sound of the Vietnamese language.

Unlike Japan, Thailand was anything but a homogeneous society. From the beginning of Thai history, Chinese immigrants learned the art of assimilation by paying sponsors to modify family names or by marrying into Thai families. Integration into the Thai society mainstream had a distinct advantage of enjoying the same benefits accorded Thai citizens, mainly the opportunity to seek higher education and apply for government civil service jobs normally denied those persons not Thai. The blurring of ethnic backgrounds also made it more difficult for Thai authorities to track their origins for security purposes.

There was always apprehension that trouble might erupt in Udorn from cells of communist sympathizers, who might target American families scattered throughout town. However, except for the 1968 attack on the USAF air base, which was "determined" to be from external elements, no overt problems arose.

It was indeed fortunate, marking a kudo for Thai government intelligence agencies that, given the presence of many third country individuals, with suspected allegiances to other countries, a "fifth column" buried in the larger cities, and a long-standing subversive infrastructure in the hinterlands, Thailand ostensibly remained trouble free.

Even though the current government under Field Marshal and Prime Minister Thanom Kittikachorn was heavily oriented toward military leadership, bordering on dictatorship, I always considered the system generally benevolent, not an oppressive regime. I suspected the degree of freedom allowed presented

opportunities for spying. I did know that at least one pilot's Vietnamese wife was being investigated by Thai CID during the mid-1960's. Directly related to the Indochina War, while bombing of the North was in full swing, anyone could observe the number of USAF takeoffs and landings from the main road and forward the information to agents in Laos and North Vietnam. As I discovered during a Pattaya vacation, this was also the case at the B-52 Sattahip base in southern Thailand. Daily flight schedules revealing our aircraft by number, crew names, and destination were posted in Udorn town hotels that anyone could peruse and forward to interested parties. Furthermore, I do not know how well our clerks working in flight operations and other employees, especially those working the club bar, where loose talk often prevailed, were vetted, but it was the Thai way to do almost anything for financial gain. ³

When we commenced the so-called "secret" Bell infil/exfil trail watch missions in 1967, I was concerned about the wrong people being alerted to my mission and destination. Once in the field, where a modicum of control existed, although still possible on a local level, compromise problems diminished.

Occasionally inexplicable and suspicious occurrences associated with Company aircraft were discovered, which we initially surmised might constitute covert sabotage. In one early instance cardboard was discovered lodged behind the carburetor fuel screen of Captain Howard Estes' helicopter. Analysis and rationalization deduced that this finding could have been perpetrated by an incompetent mechanic, or even by a

³This premise was derived purely from the Author's suspicion and observation over many years. There was no basis in fact, nor did I ever learn that an indigenous employee was discovered to be subversive. However, as divulged soon after the war in South Vietnam was finished, much internal spying had occurred at Saigon's topmost military levels.

disgruntled employee. Fortunately, such incidents were rare and not widely publicized. But they offered room for doubt, and steps were taken to prevent recurrences. Mesh screens were installed in the three H-34 fuel orifices to prevent pinless grenades with paper masking tape wrapped spoons from being introduced into the tanks. Such devices were designed so that later, when the tape deteriorated in the gasoline, the spoon would spring free, activate the fuse and blow the helicopter to smithereens.

Relative newcomers to Thailand, many Vietnamese, especially second and third generations lived and worked in Udorn, functioning as shop owners or menial produce merchants at the morning market, or on the street. After Ho Chi Minh passed, sympathetic to the larger-than-life leader, and perhaps the North Vietnam regime, to venerate his passing, black mourning armbands proliferated in shops and on the main business street in town. Perhaps it was just my paranoid tendencies emerging, but it appeared to me that hostile attitudes prevailed among the Vietnamese community, and Americans were stared at with looks that could kill. Moreover, one could sense animosity from these folks, especially the women. I had previously assumed that many of these people were ethnic Chinese business owners, and it was surprising that they would create such an overt display of disloyalty in Western-oriented Thailand. ⁴

Like someone emerging from the closet, it was indeed disconcerting to realize just how many potential subversives and enemies might live in Udorn town. Thai intelligence units supposedly kept an eye on the people, as underground

⁴ In fact, many immigrants from North Vietnam were of mixed Chinese-Vietnamese ethnicity from intermarriages during the thousand-year Chinese reign that enveloped a great portion of the country.

organizations were reputed to be operating in town, some engaged in teaching their children the Vietnamese language (largely because schools were rigidly controlled by Thai authorities).

Despite suspicion of collusion or sympathy with the North Vietnamese attempt to take over Indochina, the majority of Viets were likely good citizens, performing valuable services that benefitted all individuals living in Udorn. Denied civil service jobs or more lucrative work as professional doctors or lawyers, they patiently labored diligently at menial occupations, while struggling to provide sustenance for their large families.

For various reasons, not entirely altruistic, some Thai people took measures to aid Vietnamese families. Inherited from relatives, the Nisagonrungsee family owned and lived on a large plot of land on Adulyadet Road. When I arrived in Udorn, a few single-story wooden rooms and small shops lined the perimeter of the compound facing the road. During later years, as more money became available, these buildings morphed into concrete two-story commercial shop houses. Some of these shops were let on long-term leases to Vietnamese businessmen. Denied normal Thai perks, and seeking respect and upper social mobility through economic means and hard work, some individuals with whom I was acquainted became reasonably wealthy.

Rudimentary rental property lay behind the main house. One impoverished Viet family taken under the family's wing lived in a small house in the rear of the compound. They were pleasant industrious people. The wife hawked food in town and occasionally cooked for the family. During Vietnamese holidays, such as during the TET holiday, she generously cooked and shared delicious, highly seasoned dry noodles with us (bam mi hang), which I relished. The husband, Um Date, normally pedaled a samlor for a living, but he also employed his carpentry skills when work was available. Over time, his wood-working expertise

helped erect the main Nisagonrungsee family house, and fences for us at the Soi Mahamet bungalow and at our Nong Khai Highway house for reasonable sums. He also erected a play house for the children. Later, when Um Date's comely daughter, Jung, was invited to participate in a beauty contest, my wife, who was quite sophisticated regarding modeling techniques, coached her with dressing, properly applying makeup, smiling, and proper stage movements calculated to impress the judges. She won the contest, which later led to a satisfactory marriage.

USAF General Seith, who arrived in Udorn as Deputy Commanding Officer of the 7/13 Air Force five days prior to the 26 July 1968 attack on the base, produced later observations with regard to communist insurrection in the country:

"The Thai government has limited authority and presence in its outer provinces because [the] Thai Army is unable to establish a presence in much of the country. [The major] interests of the country lie in Bangkok. [It would be] a bad mistake to go into any undeveloped or politically uncertain area and get stuck on the ground with large force commitments that can only be supported by a major logistic pipeline or by a very competent and strong local government. Had the North Vietnamese not been employed in South Vietnam and Laos, we would have had a tough time in Thailand."

Despite the continued threat of communist-inspired insurgency within the country, Thailand continued to support USG effort in Southeast Asia with the elite Black Panther Division participation in South Vietnam, plus clandestine work in Laos with T-28 pilots performing combat missions. In addition, PARU and RTA specialists trained Meo and FAR units from 1961, and Thai soldiers had provided artillery howitzer support at Ban Khay and Moung Soui until the Vietnamese seized the site.

Politically, earlier in the year, balloting for the Thai House of Representative elections was slated to be held on 10 February. Although considered strong, as the only political party organized on a national basis that had a candidate selected for every lower house seat, it was not a given that the Saha Pracha Thai (SPT) party would achieve a majority in the first legislative elections held under the new constitution.

Splinter parties and independent candidates outside Bangkok enjoyed local support, and a combined opposition appeared to have an opportunity to deny the government party a majority in the lower house. With this in mind, the current Thai military leadership realized that they might not achieve a citizenry endorsement.

Elections were held and the lower house formally inducted in March, confirming the people's affirmation to continue previous economic and social developments within the country, and to counter subversive communist activity directed from outside the country's borders. In addition, Prime Minister Thanom Kittikachorn was reappointed to his position.

Communist insurgency continued to be a problem in Thailand. In the spring, despite continuing government efforts to stem the tide of insurgency in the North and Northeast, new areas of concern surfaced in Thailand's southwestern peninsula region. During the colonial heyday period, in order to maintain a free and unoccupied Thailand, the prudent King arranged a land swap with British hierarchy whereby the island of Phuket was traded for a portion of relatively worthless land jutting north into the lower peninsula and containing little more than poor fishing villages. Since the Malay people were largely Moslem and the Thai people Buddhist, there was some animosity and a continued desire by some people for the region to be returned to Malaysia.

A guerrilla war had previously been waged by the Malayan Liberation Army against the British colonialists. Never fully resolved, the guerrillas had been pushed into the northern jungles abutting the Thai-Malay peninsula, with some insurgents spilling over into Thailand. Now known as the communist Terrorist Organization (CTO), the well-established group was gaining strength, with the possibility of challenging the regional Thai government and northern Malaysia in the future. So far the Thai government had done little to contain the group, and in turn the CTO had not meddled in local governments or evidenced hostile intent toward Bangkok.

Estimates ranged to 100,000 people living under communist influence with up to 1,000 of these CTO hardcore members. At present, offensive units, ranging from a few to company size groups, were considered capable of launching attacks from base camps in remote areas west of Pattani and south of Yala town. (Before going to boarding school in Bangkok, my wife enjoyed her formative years in sleepy Pattani town.) Moreover, the CTO was actively recruiting and organizing people in the rural areas of Narathiwat, Yala, and Songkla Provinces. Over time, the communists convinced local Chinese and Thai-Muslim types of their sympathy and support. Villagers loyal to the government were intimidated by harassment, assassinations, and public execution of police informants.

Thus far in 1969 nineteen incidents had been reported, as opposed to only five more for the entire previous year. The evolving assassinations and kidnappings to armed encounters, some against under strength area border police forces, was unsettling.

Thai military leaders began to realize the danger to the region, but were unwilling to commit RTA forces because of ongoing security problems in the Isan and the North.

Therefore, until additional evidence surfaced revealing that a real threat existed in the south, despite Malaysian pressure to act, the government was not considered likely to commit RTA forces for joint Thai-Malay operations against the communists.

By June, reports indicated that communist insurgency continued to increase in the North, while the anti-government forces attempted to improve their assets and consolidate control over tribal areas. Also in the North, village propaganda meetings and evidence of larger insurgency units verified increased strength in Nan and Chiang Rai Provinces. Problems were also growing in Tak Province.

Guerrillas continued to harass government security forces, but wisely avoided armed conflict with superior numbers of Royal Thai Army units. However, incidents had diminished because some RTA units had been removed from the contested areas for more pressing duty in the lower areas. Despite a change of a commanding officer, there was confusion as how best to combat the tribal insurgency.

In Isan, guerrillas were implementing plans to reduce and improve the organization. An increased number of sightings of insurgents in Udorn Thani and Kalasin Provinces indicated that the guerrillas might be establishing a presence in areas that were largely devoid of security forces. ⁵ The RTG was concerned regarding the proliferation of insurgency activity in southern

⁵ Udorn Province encompassed a large area. This information was kept under wraps, for, except some caution about the Phu Phan region to the west, I never heard these reports.

Ubon Province, an area that was vulnerable because of its proximity to the Lao border. ⁶

Some recent signs revealed that the communists intended to expand their military assets in the Isan region. A defector reported that several hundred insurgents were slated to return from advanced training in North Vietnam and Laos. The organization had also obtained some mortars and rocket launchers.

By early August, following an attack on the Ubon RTAB, speculation centered on the probability of CI establishing a new area of operations in the area. This conjecture was reinforced by information that 200 trained North Vietnamese had infiltrated into the province during the year. The capture of modern weapons, and information from people of communist meetings in villages, tended to confirm the theory. The overall effort would be eased by the proximity to Laos and the presence of Lao-speaking people and relatives in Thailand.

CI expansion in southern Ubon Province may have been stimulated by frustration over the inability to attain much organizational progress in other northeastern areas. This was largely because of RTA efforts in the region (assisted by USAF helicopter support). However, this could change. Using the excuse of a deteriorating Lao problem, military leaders wanted to reduce Isan efforts to counter CI.

By the fourth week in September, an Agency summary from current intelligence reported that communist insurgency (CI) leaders were attempting to enhance the political base in the villages and improve the quality of guerrilla units. The new

⁶ While still flying in the UH-34D program, I worked with Thai border police patrol (BPP) units at new landing zones being developed in the mountains southeast of Ubon.

tactics looked like CI might succeed to a degree, but would not cope with superior RTG forces.

Within Isan, efforts were underway to revamp support structures and security issues. In villages, the communist insurgents were attempting to improve logistic and information systems. Problems with jungle units were being addressed by selective recruiting and improved training. In line with people-to-people issues, the CI were purchasing consumables rather than by their former tendency of confiscation.

The improved CI organizational structure might create new challenges to government insurgency programs. Communist success in Isan would be evidenced by the ability of insurgents to enter and project communist doctrine in villages where government programs were underway.

Thai security officials were anxious regarding unconfirmed reports of increased infiltration of men and arms into the region. In response, General Praphat directed RTA commanders to apply more pressure against known insurgency base areas.

In northern Thailand, uncontested tribal guerrillas operating in remote areas had a free hand. Moreover, using monsoon conditions, they were gathering supplies and recruiting among tribes. Weakness of the communist movement in the north was being addressed by sending leaders from Isan to aid in recruitment.

Senior RTG security people considered northern deterioration issues a problem, and anticipated that the communists would attempt to extend control over the northern border areas in the dry season. Government programs, tailored to win the hearts and minds of the tribals and to protect Thai populations in the lower areas, had not yet been implemented with any degree of success. A modicum of hope was introduced to the equation with the appointment of a new commanding officer.

Beside the shooting incident in the Phu Phan hills west of Udorn involving Bell Captain Frenchy Smith, insurgency issues impacted our pilots. Captain Tom Moher, stationed in Bangkok since 1965 to support Jansky and Bailey electronic research and development projects, had been temporarily assigned to Nakhon Phanom to help conduct the viability of employing electronic sensing devices to alert security units of large CI movements toward the base. The measures were necessary for, surrounded by 900 acres of jungle, the Nakhon Phanom base was almost indefensible and it was impossible to deploy enough men for perimeter defense.

Tom had been at the base for two weeks when he called ACPH Marius Burke requesting replacement. He was sick with a terrible illness saying, *"My tongue has turned black. I must be relieved."*

Because of the issues in Laos, Udorn was short of pilots. Marius informed Tom of this, but he continued to maintain that he was unable to fly.

With few options available, Marius left for Nakhon Phanom. Once there, Moher explained that he would fly with Burke to demonstrate the basic program, after which Marius would have to continue to march.

The entire project involved night work. Equipped with various listening devices, representing quite a logistical feat, four hundred people were motored into surrounding woods outside NKP to outlying sites. The 803 helicopter crew was tasked to fly a prearranged route that would normally take about thirty-five minutes to complete. Personnel on the ground were to report when they heard the helicopter so listeners at the base could calculate how well the devices functioned.

With everything in place, they checked into the operations center and flying commenced before midnight. Flown at 500 feet,

the first circuit took about an hour to complete, at which time Moher alerted the people on the ground that they required fuel and would return in half an hour. After fueling was complete, the GCI unit requested they fly the next run at 1,500 feet.

Tom replied, *"Roger that, 1,500 feet."* He climbed to 500 feet and assumed a cruise attitude, whereupon Marius inquired if the radar unit had not said 1,500 feet.

"Oh yeah, they always say that. I'm not climbing to 1,500 feet. It bugs me to fly high at night."

Marius thought this attitude strange, as most pilots would want more altitude than less to allow added reaction time in case of engine failure. Therefore, he said, *"These folks have a program and you need to adhere to it."*

"I am not doing it." They flew at 500 feet. ⁷

After the circuit, the base controller said, *"Good work. When are you going back up Tom?"*

"I am exhausted, worn out. I can't do any more work tonight."

Marius learned that Tom had been doing the same thing for two weeks. At this rate, he calculated the project would not be completed for six months. Figuring they would realize something was wrong while collating previous information, Burke did not

⁷ Tom Moher: Everyone in our program was aware Moher harbored an unnatural fear of altitude and refused to fly high during either the day or night. This stemmed from an incident while in the Corps. A squadron mate had encountered a fire at altitude, and both he and the aircraft were consumed before reaching the ground. This had a lasting effect on Tom and one that impacted anyone who flew with him. While I was checking out in the fall of 1962, en route to Luang Prabang from Long Tieng, even though I was attempting to make allowances for increasingly higher terrain, Tom insisted that we fly low. This resulted in battle damage inflicted by a ridgeline shooter.

Tom's reluctance to fly at higher altitudes, an almost disastrous event during the Klusmann SAR in mid-1964, and hatred of flying in Laos, as senior man in the H-34 program, prompted to him transfer to Bangkok when the opportunity arose.

have the heart to inform the people conducting the research to cancel all recorded data from previous nights because it was invalid.

After Moher departed for Bangkok, Burke completed the project. Knowing Tom as a clown prince, Marius believed that Tom's tongue returned to a normal color when he stopped eating black licorice. Marius concluded that the entire episode related to Moher's reluctance to fly at night or at altitude, and a burning desire to return home.

Aided by RTA units from Sakon Nakhon, the sensors must have worked, for, although probed, to my knowledge the base was never penetrated.

By November intelligence reports circulated that communist guerrillas appeared ready to assume more aggressive action during the dry season in parts of the country. Preempting the projected increase in activity, Thai leaders had commenced some measures to counteract CI movement, but nothing major was expected.

In the north and north central areas CI had improved tribal organization in mountainous regions. Villagers and defectors reported increases in the number and size of the tribal units. They were also better armed. To enhance support and the flow of logistics, some command and supply assets moved from Laos into Thailand along the border. ⁸ However, for unknown reasons, in general, RTG security forces had been ordered not to engage in large suppressive operations.

Speculation centered on a serious CI move out of the northern hills into the lowlands. Recent sightings of ethnic Thai guerrillas and a few incidents in formerly quiet areas

⁸ While RON at Pakse, Mike Jarina recently worked an entire day with BPP units out of Ubon.

tended to substantiate insurgent intent to extend influence with the local people. However, the CI effort might reach a stalemate because of known communist support for tribal types and of ethnic Thai disapproval. In addition, there were Thai government efforts to enhance security among lowlanders.

In Isan, CI had expanded established operating areas. Included were efforts to enhance food and intelligence gathering activity. CI activity in this region did not indicate intentions to challenge RTA forces.

Within the deep southern provinces of Yala and Pattani, there was indication that insurgents were embarking on aggressive moves against the RTG presence. Although still small in number, they had doubled, and aggressive attacks against local defense units and development projects had been undertaken. It was obvious that the RTG needed to take measures to counter the increased CI activity in the region. ⁹

⁹Segment Sources:

General LT Seith, Air Force Oral History obtained by the Author while conducting research at the Maxwell Air Force Base Records Department, 31 January 1969.

CIA February Weekly Summary, Legislative elections may embarrass Thai Government, p 5, 01/31/69, (foia.ucia.gov/scrips/cgiserv).

CIA Weekly Summary, Thai Government Party wins no mandate in elections, pg 4, 02/20/69.

Foreign Relations, SEATO 14th Meeting, 05/20-21/69.

DIA Intelligence Bulletin, 04/25/69, Insurgency in Thailand's Malay south, (foia.ucia.gov/scrips/cgiserv).

CIA Weekly Summary, 06/27/69, Communist guerrillas active in Thailand, 9, (foia.ucia.gov).

Agency Weekly Summary, 08/08/69, Thai insurgents may open new area of operation, 5, (foia.ucia.gov).

Agency Weekly Summary, 09/29/69, Thai insurgents seek to improve their position, pg8-9, 09/26/69, (foia.ucia.gov).

Agency Weekly Summary, Thai insurgents look for fair weather, pg8, 11/21/69.

Marius Burke Emails.

EW Knight Email, 10/09/00.

Colonel RK McCoskrie, U.S Air Force Oral History Interview, Office of Air Force History.

"We have taken almost the complete Plaine of Jars back from the enemy. I am still scratching my head, as it is hard to believe. It is almost as if the enemy has left the field of battle. They left eight tanks, many crew served weapons (machine guns, 37MM AAA guns and 12.7mm AAA), hundreds of individual small arms weapons, medical supplies, all grades of ammunition, and much POL.

There has been some [enemy] contact in the areas that they pulled back to.

It is really interesting flying in areas that I have never been before. I think that I was the first American [in recent history] to ever land in Khang Khay, the old headquarters of the Pathet Lao. ¹

The Plain is full of these stone jars that are centuries old and which no one knows the real history. All the stories I have heard [about them] are myths that can't be true. I took a few pictures I will pass along when developed.

While flying normal missions the other day, we spotted three POL dumps. I flew back to the staging area and got some people who are handy in things like this and we blew these dumps. Fantastic! The next day we discovered three caches of 37mm AAA ammunition. We blew them. I especially like to see this stuff destroyed as it can never be used against us again.

Vang Pao says he is going to hold the PDJ, but I think if the NVA come charging down Route-7 we will vacate. Anyway, we have crippled their capability to wage a sustained war this [coming] dry season.

¹ I believed this at the time, but it was not entirely correct. When Ben Densley joined Air America, I learned that he was part of a Special Forces FTT White Star team living at Khang Khay in 1960.

We are not worried about losing Mounng Soui anymore. The [enemy] troops in this area are quite hungry and are liable to stay that way.

In the South around Savannakhet I understand that we have made 20-mile gains, all unopposed. This puts us into areas that I have never flown in, as AAA fire was too heavy.

Why? I have heard that the rain was very severe in North Vietnam and many [troops] were brought back to build dikes. This hasn't been confirmed, but their supply lines were quite overextended. Also, the bombing of the supply routes has really hurt them. I suspect that the greenness of their troops due to attrition must have something to do with all this. These are not the same troops fighting now as when I started over here...Perhaps the NVA are ready to call it quits or make it look that way. Maybe we caught them with their black pants down.

As usual, don't talk about what I have written here."

Letter Home, 09/16/69.

On 1 September enemy troop concentrations were discovered ten miles north of Bouam Long near Don's Strip (LS-219), west of the old Alpha pad and east of Phou Cum. Since the units constituted a danger for the remaining friendly forces and people in the region north of the PDJ, Raven-40 worked two flights in support.

The Raven-40 pilot was busy. Two miles west of the Nong Pet junction and south of Route-71, a Hobo flight destroyed two trucks, a tractor truck, a POL dump and three structures. This was accompanied by a large secondary explosion and fifteen medium secondary fires.

The following day TICs on the PDJ were reported to Cricket. They were resolved. At 1715 hours, as Cricket was departing

station to be replaced by Alleycat, Raven-40 reported TIC near Black Lion's position on Phou Nok Kok. ²

Despite early successes achieved on the PDJ, the operation was not conducted without losses to airmen and machines. On 4 September, Meo T-28 pilot Lieutenant Van Sue was shot down near Phou Kout. The ensuing six-hour SAR resulted in recovery of the badly burned pilot, but two Jolly Greens were damaged during the process. After recovering, Vang Sue began to fly again and achieved a reputation almost as esteemed as Lee Lieu. ³

Riding north on Hotel-52, I arrived at The Alternate on the morning of 5 September to command PFG with "Ski" Olkowski. Six days of relatively good weather during a normally very wet month, and over fifty hours flight time coincided with one of the most active RONS I experienced while flying in Laos. The briefing I initially received from Chuck Campbell indicated that during my few days at home hundreds, if not thousands, of our "little guys" had moved across vast areas of the Plain of Jars at lightning speed. They accomplished this with relatively minor opposition, probably bypassing individual soldiers or pockets of isolated enemy units to be addressed at a later time. For this reason, I was cautioned to fly at 1,500 feet AGL on the Plain, an altitude calculated to be above most small arms fire, until the situation was better assessed.

With major success easily achieved during initial stages of the offensive, Vang Pao's plans morphed into recapturing MOUNG SOUI, the former Pathet Lao headquarters at Khang Khay, along with the surrounding hills, the high ground southeast of Nong Pet, Phu Khe, and Xieng Khouang Ville. The latter was calculated

²Extracts from ABCCC Reporting.

³John Pratt, *CHECO*, 108.

to thwart potential reinforcement and a counterattack along newly constructed portions of Route-72.

After the Lat Houang (LS-09) crossroads was firmly in our hands, the grass airstrip was employed as a forward supply base and staging location for movement further north toward Phong Savan, Khang Khay, and east toward Phou Khe, and Xieng Khouang Ville. For several days I was tasked to shuttle troops and supplies to Site-09, while backhauling refugees and the spoils of war to Alternate.

For maximum safety, at first, I generally followed the same flight track to the friendly position. Clearing the foothills at "The Nipple," I proceeded ten miles north along meandering trails. By then more familiar with the area, I began observing more and noticed what looked like a few small round stone articles scattered in the grass east of my track. I thought they might be the legendary ancient jars for which the Plain was named, ones I had seen in the hills, and heard people talk about. Seen from above, the uncovered monoliths had hollow centers and contained nothing visible. They were concentrated in that one place and I did not see more until succeeding days.

After passing abeam Lat Sen I intersected Route-5. From altitude, both sides of the undeveloped dirt road were intermittently lined with blackened corpses of cows and other cattle killed by advancing troops or during the bombing campaign, preceding movement onto the Plain of Jars. I was aware that some of the animals had been lying there for a considerable period because of the advanced states of decomposition, defined by black, greasy spots on the ground spreading through and staining the grass.

A disused grass strip existed at Lat Houang, through which Route-5 continued a couple of miles northeast toward the Route 7/4 junction at Ban Thuang and the western mouth of the Xieng



Panorama of a portion of the Plain of Jars as seen from bomb scarred hills on the southern periphery.

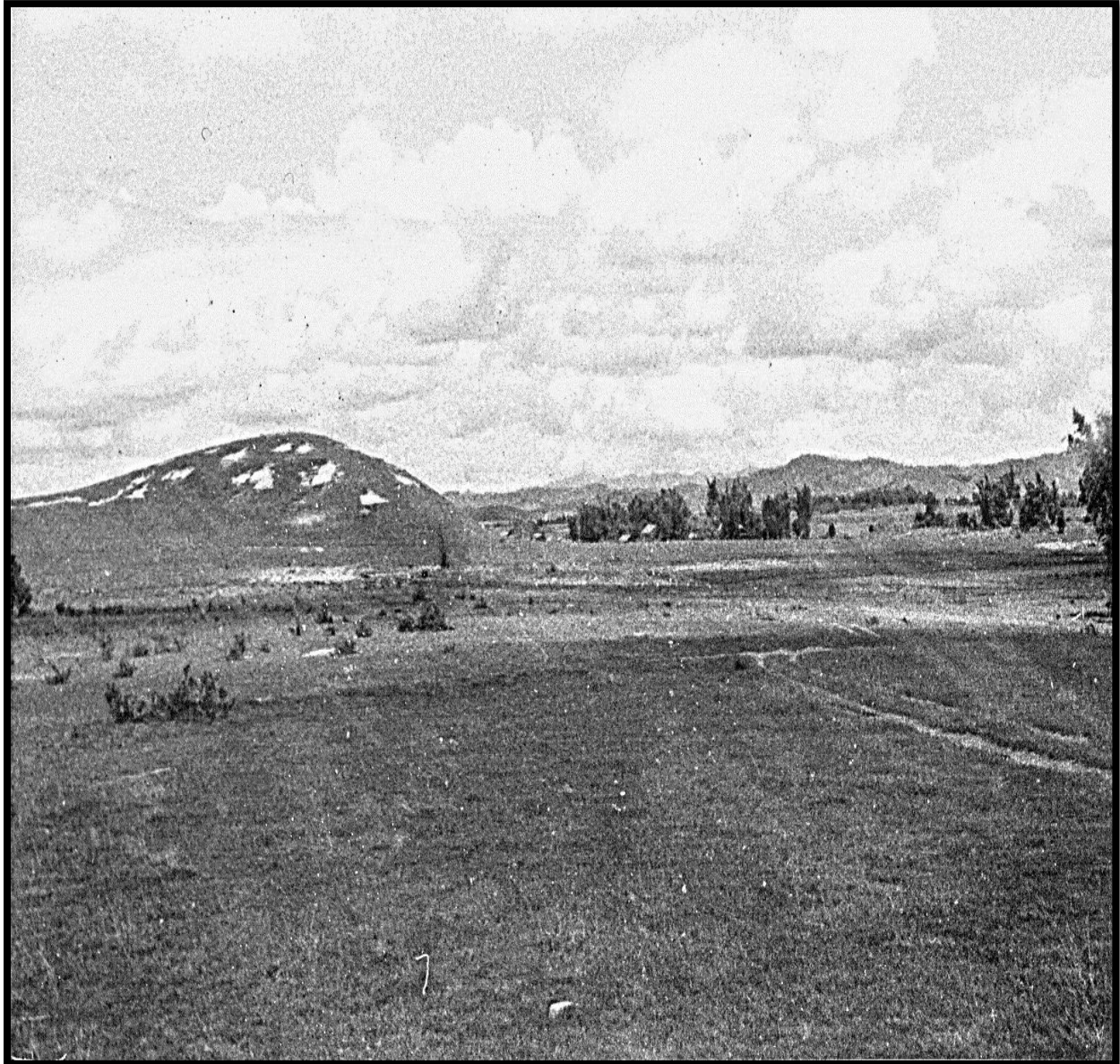
Author Collection.

Khouang Valley. Contrasting with generally flat grassy terrain, prominent white scars slashed low hills in a patchwork pattern, attesting to the allied bombing severity. Except for a few structures scattered among tree lines, very little habitation was left standing in the open.

Numerous troops and their dependents stood or sat on boxes alongside the runway awaiting delivery of goods to stack or move forward to units advancing north and east.

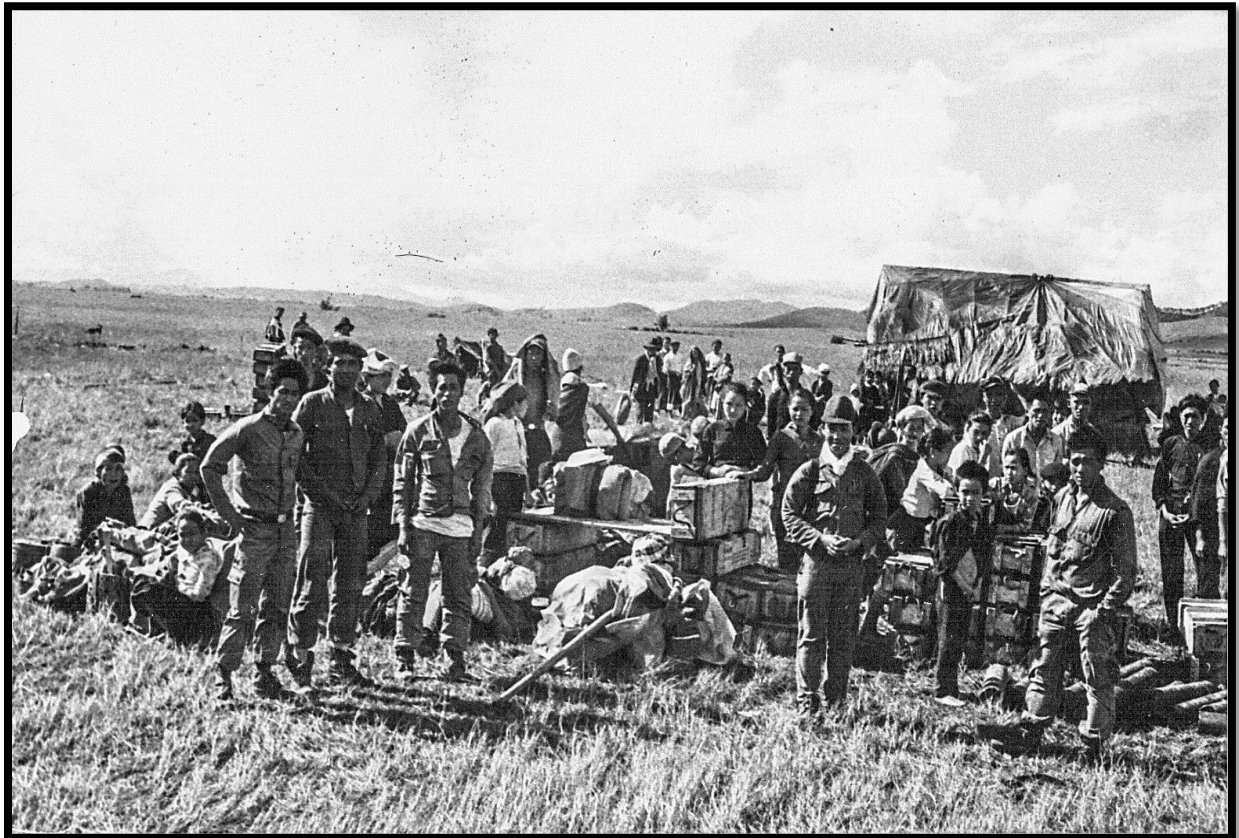
Time was of the essence. "Strike while the iron was hot before the enemy can react," became the clichéd watchword of the operation, but aptly described the immediate requirement. With so much left to do, it did not appear there was enough time to accomplish it all during the course of a normal day. Although nine plus hours was nothing to complain about, attempts to launch earlier were negated by the Customer because of the local COS policy to first obtain and collate radio reports from the field, dispatch a Raven pilot for recon, and then brief the flight crews. This strategy continued throughout the first Plain of Jars operation.

Saturday, day two of my RON, in what would generally become an early morning ritual, I ferried Chuck Campbell, Vang Pao and his "loaded for bear" guards to Lat Houang and other positions where they could direct ground and air operations. Chuck and I, both former Marines, enjoyed an excellent rapport and strong bond that only members of the Corps fostered. Chuck, a tall, blond individual, was easygoing and disseminated pertinent information to help me operate safely. Although well aware that our gains on the Plain were only temporary, we were all enthusiastic and a bit amazed by early results of the offensive. Although his courage was never questioned, Chuck, known as "White Top" for radio identification, possessed an



The Lat Houang (LS-09) area on the eastern Plain of Jars depicting grassy, flat terrain, a bomb scarred hill, and trees sheltering the few remaining structures. Road tracks and the unimproved grass strip are visible to the right in the photo.

Author Collection.



Meo troops and dependents awaiting supplies at the forward Lat Houang base on the Plain of Jars.

Author Collection.



Part of a montage panning right from the previous photo depicts the buildup of munitions to support the summer Plain of Jars operation. Soldiers and civilians await deliveries of supplies to stack. Rising terrain to the rear defines the foothills leading toward more foothills and the entrance of the Route-4-Xieng Khouang Valley.

Author Collection.



Major General Van Pao monitoring and directing RLAFF T-28 air operations from a position on or near the Plain of Jars. Case Officer and advisor, Chuck Campbell (code named White Top, seated), accompanied Vang Pao on these daily trips. Personal guards equipped with M-16 rifles and an M-79 grenade launcher surround the general.

Thompson Collection.

uncharacteristic quirk: he was leery of clouds when flying. If even a small fair weather one was evident in the distance, he would be quick to point it out to the pilot. Naturally, we made allowances for Chuck's unusual "idiotsyncrasy." When the subject of Mung Soui arose, Chuck indicated that our troops were moving forward in that sector and it was only a matter of time before we recaptured the site. Radio intercepts revealed that enemy soldiers were sick and starving. The reports also complained of abundant sickness, and angrily accused USAF planes of dropping air dispensed chemical or biological agents on them. ⁴

Later during the operation, when Chuck was elsewhere, I ferried Vang Pao and his people to the Plain of Jars. I was always leery of having the general ride with me in a dual control cockpit because he believed it was his divine right to manipulate the controls. He did this many times in the H-34, but I don't recall him ever asking to fly the Huey. Perhaps he felt a bit intimidated by the lack of a Bell automatic stabilization system, and did not feel comfortable in the machine.

Always enjoying the limelight, Vang Pao was equally enthusiastic and encouraged about the rapid gains his troops had made thus far on the Plain. We even joked about turning the Plain of Jars into a world class resort area complete with an international airport. Bomb craters would serve as fish ponds

⁴ Because of initial concern that the Plain of Jars operation would be limited in scope and duration, Agent Orange spraying was conducted early throughout the area to destroy rice crops and deny the enemy critical foodstuffs. However, it is unlikely that this toxic chemical contributed to the known 200 Vietnamese deaths that unmarked graves confirmed when Mung Soui was eventually captured. Top secret experiments with and distribution of chemical or biological agents was entirely possible, but because of previous horrible weather, poor living conditions, stress, weakened immune systems, pneumonia, tuberculosis, malaria, and other endemic diseases, they were more likely the culprits.

and we would stock the Plain with all kinds of animals for big game hunters to enjoy. Dreams, dreams...

Master tinkerer Andy Anderson, equipped with his Vietnam-acquired metal chest "chicken plate," replaced "Ski" as my Flight Mechanic. While GM-22 units continued north and other groups occupying Phu Theung moved east, GM-23 contested the heights of Phu Khe overlooking Xieng Khouang Ville before proceeding down into the town. Running into opposition on the forward slopes of the mountain range facing the valley, several troops were wounded. During the day, I shuttled twelve of these individuals to the large, well-staffed Sam Thong hospital. Compared to Western combatants, an injured Meo soldier's deportment was amazing. Despite grievous wounds, displaying a major degree of stoicism, not one of the injured men and boys uttered so much as a moan. It was that kind of culture.

As troop momentum slowly and steadily progressed east down the Route-4 valley toward the Ville, a few camouflaged caves, previously missed during the March Xieng Khouang Ville operation, were discovered. Some that were spotted by low-flying Raven FACs had been reported to 7th Air Force, but attempts to thread the needle and slip Bullpup missiles into the tiny cavern's opening generally met with failure.

Two hundred sniper scope-equipped rifles were found stashed in one cave. The weapons were still in crates and packed in their original Cosmoline protective wrappings. These guns were delivered to The Alternate where, considered a premium souvenir, they were all claimed before I had a chance to obtain one. Still, we were very happy the "one shot Charlie" pilot killers were removed from enemy hands. I did obtain a used Soviet SKS rifle in good shape. However, since Company restrictions regarding pilots having weapons still existed, I had to cut the



The entrance to an enemy storage cave is visible at the base of a mountain located on the north side of the Xieng Khouang Ville Valley. Two hundred enemy sniper scope rifles were discovered along with other booty. Revealed by telltale trails leading to the cave, the immediate area was well peppered by friendly air. One of numerous water-filled buffalo wallows, a bomb crater can be seen in the lower center.

Author Collection.

wooden stock in order to hide it from view when I returned to Udorn.

"Vang Pao's troops have occupied almost all of the [PDJ] and advanced elements are now on the outskirts of Khang Khay, the military and administration headquarters for [PL] and dissident neutralist forces in Xieng Khouang Province. A guerrilla company has captured Phong Savan airfield. Because of their political sensitivity, Phone Savan and Khang Khay have been heretofore off limits to both air and ground assault.

...[PL] troops are pulling out of the Khang Khay area, and the town itself may fall to guerrillas by default. [VP] has also deployed three battalions south of the [PDJ] to retake Xieng Khouang Ville." ⁵

The Ville and surrounding hills were occupied unopposed by 12 September. ⁶

On the seventh, no TICs were reported to Cricket, but Raven FACs worked strike aircraft against troop concentrations and enemy assaults at three FAG locations, including Black Lion in the Ban Ban Valley.

Enemy leaders were determined not to allow troops at and around Phou Nok Kok free access to the area. Therefore, just before dark on Monday the Black Lion FAG reported TIC. Before leaving station, Cricket diverted strike flights to the site.

The next day trucks were destroyed and KBA tallied southwest of Nong Pet along Route-7 near Phou Sani.

Black Lion again reported TIC against patrols on Wednesday. This was dealt with under the auspices of Cricket resources and courageous Raven pilots. ⁷

⁵ CIA Daily Bulletin, 09/10/69. Laos: Government forces are cutting deeper into communist territory in the north...

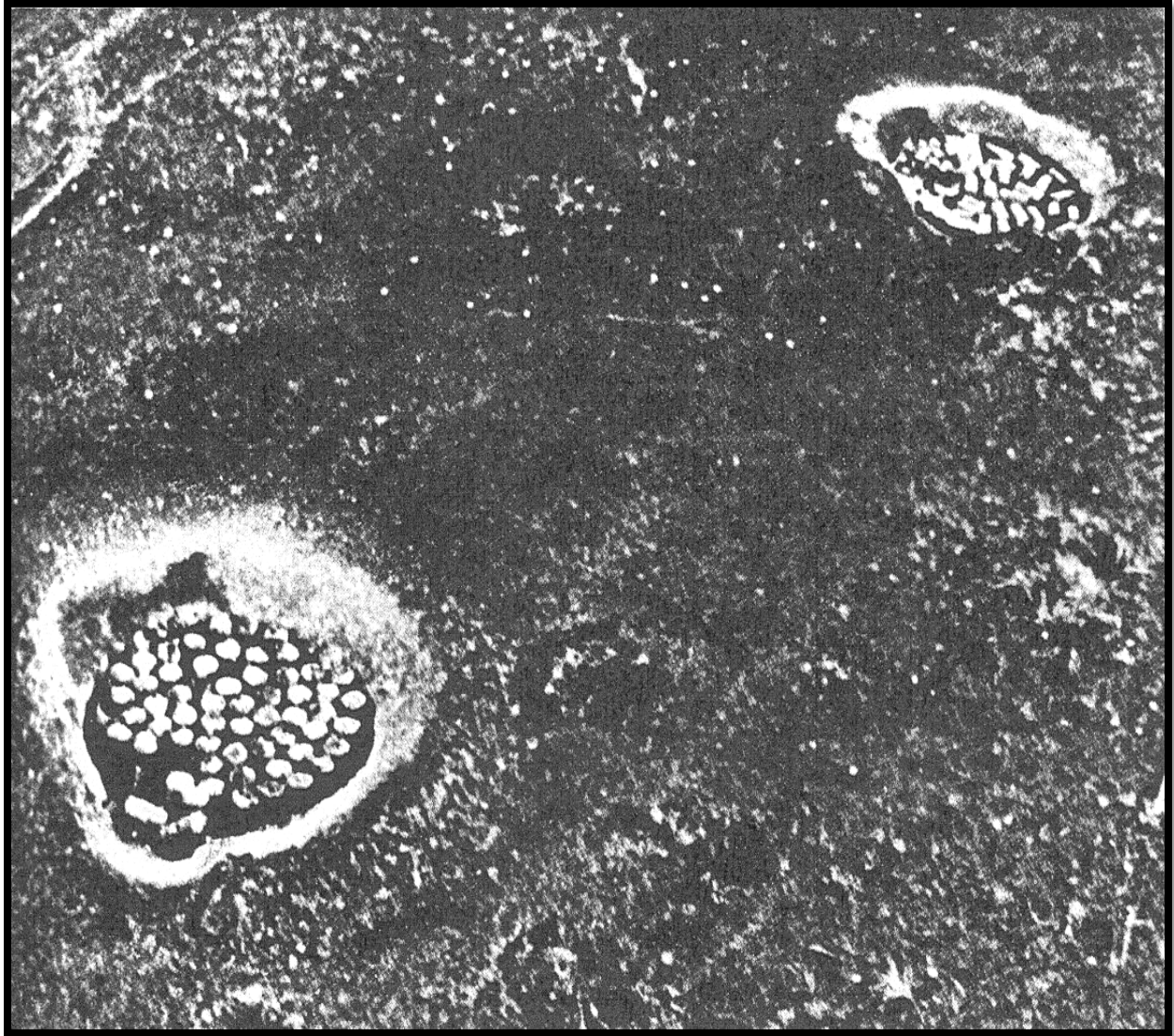
⁶ CIA Daily Bulletin, 09/15/69. Laos: Government troops have taken the town of Xieng Khouang Ville without opposition.

⁷ Extracts from ABCC Records.

ULTIMATE SATISFACTION

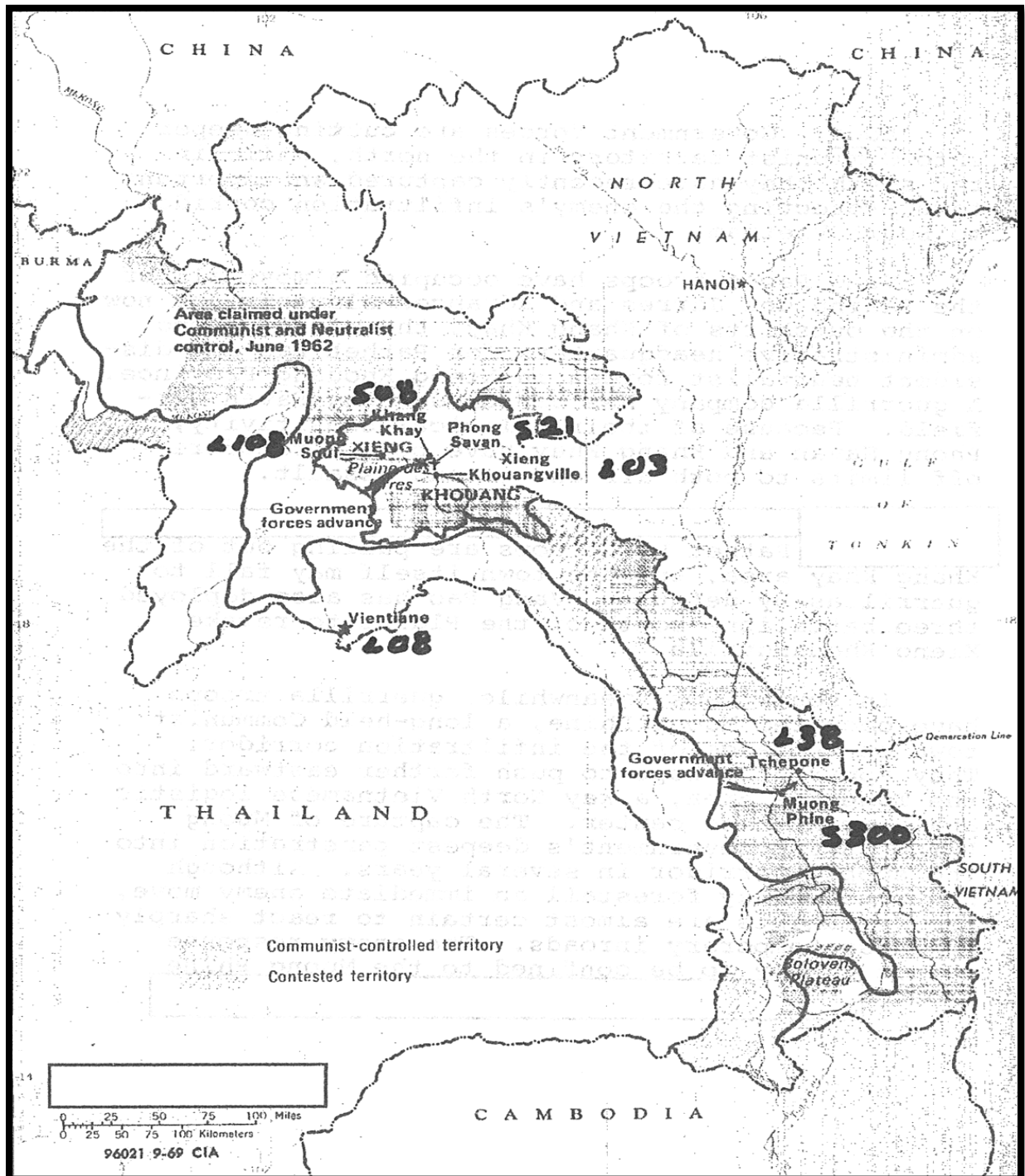
On Monday the eighth, during a final company size push on Phong Savan Town, I was flying north of Lat Houang toward Site-21 at fairly low level when Andy spotted something unusual in the distance off our left rear, to the west of Route-7. Further investigation revealed three large storage pits jammed with green fuel drums. All were camouflaged by swatches of weathered, round woven thatch material. Cleverly conceived and designed, during the rainy season, the thatch was intended to float to the surface at the same level as the surrounding terrain. This presented an illusion of continuous terrain and was calculated to conceal the pits from overhead reconnaissance aircraft. The ploy was also intended to conceal detection even at lower altitudes, but the recent dry spell allowed the somewhat deteriorated covers to settle on the drums. Moreover, as seen from the cockpit at an oblique angle, a slight declivity and the perimeters of the containment pits were well defined.

Elated, I was certain the hundreds of gasoline barrels constituted a major find. Since much booty in the form of World War Two vintage PT-76 tanks, vehicles of all descriptions, various artillery pieces, crew-served and individual weapons, and tons of ammunition were either being used during the operation, destroyed, or returned to Alternate for display, or delivery to other locations, I thought the fuel might prove useful in the tanks of captured rolling stock. Therefore, I conducted a special trip to Long Tieng to apprise Case Officers of our find. My enthusiasm was quickly deflated when they divulged that the quality of Soviet fuel was poor, certainly old (some petroleum caches had been in place for seven years), and the low octane gasoline was much inferior to ours. However,



Poorly concealed storage pits on the PDJ containing Soviet gasoline. These are similar to the ones discovered by the crew of Papa Foxtrot Gulf, but without thatch camouflage covers.

Author Collection.



09/10/69 CIA map depicting the locations of Phong Savan and Khang Khay on the eastern and northern Plain of Jars. The graphic also shows Military Region Three SGU advances toward Tchepone during the September Mung Phine operation.

leaving the petrol in place was not practical. Destruction was the only alternative to hauling it off the Plain.

I boarded both White Top and Mister Clean, who after overcoming a serious medical problem, had recently returned from Bangkok, and we soon launched for the Plain of Jars. I dropped Chuck Campbell off at one pit, armed with an M-16 rifle, thermite grenades, and his obligatory hand-held HT-2 radio. I performed the same drill with Burr Smith, landing him close to another storage hole. Keeping my turns up (sufficient RPM to takeoff rapidly), I watched for a short time as he randomly fired his rifle into selected drums. Then he instructed me to take off and orbit until called. As he readied to torch the pit, I returned to the first storage area to retrieve Campbell. Before leaving Chuck tossed a couple of grenades into the mass of volatile fuel. After collecting Smith, I returned to altitude to watch as the fires rapidly increased in magnitude. The ensuing show was nothing less than spectacular. Copious greasy, black clouds of dense POL smoke boiled heavenward, propelled upward by convection from the fire's intense heat. Barrels periodically exploded, some soaring two hundred feet or more above the pits.

After tiring of watching the conflagration, I returned the duo to The Alternate and returned to my Lat Houang-Phong Savan shuttles. During the course of these missions, I had the opportunity to observe the gasoline-fed fires blaze for the next four hours, then finally diminish into the smoldering pits. I considered our participation in the destruction and denial of war goods immensely satisfactory and psychologically rewarding. The downside, of course, was the fact that the episode was over, but our presence on the PDJ was recent, and there were certainly new fields to explore and other challenges to confront.

Additional tools of war were discovered around Phong Savan when the troops cleared and moved through the area. Granted, enemy camouflage techniques were well developed, but it seemed unconscionable that supposedly sophisticated USAF reconnaissance and the latest airborne intelligence gathering methods had previously failed to detect substantial amounts of the larger equipment. I saw some of these weapons and ammo stacked beside the Lima-21 strip during one of my trips. Andy and designated loading troops stacked three 12.7mm AAA barrels in the cargo compartment to add to Long Tieng stocks. It was satisfying knowing that there were three fewer of the formidable weapons available to enemy gunners to potentially cause me and my peers grievous harm.

Calculated to supplement and enhance failed airborne USAF intelligence, during early September specially equipped U.S Army OV-1 Mohawk planes, nicknamed "Snoopies," and occasionally deployed earlier at Udorn for Trail missions, began scouting northern and eastern LOCs in Military Region Two. Operating with the latest electronic technology, consisting of oblique radar and infrared capability, information obtained during the month tended to confirm Vietnamese units not killed or captured had withdrawn from the battlefield, leaving behind inept surrogate Pathet Lao and Deuanist FAN forces.

Emulating counterparts in the FAN and FAR RLA, when pressured by air and ground assets, the Pathet Lao assumed a Falstaffian "better part of valor" attitude, withdrawing east at high port along Route-7 to sanctuaries beyond Nong Het, close to the North Vietnamese border. Other troop concentrations were discovered near Sam Neua Town. Using this information, during the month the Air Force quickly modified its tactics to include seeding Route-7 with electronic sensors, striking lucrative targets around Nong Het, and along a specified area of Route-72.



Soldiers from General Vang Pao's army at Phong Savan, Laos, adjacent to the Author's Bell helicopter, awaiting the photo opportunity and to load Soviet 12.7mm weapons for distribution to Long Tieng.

Author Collection.

Moving unimpeded across open terrain, elements of the 22nd GM marched further north along Route-7 and into hills overlooking Khang Khay. Largely uncontested, they then continued into the outskirts of the mostly abandoned town by nine September. Historical Khang Khay, for a time in the early 1960s consisted of leftist and "neutral" politicians to include Souvanna Phouma, when the town served as the seat of a government of Laos in exile. ⁸ During future years, the town served as a Pathet Lao and dissident neutralist administrative, logistic, and training area that housed a prison camp and a Chinese "Cultural" Mission. ⁹ Although supposedly declared off limits to allied bombing by the RLG in Vientiane, like other important enemy towns on the Plain of Jars the town suffered considerable damage because of bombing "accidents" over the years, particularly after enemy gains in 1968. Displaying a distinct French architectural influence, several concrete stucco structures, many devoid of roofs remained, but like slabs of Swiss cheese, walls were pockmarked by bomb blast fragments, bullet holes, and canon fire.

Because there was some doubt as to how long we could hold captured terrain so far north on the PDJ, the powers who be ordered an immediate examination of the Chinese Cultural Center. Campbell and others were selected for the job. On the ninth, since the northern area was not considered entirely cleared of left over enemy, I flew the small team at altitude to the outskirts of the town where I dropped them off. I was not sure if our troops were still in the immediate area. Therefore, I was

⁸ There were actually three governments operating at one time in Laos: one in Vientiane, one at Khang Khay, and the Pathet Lao government at Sam Neua.

⁹ For additional information concerning this camp, see the November section of Author's Book Nine, 1968, regarding an account of a school teacher captured at Moung Ngan.



Permanent structures at Khang Khay, Laos located among a well-developed dirt road structure.

Author Collection.

reluctant to leave Campbell and the rest alone without a means of escape, but Chuck, who probably knew the situation better than I did, indicated they would likely be investigating the structure for several hours. I was advised to return to regular work. When their mission was finished, he would radio me or someone else for a pickup.

Chuck was eventually recovered from Khang Khay. He later informed me that the concrete structure penetrated three stories into the ground and natural caves. The absence of breathable air, complete darkness, and potential booby traps prevented safe investigation of lower levels; scuba diving apparatus would be necessary for that job. Upper rooms contained an abundance of propaganda material and other such items. To probe this find he presented me with a few Chairman Meo se Tung buttons and Pathet Lao kip.¹⁰

According to Wayne Knight, the good people at AB-1's technical lab sent self-contained breathing devices to assist in deep exploration of the center. Anything that was easily assessable was investigated, but remained highly classified. From time to time the CPH heard references in AB-1 halls regarding finds, but he was unable to relate to them.¹¹

In the meantime, I conducted shuttles to outlying landing zones where troops were resting or awaiting ammo deliveries to continue their march north. During these runs, I happened across

¹⁰ Kip: In 1969, 500 RLG kip was equivalent to one U.S. dollar. In enemy-controlled Phong Saly Province government kip was exchanged on a one-to-one basis. However, Pathet Lao kip could not be exchanged for government kip.

Agency Memorandum, 08/14/69, Conditions in Phong Saly Province, foia.ucia.gov.

¹¹ EWKnight Email, 10/09/00.



Chinese and North Vietnamese communist booty received from Customer Chuck Campbell after searching the Chinese Cultural Center at Khang Khay, Laos.

Author Collection.

a destroyed PT-76 tank in an old bomb crater that was partially concealed by bush and tree growth. Apparently, the tank commander wrongly presupposed that Mother Nature's camouflage would serve to disguise his machine.

The Agency reported:

"...In north Laos, government forces have made only slight progress during the past few days toward gaining additional ground. Large stocks of communist supplies are being destroyed in the Khang Khay area, but determined enemy resistance continues on the northern periphery of the [PDJ]. On 11 September three [NVA] companies-probably from Moung Soui-staged an all-night attack against a government battalion northwest of the Plaine. There is still no evidence of enemy intentions to take major counteractions..." ¹²

As the Plain of Jars operation proceeded north, new Customer faces appeared daily at Long Tieng. Flown in from other Southeast Asian locations, some were reputedly experts in Soviet weapon technology, others with explosive techniques and detection of booby traps. This category was tasked to destroy the massive amounts of ammunition, guns, and other enemy supplies we could not repair or use, and those we wanted to deny the enemy.

On the tenth, I carried such a team and explosives north of Khang Khay to a point on the south side of Route-71 where patrols had discovered three large caches of 37mm ammunition. Both sides of the wide dirt road were open, devoid of trees, high shrubbery, or other obstacles. After a brief recon of the area, I landed in the low grass, while the team fanned out to the left several yards along the edge of the heavily jungled forest. Since a few of our forward element troops were still

¹² CIA Daily Bulletin, 09/15/69. Laos.



A wrecked PT-76 tank sits in an overgrown bomb crater on the northern Plain of Jars. Previously hidden, the depression was used on the erroneous premise that lightning never strikes the same place twice.
Author Collection.

milling around the immediate area, and other patrols were moving through, curious as to what was in the brush, I shut down and followed.

The caches, containing huge piles of green wooden boxes, were located just inside jungle cover. Always clever devils, and quick to take advantage of any situation, the enemy positioned the supplies far enough off the road to effect maximum concealment, just outside the 200-meter Air Force rules of engagement (ROE) restriction for bombing without FAC/FAG control along LOCs. The corner of one pile had been clipped off by an unexploded bomb without causing appreciable damage. Apparently, either an errant bomb delivered by an American pilot had fallen, or the pilot had failed to heed mandated ROEs. ¹³

Concerned about hidden booby traps, I remained on the periphery skimming through other plentiful supplies such as Chinese thread of inferior quality, which we were often warned about while shopping for tailored clothes in Hong Kong. Other interesting items discovered were large silver cans of pork. I guess this was the ChiCom answer to our wonderful pressed Spam ham. I took one of these items home, but lacked the intestinal fortitude to sample the mess.

Since the area was not a hundred percent secured, much to my delight, we did not remain long. Before departing, at strategic points, Customers deployed explosive charges fitted

¹³ ROE: These restrictions, originally developed to prevent collateral damage to villages and civilians situated close to roads, had been modified over time when it became obvious that the enemy had taken maximum advantage of our foolish rules. Any strikes beyond the limit had to be controlled by either FAC or FAG sources. Although encouraged by AIRA to follow similar rules, Lao, Thai, and Meo T-28 pilots were under no similar restrictions. This was the case with VP's Meo pilots. With an entire generation gone, "kill the enemy" was the Meo motto.

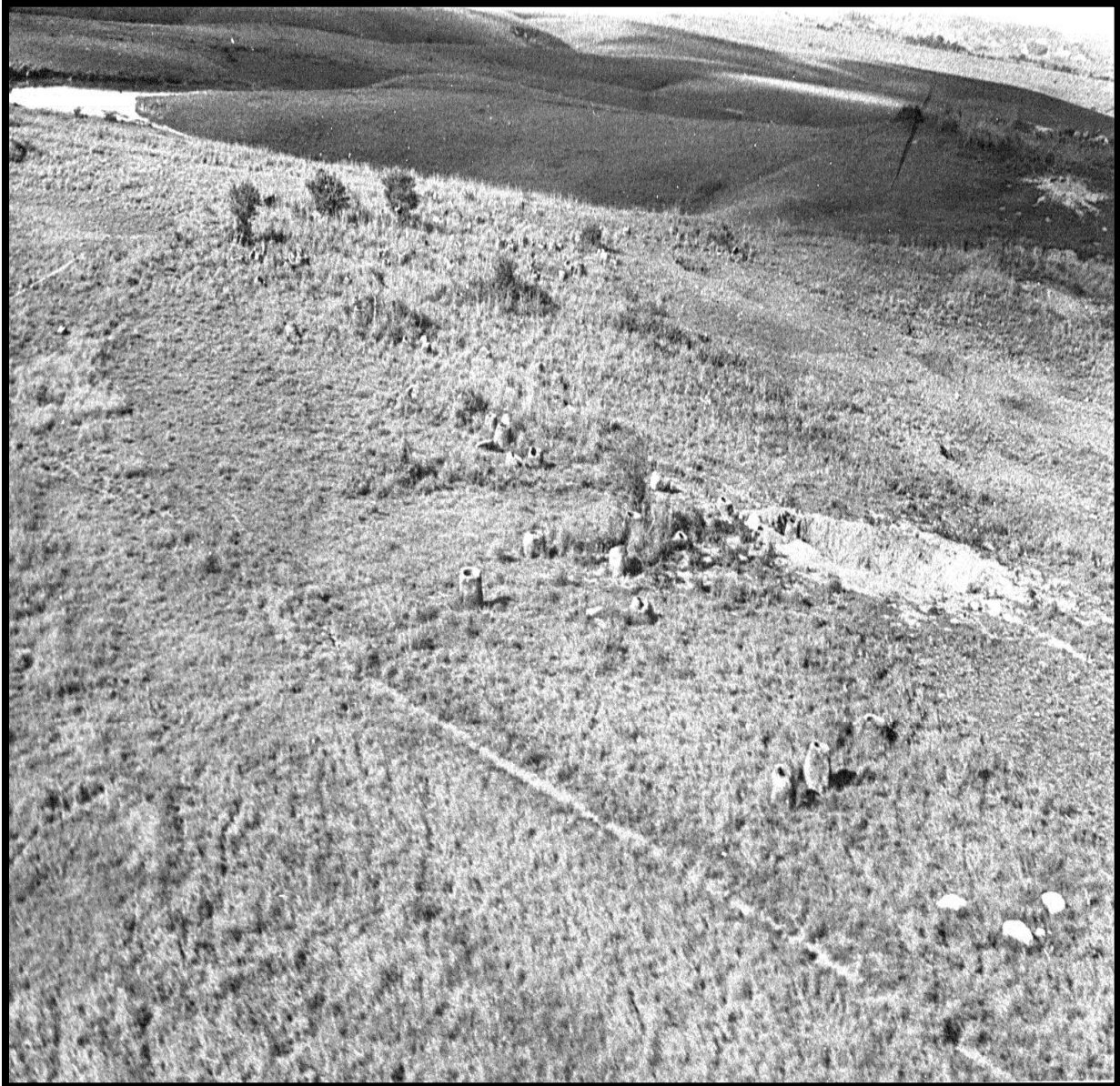
with chemically activated timed pencils. The devices were calculated to detonate after we were well clear of the area.

Interspersed with these tasks, in a hastily arranged emergency exfil, without benefit of a double crew, I landed with no problem at the strategic Phou Nok Kok landing zone at UG4171 to retrieve wounded. Except for roving patrols scouting the Ban Ban Valley, this high ground was considered the front lines--at least for the present, since VP had visions, perhaps grandiose delusions, of clearing the entire Route-7 area past Ban Nong Het all the way to the North Vietnamese border.

Landing after dark, I discovered that I had been relieved. Fortunately, Caribou 293 was still waiting on the ramp with running lights and engines idling. Along with other crews, I hurriedly boarded the ship for the hour flight to Udorn, anxious for beer, bath, and bed.

THE CURIOUS PLAIN OF JARS

During the course of the fun-filled and enormously interesting RON, I had the opportunity to view and photograph the vaunted jars for which the high plateau was named. Although I had never previously had an opportunity to see them up close, I had learned of their presence from other Americans, like one of two original Alternate Case Officers, Princeton graduate Vint Lawrence. Another with knowledge was the intelligent Sam Tong AID worker, Blaine Jensen, who actually saw a few of the many jars while briefly working on the Plain of Jars for Kong Le in the fall of 1963. Predating recorded history, there were several explanations as to the composition, manufacture, and presence of the rare artifacts. They were said to be fashioned from sandstone and other stone not common to the area; some were still topped with lids. No one knew how they arrived on the Plain. There was speculation they might have been dragged in by



With the Ngam Ngum visible in the upper portion, several jars sit exposed on the Plain of Jars between a narrow trail and bomb crater.

Author Collection.



Photo taken from the Author's Bell helicopter at a low hover depicts lidless jars on the Plain of Jars. Government troops provide perspective as to the height of two jars, some that varied from three to nine feet with diameters up to almost nine feet. Mostly of stone construction, weights were estimated in tons.

Author Collection.



A bomb crater located dead center in a cluster of ancient jars and enemy bunkers. Although considered priceless national treasures by the Lao government, and off limits to American air strikes, Lao, particularly Meo T-28 pilots who had lost relatives and loved ones during the war strived, to "kill the enemy," and often disregarded orders to spare historical artifacts.

Author Collection.

elephants. ¹⁴

Unscientific speculation posited that the mysterious artifacts were derived for large storage vessels to hold grain, water containers for trade caravans from northern India, giants' wine cups, or, most likely, burial urns for individuals of enormous importance. Of course, this was mostly supposition, for no bones were ever discovered in or around the containers at the time to substantiate this.

It was also surmised that if the items were indeed funerary urns, then wild animals must have removed any remains.

During the early 1930s French geologist and archaeologist Madeleine Colani and her team investigated jar sites. The year of my birth, she published two volumes regarding her findings. However, no one actually possessed a tangible answer to the how, where, and why regarding the prehistoric jars. The danger of venturing onto the Plain of Jars to perform research during the long war years discouraged detailed scientific investigation. This would have to await resolution of the conflict.

Although scattered throughout the Plain, one concentration of jars existed around an isolated karst that was bombed during 21 April, one whose innards contained a vast amount of POL. This particular cave had been investigated by Colani and cohorts. Finding ashes, stone tools, ceramics, bronze ornaments, fabrics, and fragments of human remains, they concluded that the cave was employed as a crematorium during the bronze and iron ages.

At one time, a large human forearm was reputedly discovered in a cave on the edge of the PDJ, north-northwest of Phu Pha Sai at the end of Padong Ridge. In a superstitious country fraught

¹⁴Jars: Much later, examinations revealed compositions of granite, limestone, or a kind of cement conglomerate supposedly consisting of molded clay, sand, sugar, and buffalo skin products. The latter was fired in the kiln of a nearby cave.

with legend, myth, and colorful stories, this finding gave rise to wild tales of a race of giants living in the area. ¹⁵ After fighting a long battle, eventually conquering the enemy, the jars were employed to brew and store the fiery, "lip chapping" Lao Lao rice wine.

There was a great deal of concern regarding the fate of the jars among the highest levels in the Lao government. To ethnic Lao, any disturbance of the jars would trigger the wrath of ancestors upon them, and in retrospect they may have been right. However, this was not the Meo or other ethnic minorities' belief, which had no respect for the jars and considered that leaving them untouched could provide enemy sanctuaries. Therefore, VP provided his T-28 pilots carte blanche to bomb anything considered a safe haven for the enemy. One could not blame VP, for he was fighting for the Meo people's survival and for their current homeland.

Not long after Ambassador Godley's visit to the Plain, AID personnel Blaine Jensen and Ernie Kuhn were dispatched to map and catalogue jar locations. After accomplishing what they could, the information, including photos of damage and documentation locations were transferred to embassy maps for dissemination to the USAF to avoid bombing. Godley also personally delivered the information to Souvanna Phouma. ¹⁶

¹⁵ Laos was not the only country in Southeast Asia where giants supposedly resided. Tales abounded to this in Thailand and other world cultures.

¹⁶ Segment Sources:
 Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 216, 248.
 Victor Anthony, *The War in Northern Laos*, 315.
 Blaine Jensen Letters.
 Wikipedia, Plain of Jars, of Jars, (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plain_of_Jars).
 Crystalinks, Plain of Jars, (crystalinks.com/plainofjars.html).
 Joe Cummings, *Lonely Planet: Laos a Travel Survival Kit*, (Bangkok: Asia Books, 1994) 161-162.
Discover Laos.

ERNIE

Ernie Kuhn and his new wife returned to Laos from home leave in June. When Vang Pao's offensive evolved into a large-scale operation, many refugees were generated and had to be removed from harm's way. After Lat Sen and its 3,560-foot east-west strip were secured, the first large group of civilians began arriving from the hinterland, driving their cattle, water buffalo, pigs, and chickens, while lugging sewing machines and other personal belongings. Experienced in handling panicked refugees, Kuhn was directed to marshal the people south ASAP by all available aircraft.

Seeing all that meat on the hoof gave Ernie an idea. Thousands of dollars were expended purchasing beef from Chinese businessmen in Singapore, flying or trucking canned meat to Vientiane, and then upcountry to feed the soldiers. The hundreds of cattle presented a perfect opportunity to conserve scarce funds. If buffalo could be purchased from the refugees, it would not only provide local meat at reduced cost, but also afford the people money for necessities at Sam Tong. Ernie called his boss Jack Williamson in Vientiane and presented his plan. Within a short time, Jack came back on the air with approval. Details regarding payment would be worked out, likely in the form of IOUs.

Vang Pao was at Lat Sen that day. Thinking that he had done something extraordinary, Kuhn told the general what had transpired. Taking exception, Vang Pao became angry, saying the people had lived in the enemy area for a long time and he considered them all enemy. Because of this, he did not want them at Sam Tong, although it was the only temporary option to remove them from the Plain of Jars. Furthermore, assuming a supreme

Asian warlord's posture, he indicated that all enemy cattle and booty belonged to his troops. An argument ensued. Ernie lost the battle and also the war. He was in no position to win a dispute with such a mercurial person, one who exerted total command of the operation, and he was quite possibly lucky to escape the confrontation intact.

By pursuing an unpopular agenda, Ernie, who was politically connected to the RLG by marriage, made an enemy of VP, who demanded Kuhn be removed from his Military Region Two job and Sam Tong. Vang Pao relented somewhat after people discussed the incident with him. Ernie remained, but his interpersonal relations with the general were never the same.¹⁷

The enemy animals were confiscated. Within four days, huge cattle drives were underway to herd the beasts off the PDJ and move them toward Long Tieng.

More people dribbled south over the weeks, as the market towns of Lat Houang and Phong Savan were captured. Ernie noted that there were no young men of military age in the groups—only old men, women, younger girls, and small children. The refugees' skin appeared the color of white milk from years of living in bunkers and caves to avoid the fighting and bombing. Many people had pimples and sores on their faces from the damp, dark spaces. Ernie entered some of the caves and bunkers at Lat Houang. Little more than reinforced bunkers, they contained beds, tables, chairs, and kerosene lamps. He retrieved notebooks and other written material in Vietnamese and Lao.

Ethnics at Lat Houang were diverse. They included Lao, Phuan, Vietnamese, Cambodian, Indians, and Chinese, who in some manner had become enmeshed in the fighting and were unwilling or

¹⁷ I was to experience a similar incident with Vang Pao early the following year.

unable to leave. Refugees were initially ferried to Sam Tong for vetting. Chinese, Cambodian, Vietnamese, and Indian types were immediately delivered to Vientiane where ethnic associations in the administrative city supported each group. This relieved USAID of a similar burden. ¹⁸

JARINA MAKES THE ROUNDS

While I was still upcountry, Mike launched from Udorn for Wattay Airport in Hotel-45 with Flight Mechanic Baccay. Following a briefing, he was dispatched with a load of people for the Nam Ngum Dam Site. After returning to Wattay Airport, he journeyed to a hill site northwest of the airport where Ben Van Etten experienced an engine failure on 15 August. This task complete, the crew returned to Vientiane for the night.

On the ninth, Jarina flew to Luang Prabang, where he conducted local flights.

The next day Marquart, who failed upgrade to Captain and had not yet been assigned semi-permanent First Officer duty at LP, joined the crew for missions. To recon the target areas, Mike rode in CASI Beech Baron N4681.

The first mission was conducted to SH9476, almost forty-six miles due north of Luang Prabang. The landing zone was located on top of the Phou Phapun Range, nine miles southeast of the enemy regional logistical center for the Beng Valley at MOUNG Sai. Combining missions, the flight continued northeast for thirty-six miles to TJ4609, a few miles southwest of old Site-187 near the friendly village of Sen Va Nam Doan, to exfil Route-19 trail watchers. On the way back to Luang Prabang, the flight stopped six miles southeast of the previous landing zone

¹⁸Ernie Kuhn, 34-35, 67-68.

at TJ5401 near Thao Keo, another friendly village, and the Nam Ou. The three missions were accomplished in one fuel load.

The importance of these remaining friendly sites in upper Military Region One became abundantly clear when the flight was tasked to resupply or reinforce missions one and two for the next two days.

In anticipation of Jarina rotating to Udorn on the thirteenth, Ed Rudolph and Baccay arrived to replace his other crew. During a much more productive day of twenty-two landings, they shuttled goods and personnel to a high mountain eight miles south southeast of Luang Prabang that overlooked Route-13. A special mission was conducted to TH4865, forty-four miles north northeast of LP and close to the Nam Ou.

Mike then deadheaded home on Caribou 851. ¹⁹

On the same day Mike was rounding out his last day at Luang Prabang, I deadheaded from the Q warehouse to Alternate on CASI C-47 XW-PDE.

The previous day GM-23 units, after recapturing Phu Khe and occupying old positions, moved down the mountain into Xieng Khouang Ville without encountering opposition. With the cork installed to seal and prevent further development of the Route-72 LOC route toward the Plain of Jars, Vang Pao's troops were then free to maneuver east down the valley and into the security of the hills to monitor developments.

At the end of the first week in October, units had moved twenty miles east to commanding high ground five miles north of the Mounng Ngan Valley and overlooking portions of the new logistics route. ²⁰

¹⁹Mike Jarina Interviews.

²⁰Ken Conboy, 247.

Whatever mission was planned for the day was scrubbed because of adverse weather or other reasons, and I returned home on Papa Foxtrot Juliet.

WASHINGTON

At the inception of Vang Pao's movement onto the Plain of Jars, rehashed or relatively new options from State, DOD, and CIA were considered by the Secretary of Defense and thought to support RLG in its quest to maintain a viable country. Most of these provided escalation and included:

"B-52 reconnaissance and strike operations..., deployment of two Thai infantry battalions, additional Thai air support, Thai artillery support, additional equipment to Lao forces..."

By early September, Vang Pao's "limited" operation was still in its infancy. Without initiating major counterattacks, a determined enemy appeared to have contained further government gains on the northern reaches of the Plain of Jars. On 11 September three Vietnamese companies, believed from the Moung Soui area, staged an all-night attack against a government battalion on the northwest Plateau.

A day later the ABCCC control ship aloft Cricket received a report from Raven-47 that a battalion sized troop concentration was located north of Moung Phanh (L-106) on the edge of the western Plain. The Raven FAC directed four late strike flights against the enemy.

During the early morning of the 13th, FAG Poppy in the Moung Phanh area was experiencing enemy TIC. White Rose, three miles north of the Xieng Khouang (L-22) airstrip, was also in a TIC situation. Raven-48 addressed Poppy's problem with two A-1 flights.

Never happy about making waves in Laos, officials in the Nixon Administration, specifically Henry Kissinger, were

skeptical as to the Plain of Jars operation's eventual outcome. Citing political and military concerns in regard to almost all the August proposals to escalate hostilities, he recommended only a limited military response in Laos. To allay fears of a greater American participation in the communist camp, he further recommended that Souvanna Phouma assure Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese representatives that there was no intent of the operation to seek a military solution.

Still, because of a possibility of massive enemy resurgence on the PDJ during the dry season contingency planning was recommended that included employing B-52 strikes on the Plain of Jars.

Within less than two weeks, recent successes on the PDJ attracted considerable attention in Washington's highest levels, and modified some of the previous thinking as to support for RLA. Recognizing a political plum to conduct "horse trading" during current bilateral Paris negotiations, President Nixon directed advisor Henry Kissinger to contact Defense Secretary Melvin Laird with an order to immediately implement a program calculated to enhance and support the RLA Lao conflict. ²¹

A basket of topics included in part to:

Provide additional M-16 rifles.

Shift T-28's from Thai stocks to the Lao and replace the Thai planes. Ascertain if additional Lao pilots are required and if other types of fixed wing or additional helicopters are needed.

Determine if additional C-47 and C-130 gunships are needed in the Lao Theater.

Establish if logistic support is adequate..

²¹ Meo can easily be substituted for Lao.

Increase artillery support for strategic locations. Reintroduce a Thai battery for use and/or commence indigenous training. ²²

Apply improved reconnaissance on LOCs in north Laos. ²³

²² Large bore artillery training immediately began for Meo in Thailand.

²³ Segment Sources:
Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976. Volume 6, Vietnam, January 1969-July 1970, Document 112, Memorandum from the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon, Military Options in Laos, 09/02/69.
National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, NSC Files, Box 10, President's Daily Briefs.
FRUS, Document 121, 09/15/69, Memorandum from the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to Secretary of Defense Laird.
Ken Conboy, 249.
CIA Bulletin, 09/15/69.
Extracts from ABCCC Reports.

Our Bell 204/205 inventory was substantially diminished because of accidents, both scheduled and unscheduled maintenance, and a rapidly aging fleet. Naturally this contributed to an excess of Bell pilots and disproportionate flight time logged compared to the H-34 drivers. To correct this imbalance, for some time management had been preparing a few of us old timers both physically and mentally for reversion to the H-34 program that would continue until the end of the year. Not many were considered and ultimately selected for the switch. After the first batch of more senior pilots transitioned, it was my turn. Even though I was not overly enthusiastic about such a move, I had little control over the mandate. Moreover, there was a need. Certainly, our fledgling union, although already collecting Udorn chapter dues, was not firmly established and had little or no power at this time to negotiate such a thorny issue as bidding on slots and seniority rights. As a salve to ease the switch, I was informed that we would be flying more, earning more money (well over 3,000 dollars a month), and helping to satisfy the need for double crew pilots. Moreover, the return to throttle twisters was not considered permanent. As required, we would likely still fly the Huey on two-pilot Special Missions. I did not envision flying normal work in the Huey. Unable to accept the inevitable, I could imagine a rather large fishhook tearing at the corner of my mouth.

Flying first with Wayne Webb in Hotel-30, and then with Phil Goddard in Hotel-75 on the 14th, I commenced transition training in the UH-34D. After contending with the increased cockpit division of attention required to closely monitor engine

tachometer instruments, while flying an throttle-twisting, RPM-sensitive helicopter, I did not feel entirely comfortable during my two flights that totaled one hour and forty minutes. Initially, my thousands of hours amassed in the machine counted for little after flying the Bell, where comparable cockpit attention was not required. Also, re-acquaintance with judging differences in aircraft size was a bit difficult to manage at first. Still, like riding a bicycle, I possessed the necessary touch and feel to perform maneuvers to standard and had not forgotten all the emergency procedures. All that was required was a little study of the handbook and time in the machine to feel comfortable.

The next day I rode with Company Standards pilot Wayne Webb for less than an hour in Hotel-59. During the period we conducted normal and emergency maneuvers necessary to satisfy the required transition proficiency check. Wayne released me for upcountry work. Since H-34 pilots were badly needed, I probably could not have failed the check ride even if I tried, mainly because Webb did not enjoy flying upcountry.

I had a couple of days at home before leaving for Military Region Two to reacquaint myself with how to fly the H-34 in the mountains.

During the previous week there had been some rain that resulted in the klong between the yard and road overtopping and flooding the front yard. Dirt the landlord had deposited proved inadequate to cope with the flooding. It would take other more drastic means. The tin roof still leaked in the driving rain, necessitating repositioning our bed.

Pete, who was developing fast now sat in his jumper and could eat crackers. He was able to walk around the playpen while holding onto the sides, and did not fuss as much as he did while only standing.

A Filipino ground mechanic's wife, Mrs. Jabarina, who lived down the street toward the Nong Khai Highway, had started a playschool for Air America youngsters. Attended by multi-racial children, we thought it would be beneficial for Ricky to associate for three hours a day with fourteen other children his age and learn something useful. Not used to other children, he cried when I dropped him off on Tuesday.

UH-34D FUN

Late morning on Wednesday, 17 September, flying old Hotel-15, Scratch Kanach, Flight Mechanic Leonida, and I departed Udorn for Long Tieng. Although still attempting to acquire my former fine touch for the H-34, Scratch was technically the IP. However, as was his usual method, he casually and somewhat stoically sat in the left seat with his left foot propped firmly on the window ledge, while I attempted to satisfactorily perform in the hills and on the Plain of Jars. I never was quite sure whether he did this to instill confidence in me or was just bored. Kanach never wavered in his excellence, flying any machine well, and appearing more confident in the H-34 than I was, but beneath his calm exterior, I wondered about the man's real feelings. But this was part of the Kanach mystique and universal reputation as one of, if not the best, helicopter pilot in our group.

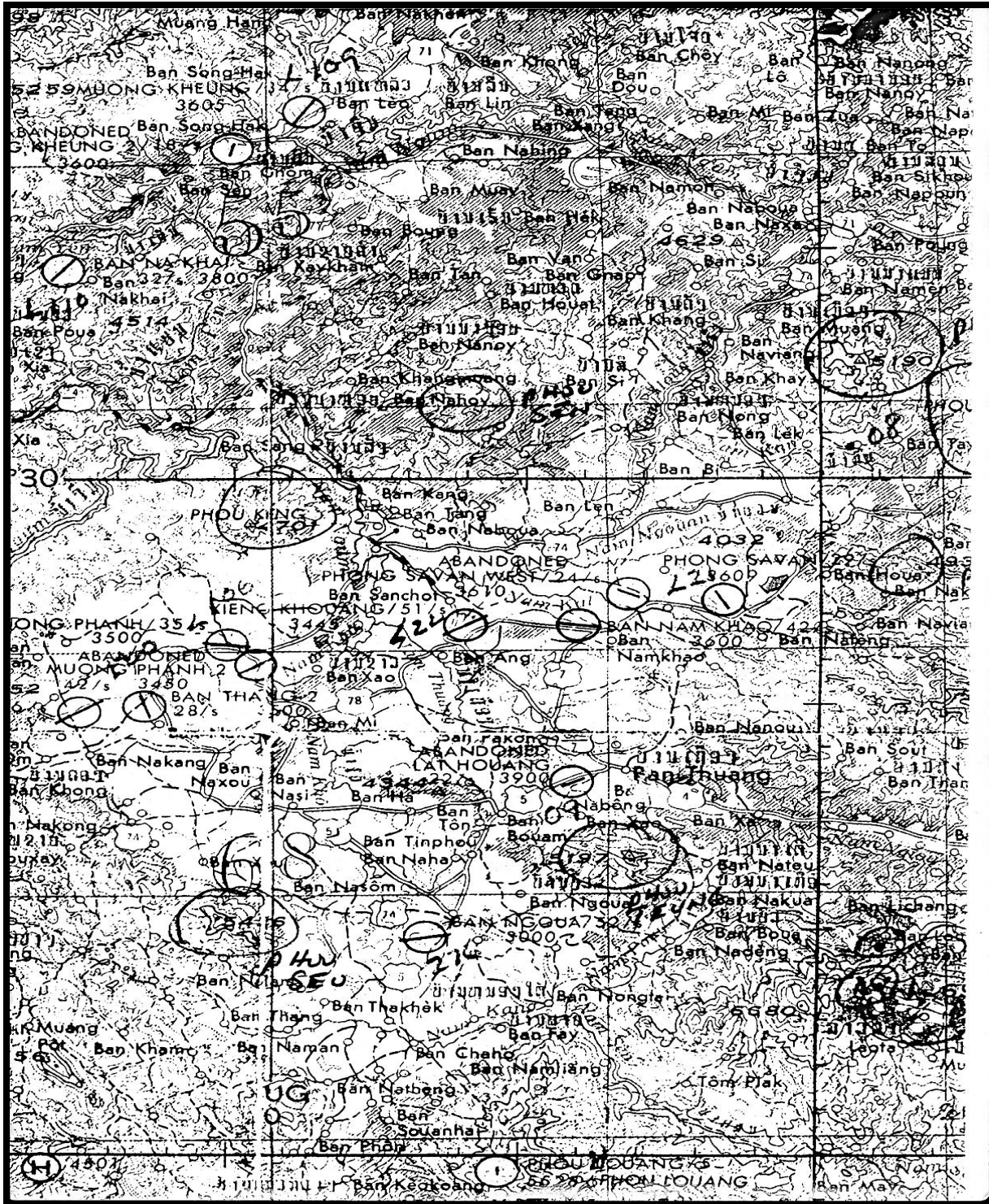
As customary, we worked for the 713 Customer, but generally took it easy at first, paying strict attention to throttle manipulation rather than heavy loads. Since it had been two years from the time when some of us had flown the H-34 upcountry, the customer did not push us to carry heavy loads. Beside the considerable difference in throttle manipulation, right from the beginning I missed the Huey's superior high-altitude performance, speed, and maneuverability. Some ill-

informed, naive individuals would maintain that all helicopters were the same. This might be true when considering principals of flight, but not when dealing with real time actual and varied emergencies. Each model displayed unique characteristics and differences, and each aircraft had its own procedures.

Complicating our present situation was the fact that we were currently flying a reciprocating engine helicopter as opposed to a Bell turbine engine machine. Emergency procedures for these engines and helicopters were vastly different. Of course, I had always been able to cope with emergencies, and an actual "moment of truth" would have to be addressed when encountered. As fate decreed, I did not have long to wait.

By this time, walking line abreast across open fields, our motivated troops had already moved through and perfunctorily cleared the old Japanese-French built Xieng Khouang PSP airstrip (L-22 at the town of Ban Ang), while moving toward the southern foothills of Phou Keng (TG9958). Located four miles northwest of Lima-22, the prominent mountain overlooked parts of Route-7 and commanded northern and eastern areas leading toward Moung Soui. Therefore, the capture of Phou Keng, a strategic hill, was considered a primary objective and important facet in any attempt to recapture Lima-108. Considered relatively safe, other helicopters crews like us were already flying in the area.

It was fortunate that L-22 was firmly in our hands, for late on the 15th, Hobo-16, flying a battle-damaged A-1H pilot searching for a friendly forced landing site, radioed a Mayday. Nikki Fillipi, who was headed back to Long Tieng for the evening, heard the distress call and directed the Air Force pilot to LL. In addition, while Fillipi headed for Lima Lima, he cautioned the pilot of a bomb crater's presence in the center of the 5,200-foot pierced steel planking (PSP) strip. Spotting the bomb crater during roll out, Lieutenant Colonel Al Martin



The Xieng Khouang (near Ban Ang and named L-22 or Lima Lima) airstrip was located at the geographical and road network center of the Plain of Jars. A strategic position, it was originally built and garrisoned by French forces during the First Indochina War.

created a ground speed brake by sucking up the landing gear, producing maximum friction to slow and stop his airplane. Zorro commanding officer Martin was almost immediately recovered by Captain Fillipi and flown to Long Tieng. The plane was later lifted to Long Tieng by a CH-64A crew, where mechanics conducted field repairs, after which the machine was flown to Nakhon Phanom.

Despite the battle damage incurred by the Hobo pilot, A-1 and jet plane drivers continued supporting action in and around the Plain of Jars. Mid-afternoon on 16 September FAG Blue Moon reported TIC near Phou So. Air strikes discouraged further enemy attacks and the position was declared viable within an hour.

A Hobo flight reported a hundred KBA near Phou Khout, northeast of Mounng Soui.

Late in the day two 12.7mm AAA guns were destroyed and two others damaged along Route-7, well east of the Ban Ban Valley. Another flight caught and destroyed a vehicle in the open near the town of Nong Het (LS-03).

The bomb crater on the Lima Lima strip was filled in and soon became a forward supply base for the Plain of Jars operation. Our larger planes began flying in fuel, bullets, beans, and bandages, and all manner of items necessary for site defense and movement to the front. To enhance the number of sorties and tactical air support, a few T-28 pilots began working out of the site. On a good day the planes could be rapidly loaded with bombs, bullets, and rockets, and quickly turned around.

Observing merit in this operation and wanting to provide more tactical air support to Vang Pao, AIRA officer Bill Keeler went to Nakhon Phanom to discuss increasing A-1 sorties by having Skyraider pilots land at L-22 for ordnance loading and fueling. Because of the distance involved, two sorties per

aircraft was the daily norm out of Nakhon Phanom. Heavily loaded with stores, it generally required two hours to arrive in the Barrel, loiter about an hour, and then fly an hour and a half to "Home Plate."

Despite Keeler's entreaties to implement the plan, rear echelon Air Force leaders at the base refused to consider it, claiming they were unconcerned with increasing the number of sorties. Moreover, a maintenance officer insisted that only a certain number of missions could be flown before starters needed to be changed. If sorties were appreciably increased, he would run out of starters. That was the sort of war run in parts of Laos.¹

Although now outside looking in, we transferees to the H-34 program were still considered an integral part of The Alternate team. We continued to RON at the Long Tieng hostel, exclusively working the 713 contract. This had the distinct benefit of communal evening dialogue with Customer and Raven FACs in order to update each other regarding the current, but fluid situation.

Mike Jarina, after two days working in Military Region Three, flying Hotel-75 with Flight Mechanic Laveriza, was reassigned to the PDJ operation out of The Alternate. Upon arrival, he began shuttling troops from San Louang (LS-41) to the Xieng Khouang area to cement our gains there and support the Phou Keng offensive. He also worked east at Padong and Khang Kho

¹Segment Sources:
HH-53B History.
Mike Ferguson, *Air America and the War in Laos, 1959-1974*, University of Texas at Dallas, 2010, 75-76.
Nikki Fillipi Interview.
Extracts from ABCCC Reports.
VH Gallacher, United States Air Force Oral History Program, Interview of Lieutenant Colonel Billie R. Keeler, 43, 02/05/73 at Eglin AFB, Florida-obtained at Maxwell AFB by the Author 08/31/94.

in support of the Xieng Khouang Ville operation. Before securing at Site-20A for the night, Mike logged fifty-two landings.

We continued flying in our quest to reacquaint ourselves with the vagaries of the H-34. Working both north and east, we had not yet been challenged to land at the highest elevations or particularly tight pads--not until later in the day when an emergency exfil was scheduled to retrieve a wounded trooper from the heights of Phou Nok Kok. Enemy still located in the adjoining hills and east of the mountain in the Ban Ban Valley offered stiff resistance and were loath to relinquish the entire area to our forces. Consequently, our requirement to extract sick, lame, and lazy types never ceased until termination of the PDJ operation during early 1970.

Apparently, Scratch was satisfied with my performance. During the day he acquired another H-34 and I was left solely in charge of Hotel-15.

After aborting a flight to San Tiau, Jarina continued working around the Plain. Conducting one more landing than the previous day, he shuttled troops and materiel to Lima-22 and Lat Houang, where supplies were being stockpiled at both sites. Relatively unfamiliar with the Plain of Jars operation, and where higher flight levels were considered necessary, he picked up minor battle damage.

He also worked in the Lima-03 area, where people were busily investigating and looting caves. Interested, he briefly shut down and walked around observing. He noted individuals removing cases of poor-quality Chinese-manufactured thread, bicycles, grease guns, and the prized sniper rifles. Unable to carry items home, he acquired only a rubberized raincoat covered in dried blood.

Just like during the first Xieng Khouang Ville operation, he discovered a small desk with drawers that had been removed

from a hospital complex. Inside one drawer was an inch-thick sheaf of lined tablet paper containing what looked like Lao writing. Thinking it might provide useful information, he hauled the item to Alternate, where he found an interested Customer. Two days later the same Customer informed him that the papers were a valuable source of enemy casualty reports in the region.

Friday morning, unconstrained by another soul in my cockpit, I flew almost ten hours. By then the high ground southeast at Phou Sani, and at Phou San (UG0863), northwest of Khang Khay, were in the government camp. In most cases, the Pathet Lao had retreated east leaving substantial booty behind, including AAA guns. The few Vietnamese remaining at Phou Keng had been ordered by their leaders not to leave the position except on their shields. Therefore, the offensive there stalled for two days, requiring the assistance of additional troops. The mountaintop was secured and firmly in our hands by the 24th.

Conducting forty landings, I worked the PDJ most of the day shuttling troops around to ensure safety for Ambassador Godley's visit on Saturday, the 20th. Late in the day, Scratch and I teamed up to move troops to newly created defensive outposts in the Ban Na area, where backdoor enemy probes were anticipated. While hovering over trees north of the strip, I heard a sharp explosion to my rear. I called Scratch who was working just to the west to ask if he was in a position to have seen anything. Receiving a negative, I assumed that the blast was caused by my downwash impacting a grenade or mine strung in the trees as a perimeter defense measure. I had not heard of enemy patrols in the area, so a fused RPG round was unlikely.

Jarina was sent east into Zone Steel to work the entire day out of Mounk Mok. ²

² Mike Jarina Interviews.

SIGHTSEEING VISITORS AND PICNICS

The next morning, I ferried Vang Pao, his officers, and guards, to the Lat Sen area to join Ambassador Godley, his staff, and various high-level types arriving to show the flag.

Since the beginning of the offensive, emphasis concentrated on the northeast portion of the Plain of Jars to drive the Vietnamese east toward the border and deny those located on the western portion supplies to mount a sustained counteroffensive. It had only been during the last two days that the northwestern drive had reached Phou Keng, and that effort was now temporarily stalled. During the rapid movement north, contested areas like at Moung Phanh and at other enemy pockets had been bypassed for later attention. Although largely surrounded, the enemy had not capitulated, and Moung Soui was still considered in enemy hands.

Even though our forces controlled the southern Plain and much of the strategic high ground on both sides at Phou Seu and Phou Theung, I thought it a bit premature to allow high level officials onto the Plain of Jars. Besides being potentially dangerous, the visit also diverted air and ground assets to provide security and detracted from the overall mission, the mop-up, and imminent push on Moung Soui. Still, Godley, in overall charge of civilian and military interests in Laos, controlled the all-important purse strings, and actually sanctioned Vang Pao's latest action. Specifically, without his approval there would have been no State Department support for a PDJ operation. Perhaps stimulating the early visit was the fact that no one was particularly optimistic that we would hold the PDJ for long.

Since Xieng Khouang Ville was not entirely secure, the official delegation viewed the western part of the valley from

Lat Houang. However, the itinerary included a quick-over flight of the flattened town, plus a visit to a cluster of jars.

During the morning while dignitaries were observing and still pressing the flesh, I was assigned to take several soldiers northeast to a high site. Before departing, as was my custom, and knowing that there was always someone who wanted to weasel a ride from a position, I asked the loader if he wanted anyone to return from the site. Negative. Even though I was still a little dubious about carrying heavy loads to unimproved high elevations before becoming completely comfortable with the larger machine and intricate throttle manipulations, I was happy to obtain the work, for I had thought I would have to standby on the ground and wait until the visit was over.

After unloading, I prepared to lift off the pad when a "red beret" lieutenant attempted to board. As per orders from the loader, I explicitly informed my Flight Mechanic not to allow anyone on board the ship. Leonida passed this information to the lieutenant. Within seconds, my agitated crewmember came back on the intercom saying the man was very angry. Employing a trick I used in the past to calm and prevent trouble with people who wanted rides, I instructed Leonida to convey to the lieutenant that I would return later and pick him up. Already in an unsettled state, perhaps previously falling for such a ploy, the man refused to accept the offer. Losing self-control or hoping to intimidate me, he grabbed a rifle from a soldier and pointed the weapon at me, causing Leonida to fear I would be shot. Although familiar with similar incidents mostly involving FAN officers and other Air America H-34 pilots, to my knowledge, I never had any person--Meo, FAR, or FAN--pull this stunt on me. Furthermore, I adamantly refused to tolerate demanding individuals. Moreover, using weapons to threaten a pilot was

strictly forbidden, usually harshly dealt with for those under VP's control.

Now it was my turn to react. I raised Hotel-15 to a high hover and directed the aircraft and the huge right tire close to the gunman's head. Besides creating major rotor downwash, resulting in a dense cloud of choking, blinding dust, the addition of the hovering beast looming over the "red beret's" head must have presented a formidable and intimidating deterrent. We would soon see which threat survived the test. Seriously outmatched, the young man's intelligence was not entirely an issue, and the situation immediately developed into a standoff that slightly favored me if he kept his finger off the trigger. Therefore, without knowing if I was still in his sights, I rapidly turned 180 degrees, dove off the hill, and assumed a heading for the dignitary site.

From the beginning of our work at Long Tieng VP always told us through his Case Officers to inform him if we experienced serious trouble with passengers-that he would handle it. ³ I was embarrassed to bother Vang Pao during all the festivities in progress, but still quite angry, wanted the lieutenant's fanny. In addition, I had to set the record straight should I be unfairly implicated in the incident. I finally managed to isolate the general and briefly related what happened on the hill. It was obvious that VP was too busy to deal with my problems, he merely grunted, flashed me an enigmatic smile and walked toward the visitors. Despite the rebuff, the brief discussion achieved a desired catharsis and I cooled considerably. I never heard what transpired, if anything.

³ Depending on the seriousness of the infraction, this normally resulted in the death of the perpetrator.

Heading home after departing the Plain of Jars, Godley et. al. stopped at Sam Tong, where Blaine Jensen purchased lunch for the group at the hostel.

Mrs. Godley subsequently talked with her husband about his visit to one of the largely unknown wonders of the world. Impressed, she invited wives of the dignitaries, and prominent wives of top Lao officials, to join her for a picnic on the Plain of Jars. Citing security issues, except for the picnic, attempts to dissuade the ladies from conducting the visit failed. Such trips did not constitute a precedent, for prior to major Civil War action, American families drove their carriages to battlefields to party and view impending actions.

The ladies completed their outing, viewed the jars, and, with assistance of careful handlers avoided any major incidents like stepping on a mine. On their return to Vientiane, they stopped for lunch at Sam Tong, where Jensen again treated the group. For a time, that marked the end of sightseeing for politicians and their wives, allowing the war to resume its normal progression.

After talking to Vang Pao, I returned to work and finished the day at dark.

Jarina now had another pilot in the cockpit, Brian Johnson. During a full day, he hauled Meo refugees from Khang Kho (LS-204) to Pha Ka (LS-51), three miles north of Moung Phun (LS-37), another early AID site located southwest of Sam Tong. In anticipation of a quick return of the enemy, the crew of Hotel-75 continued hauling civilians and their goods out of Xieng Khouang Ville, Lat Houang, and the Xieng Khouang to the Moung Phun area.

Recalled late, after a one-hour night flight, Jarina secured at the Air America parking ramp.

As originally briefed when transitioning to the H-34, I continued to fly the Huey when a specific occasion, like a double crew mission, was programmed. Marking the first time since joining the Company, to my knowledge, except briefly for the "G" model Bell, line pilots were sanctioned to fly both model helicopters. ⁴ Switching aircraft the same day was not the norm--yet. That would soon occur when management had confidence and were satisfied that we old timers could successfully handle the task.

On Sunday the 21st, with an important mission looming, I left Hotel-15 on the parking ramp below the hostel and joined the crew of 96W, consisting of Nikki Fillipi and Andy Anderson, for a Houa Phan Province exfiltration. Most of these Special Missions required more than two helicopters. Therefore, since our Bell fleet had diminished to a pitiful level, Bells were supplemented with H-34s. This created no problem other than allowing for the H-34s slower cruise speed. Like ship convoys in the North Atlantic during World War Two that assigned the slowest vessels to lead, we had easily solved this problem long before by assigning the SAR H-34 to lead the pack.

Withdrawal of the Route-6 road watch team was from a relatively familiar area at UH910057, close to the Nam Han, eight miles southwest of Sam Neua Town, and four miles southeast of Hong Non (LS-86). This was an early forward site lost in early 1965, at the cost of several PARU and a badly wounded, gut-shot Tony Poe. After beating the brush in the area around the Route-6/68 junction and gathering critical information regarding enemy movement south toward the Ban Ban Valley, the

⁴ Training requirements dictated that management types like Knight and Goddard maintain qualifications in both the Bell and H-34 helicopters, but they rarely flew upcountry by themselves.

team backtracked to the vicinity of a still friendly Meo village and called for extraction.

Our group mustered at Houei Tong Ko (LS-184), the only remaining launch pad in the province providing both security and fuel. A direct flight to the landing zone was forty miles east-northeast, but, as is often the case, to confuse observers on the ground and not compromise the area for future missions, we undertook a circuitous flight to the target. Then, with the team on board and fifty percent of the mission complete, we returned to Site-184. ⁵ Attesting to enemy control in the province, a necessity for circumnavigation to the landing zone, one hour and thirty-five minutes were logged in the denied area.

At the completion of the mission, I deadheaded to Alternate on Hotel-44, an H-34 portion of the armada. As only A-1 turbine engine fuel was available at Tong Ko, we were obliged to land at Bouam Long to take on a drum of 115/145 gasoline.

The next morning, I returned to the Plain of Jars shuttling supplies into Lima-22 (the site became known to pilots as Lima Lima or LL) and supporting measures to move on Phou Keng and Moung Soui. Recalled that evening, I arrived after dark, feeling more confident about piloting the H-34 again. Moreover, I hated to leave the upcountry scene, particularly since I was having so much fun.

Part of my enjoyment involved pawing through war booty. On a trip to Lat Houang, I discovered that even more interesting booty began arriving at the strip from Xieng Khouang Ville Valley caves. Except for a Meo flintlock rifle that Vint Lawrence gave me years before while shepherding Meo and Black Tai refugees from the border northern region, I had collected

⁵ A mission was never considered one hundred percent successful until all parties returned safely to the starting point.

few native artifacts. I made up for this acquisitive tendency during this and future RONs by appropriating several items at various times to include: a set of Chinese-manufactured field phones, a Chinese gas mask, and other items of Chinese origin. On other days I acquired two green bronze temple drums, a camphorwood waste basket, various rolls of Chinese thread, and a treadle type Crosley sewing machine, similar to what my mother used when I was young. Dulling the gong's resonance, but not detracting from the intrinsic value, the largest of the verdigris-covered drums had a jagged shrapnel tear that negatively affected its tone when struck. The drums and basket were clearly marked for Vang Pao, but I believed that by now he had sufficient items and could spare a few for an old timer. During a booty gathering mission, CASI porter pilot Chuck Taylor landed and claimed a cute but deadly knee mortar for his bar in Vientiane. I thought I might have some trouble transporting the sewing machine from the Air America helicopter ramp to my house, but without comment, the machine was loaded on a Company bus and promptly delivered. To my knowledge, the machine was never used by my wife and was eventually discarded.

With information gleaned from our exfil mission team south of Sam Neua, an Agency Weekly Summary indicated that substantial enemy presence and resistance had resulted in slowing our little guys' offensive movement north of the Plain of Jars. This, plus the existence of well defended enemy positions, limited success in seizing all high ground objectives.

"...Several small but sharp communist counterattacks have kept government troops off balance in the northwest portion of the Plaine and in the vital area near the Route-7/71 [Nong Pet] junction. The government hopes to hold this latter area as long as possible to forestall enemy reinforcement from North Vietnam.

Time is on the communists' side. Heavy rains, which have considerably reduced the enemy's ability to supply front-line troops, will begin to taper off in the next few weeks, permitting them to bring in fresh troops from North Vietnam if they choose to do so. Increasing weariness of government troops, who have been on the offensive without relief for over a month, may also become a factor in the enemy's favor..." ⁶

On 22 September, at a choke point along Route-7 east of the Nong Pet junction, our extended units encountered the first serious enemy challenge. Moreover, there were disconcerting reports of the 312th Vietnamese Division moving reinforcements into Laos, and a logistical buildup in the ten-mile buffer border zone east of Nong Het, where the enemy operated with impunity.

Deep caves proliferating along the periphery of Military Region Two's eastern mountainous terrain served as an important alternative, shielding major headquarters and top-ranking officials from allied bombing throughout the entire war. Similar enclosures also served as prisons and provided adequate sanctuary for terrified civilians evading the bombing campaigns. Northeast of Khang Khay Meo guerrillas entered an abandoned cave at Phou Sani, which was considered the regional Pathet Lao headquarters. The well-developed complex contained a radio station, large amounts of Pathet Lao currency, and propaganda manufacturing equipment. ⁷

To the southwest, coordinated with the Phou Keng operation, a government unit moved to a position five miles closer to Moung Soui.

⁶ CIA Daily Bulletin, 09/22/69. Laos: The government offensive in north Laos is still stalled as enemy resistance stiffens.

⁷At one time my Huey was cubed out with burlap sacks stuffed with virtually worthless Pathet Lao kip, which I delivered to Vientiane.



Areas of the late September conflict north of the Plain of Jars.
CIA Map, 09/22/69.

Wayne Knight would not be denied an opportunity to experience work on the Plain of Jars. On the 23rd, he conducted a semi-annual line (route) check with Dave Ankerberg (DOH 05/01/68) in the 20 Alternate area. He did the same on the same day with Harvey Potter in Hotel-39.

After a night at the hostel, on Wednesday the CPH rode with Brian Johnson (05/31/66), another Saigon Bell pilot who elected to escape the clutches of CPH Hitchman. Like other transferees from South Vietnam, Brian had to first pay his dues by flying the H-34 until a Bell slot opened up.

During the day they worked the Lima Lima strip. It marked Knight's first indication that the strip was open for business. While there, he learned that a hot landing zone on the eastern foothills near Route-4 had become a "bone of contention" and a source of conflict between some pilots and the LL Customer. Claiming the site was too dangerous for helicopter work, a couple of diehard pilots absolutely refused to venture into the position. Wayne discussed this with the angry Case Officer, who insisted that the landing point was in defilade, and the enemy position was located to the west of the landing zone. It was only when pilots departed and flew in front of the site that they were spotted by a forward observer and subjected to mortar fire. He maintained that if helicopter pilots departed in the same direction from which they approached, then the enemy would not know of their presence and no mortars would be launched.

To investigate the flap, Wayne joined Robbie and the Case Officer in PFJ. Robbie dropped Wayne and the Agency man at the site. In order to test the theory, they had Robbie return to LL for cargo. He was to conduct multiple trips, avoiding the front of the landing zone. The process worked; there was no incoming enemy fire.

To further assess the concept, over his HT-2 radio, the Case Officer asked Robbie to fly around the front of the site while he and Knight observed from behind the safety of gigantic three-meter-tall boulders. Almost immediately, Wayne heard a whistle, and mortar rounds began falling from the direction the Case Officer had indicated. During the twenty-minute barrage, indirect fire was blind, but considered very accurate and would certainly have impacted any aircraft at the site. ⁸

When firing ceased, Robbie was instructed to land, and they departed for Lima Lima without incident.

At the strip, a couple of angry pilots told Wayne he was crazy for what he had done, but they were unable to argue with the success achieved. As a result, normal operations were resumed at the site and the pair of reluctant pilots shamed.

As the CPH was dealing with a Customer problem, friendly troops were moving closer to Moung Soui. Making contact with the enemy, FAG Blue Moon reported TIC near the site. Three A-1 Firefly flights were dispatched in support.

As reported by FAG Pogo, troops moving toward Moung Soui from San Luang required help.

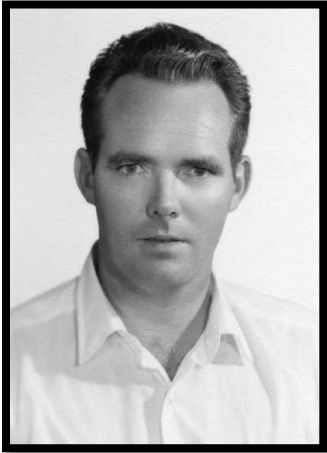
Peacock relayed that enemy concentrations were forming near Phou Vieng (LS-06) in the mountains south of Phou Cum (LS-50).

Enemy was reported well to the north of Site-50 at Houei Thong (LS-196) inside Luang Prabang Province.

Patrols with Yellow Dog and Hot Plate near Ban Ban required assistance.

The following morning, Wayne continued Johnson's initial line check. That evening he departed for Udorn, considering the

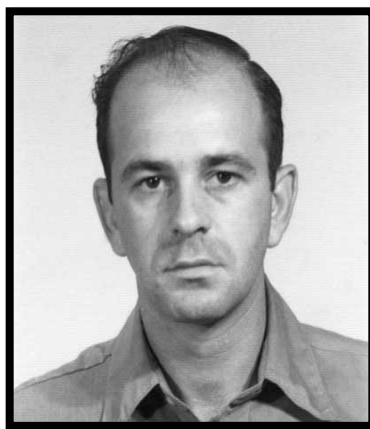
⁸ With a forward observer radioing instructions, the enemy was extraordinarily accurate firing preregistered mortars.



Dave Kendall



Harvey Potter



Hal Miller

three days working the Plain of Jars interesting, incident-filled, and a largely satisfying experience.

During the day FAGs Pogo and Black Lion reported TIC and were supported by A-1 pilots.

Other pilots began arriving from Saigon. On succeeding days toward the end of the month, he flew two training flights with Dave Kendall (DOH 08/09/66) in Hotel-68; this was followed with Hal Miller (05/29/68) in Hotel-53.

Knight was away from the Udorn facility from 30 September until 17 October. ⁹

JARINA IN THE NORTHWEST

On the day I departed Military Region Two, Mike was scheduled to work in the far northwest. After deadheading to Ban Houei Sai via Luang Prabang on C-123 374, and to Lima-25 on CASI Baron 13Z, he took control of Hotel-30 with Flight Mechanic Baccay. Assigned AID missions in the Xieng Lom/Sayaboury area, he flew south to Ban Pak Hop, nestled in a bend in the Mekong River seventeen miles northeast of Xieng Lom. After proceeding to Site-69A, he flew east and south to Lima-23, where he conducted missions to Ban Na Deua on Route-1, thirty miles south-southwest of Sayaboury town. He worked another site in the province before the long trip back to Houei Sai, where the crew RON at the Air America hostel.

⁹Segment Sources:

Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 216.

Victor Anthony, *The War in Northern Laos*, 319-320.

Tom Ahern, *Undercover Armies*, 328.

Blaine Jensen Letters.

Mike Jarina Interviews.

Agency Weekly Summary, 7, Lao government forces are facing heavier resistance, 09/26/69.

EW Knight Emails, 10/09/00, 10/10/00, 11/20/00, 07/06/01.

EW Knight September 1969 Flights. Extracts from ABCCC Reports.

Tuesday morning, when released for flight, Mike proceeded upriver to the Yao settlement of Ban Nam Keung. From there he conducted missions eight miles east to the Van Pak Len (LS-267) area. Then he continued inland to the Agency base at Nam Yu (LS-118A), where Tony Poe and his cohorts reigned supreme. Other missions took him west to Moung Mounge (LS93), Ban Na Woua a few miles north of Nam Yu, and Ban Vieng (LS-135). He then recovered at Houei Sai with a total of twenty-five landings.

Mike resumed 713 work on the 24th. Assigned missions out of Nam Yu, he supplied teams to the north, around Ta Fa (LS-216), and Team Mai north and west of Nam Tha. Later he was sent to work at Xieng Lom.

Thursday morning two Special Missions were conducted twelve miles east of Site-69A. This was followed by work out of Houei Sai. After a run to QD2321, in the Team Mai/Scope 14 area Mike recovered at Site-25 for the evening.

On the 26th, he relocated to Nam Yu, where he was relieved. He returned to Udorn on Air America Porter 97X and C-123 555. ¹⁰

OPERATIONS IN MR-3

While Vang Pao's diversionary Plain of Jars operation awaited improved weather conditions, an Agency-advised and sponsored Special Guerrilla Unit (SGU) was tasked to probe forty-five miles east of Lima-39 toward Ban Tangvay, a town located along Route-111, eighteen miles south-southeast of Phalane and leading into enemy-held Moung Phine, a key town on the infiltration corridor. The town and adjoining strip had been unoccupied by government forces since 1965. Bad weather was not an overriding factor on the low lands as it was in the northern

¹⁰ Mike Jarina Interviews.

Military Region Two mountains, and little enemy resistance was encountered in the area. Consequently, the FAR unit moved into the town toward the end of July. Soon after establishing a defensive perimeter and consolidating gains, the irregular company was reinforced by airlift. The Junction City Junior operation was about to commence with what would eventually involve 900 men and numerous assets. In the northwest, Savannakhet RLG forces successfully moved into territory south and east of Ban Moung Phalane southwest (L-61A), sister site to Ban Moung Phalane located on Route-9.

Under an allied air umbrella, units slowly probed twenty-five miles up the road toward Route-9/23, a junction marking the western portion of the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Shadowed by mountain ranges a short distance further east, the town of Ban Moung Phine (later recorded as LS-300), had been an enemy garrison and regional Pathet Lao headquarters since the RLG relinquished the area during 1962. As a further incentive to conduct the operation, there were also questionable reports from forward intelligence teams that American POWs were incarcerated in the area.

By the end of August, with friendly air softening enemy resolve to resist the SGU movement, what was first conceived as a pragmatic attempt to merely sweep the area, morphed into a more ambitious three battalion offensive. It was envisioned to require a six-day operation, to include interdicting and securing parts of Route-23, seizing the Trail junction, the town of Ban Moung Phine, and, if possible, marching deeper into enemy-controlled areas toward the Tchepone logistical and marshalling center for goods transported south on the trails.

Supported by USAF helicopters, Raven and Nail forward air controllers, flareships, A-1 attack aircraft, and RLAFF T-28s, the operation commenced on 1 September. Despite being positioned

by helicopters at various landing zones, at first, enemy resistance limited friendly gains, but, discouraged by air strikes, the under-strength defenders soon relinquished territory. By the fifth, two battalions reached and secured the road junction, and by the seventh units entered the outskirts of Moung Phine.

Paramount to implementing the offensive's near-term objectives, former off-limits bombing restrictions at the junction and town, intended to spare collateral damage to thousands of area civilians, were lifted. Easing existing rules of engagement, the subsequent pounding of Moung Phine allowed the bulk of irregular troops to enter the town on Sunday, the 13th. Totally surprised, most PL fled, abandoning weapons, considerable intelligence information, and leaving civilians with questions of what action to pursue.

While additional SGU battalions arrived and consolidated positions at Site-300, Mike Jarina departed Tango-08 for Savannakhet in Hotel-75 with Flight Mechanic Leveriza. Diverted to Thakhet's remote strip (L-40A), Mike boarded troops for Grove Jones number two (LS-141A), almost fifty miles north and twelve miles east to VE4895. After ferrying troops to Thakhet, he recovered at Lima-39.

On 16 September Mike participated in the operation code named Junction City Junior. Working half a day, he flew to Moung Phalane southwest (LS-61A), located on Route-9 forty-seven miles east of Savannakhet. After he returned to Lima-39, the Customer directed him eighty-two miles east to Moung Phine, where he shut down for a short period. Helicopter operations were still underway at the site to remove several hundred refugees from enemy clutches, first to Moung Phalane and then to Savannakhet. The operation also preceded a plan to spray the rice crop with herbicide on the 24th. However, tangible objections from local

commanders at Moung Phine, AIRA at Savannakhet, caused the defoliation plan to be canceled.

Used to working in Military Region Two, but now in the H-34 program, I was subject to being shunted anywhere in Laos. On the 25th, I deadheaded to Savannakhet on 78G, only to impatiently standby for a mission that never materialized.

The following day, having accomplished nothing except viewing a lot of countryside, I returned home via Thakhet on CASI Porter XW-PCL.

After resting, refitting, and rotating fresh troops to Moung Phine, with high ground to the north occupied, toward the end of September, the operation morphed into a more ambitious plan. Perhaps stimulated by Vang Pao's rapid and successful movement on the PDJ under the umbrella of rolling air strikes, between the Lima-39 RLA military staff and Agency unit, the victory prompted grandiose visions that Moung Phine could be held indefinitely by government forces. Moreover, the Moung Phine base could serve as a launch point for a search and destroy raid to sever Route-9 and destroy goods stockpiled in the Tchepone Valley.

Supported by FACs, an SGU battalion began proceeding sixteen miles northeast up Route-9 toward the logistical waypoint located in the Tchepone Valley and the 9/91 junction. During the clearing action, an abundance of ordnance and crew served weapons was uncovered and either removed or destroyed. Moving swiftly, early in October, the unit reached the 9/914 junction. Less than three miles short of their targeted objective, they paused to await reinforcements. Presenting a concentrated, static target for the enemy proved unwise. Counterattacking Vietnamese hit the battalion hard and drove the men back several miles into the mountains. In addition, SGU companies were ejected from high ground to the southwest

overlooking Route-9. That action marked the beginning of the end for the ambitious Moung Phine-Tchepone operation. Moung Phine was outflanked and Tangvay captured. With their rear base lost, government troops withdrew.

Although only lasting two months, Junction City Junior contributed to the destruction of supply dumps in and around Moung Phine. It diverted Vietnamese troops and their supplies to the west, away from the process of operating and defending the Panhandle Trail supply system. Moreover, the annual food supply the communists depended on for sustenance had been disrupted. ¹¹

UPCOUNTRY

The day after my non-participation in Military Region Three, I was assigned upcountry work in Hotel-44 with Flight Mechanic Leonida. Switching to the UH-34D program not only involved becoming intimately familiar with the machine again, but also flying with unfamiliar Flight Mechanics for the first time, and working areas normally reserved for H-34 pilots. This involved 713 operations, but with Customers whom I was not familiar. Fortunately, Captain Bob Swartz (DOH 08/12/67) was along in the left seat, perhaps as my safety pilot. Bob was a congenial person who could brief me on current situations.

¹¹Segment Sources:
Ken Conboy, 218-220.
Victor Anthony, 316-317.
Tom Ahern, 359-360.
Pratt, *CHECO*, 105.
Mike Jarina Interviews.
CIA Bulletins, 08/30/69, Laos: Government forces in the south have recently captured an important town protecting the enemy's infiltration corridor to South Vietnam, 09/10, 15/69.
CIA Daily Bulletin, 10/15/69. Laos...in southern Laos enemy attacks have erased some government gains.
Bernard Nalty, 118-119-121.

After landing at Long Tieng, we were assigned to deliver troops to Sam Sen (LS-112) and proceed to Luang Prabang for unspecified work. Site-112 was located at 3,500 feet ASL in the Long Pot Range foothills, eighteen miles northwest of Alternate, on the west side of the Nam Ngum, and overlooking Xieng Dat to the north.

As the drive on Moung Soui approached the final stages, I assumed that my mission was either connected with alerting the natives to the push, mustering additional people for the operation, or reinforcing the area against potential enemy end runs toward our major bases. To the north of newly liberated Lima-22, the commanding heights of Phou Kheng had recently been occupied, limiting the Vietnamese ability to shunt forces along Route-7 toward the Site-108 area. With only one estimated enemy battalion still located in the Moung Soui environs, opposed by several irregular companies poised forward of the western Vang Pao line, it was considered only a matter of time before the enemy capitulated. Since a majority of the PDJ was already in RLG hands, albeit thinly held, Moung Soui's seizure would mark total victory for Vang Pao and his mixed force army. Since static defense was not a strong point of the Meo warrior, and the enemy seemingly possessed untold resources, only time would tell how long the Plain of Jars would remain in government hands, and what kind of reaction the August offensive would perpetrate. ¹²

Years before the Plain of Jars operation was a concept, I had noted a few stone jars in the Long Pot hills. Since the composition was not like stones found in the immediate area, we speculated as to where they were quarried and how they were

¹²Ken Conboy, 216.
Victor Anthony, 315.

delivered to the site. Most people had no idea. Alternate Case Officer knowledgeable Vint Lawrence alleged that the hills in Chiang Mai, Thailand, offered the same type stone (originally thought to be sandstone) and that elephants likely dragged them hundreds of miles to Laos. If true, then it must have required a Herculean effort to place the heavy items thousands of feet above sea level.

Despairing of no personal visual record relating to my Lao experience, for posterity, I began avidly snapping pictures in 1968 with a camera I had acquired in Singapore while on a Kuala Lumpur fact-finding mission for the investors in Asian American. Too busy to land and not wanting to present an easy target for potential roving enemy patrols, except from the air, I lacked an opportunity to view the jars up close on the Plain of Jars. Therefore, I took advantage of our stop at Site-112 to examine, fondle, and photograph the ancient artifacts at my leisure. Bob had never seen the objects at the site before, and obtained as much enjoyment and satisfaction viewing them as I did that day.

After our cultural experience, we proceeded to Luang Prabang. With assigned work completed, our crew RON at the Air America Hostel.

Following Sunday assignments at Luang Prabang, because of the high priority accorded the Plain of Jars operation, we returned to Alternat for the night.

That same day Jarina deadheaded to Wattay Airport on C-123 613, where he transitioned to Hotel-75 with Flight Mechanic Nery. At the airport he picked up officers and a Requirements Office (RO) Customer intent on alerting and preparing troops for the impending push on Mounng Soui, and expected enemy activity in the region. He first stopped at the FAR-controlled site at the Phong Hong (LS-133) Route-13/15 junction, well below Vang Vieng. From there he flew north to the Ban Lee Two-LS-249 area, three



Lending perspective to the size, UH-34D Captain Bob Swartz stands beside two stone jars at Sam Sen (LS-112). Unlike many jars I had seen on the Plain of Jars, lids lay on the ground next to the jars. The Meo village is seen on a rise overlooking the rolling, short STOL grass strip.

Author Collection.



Another view of Bob Swartz and two stone jars at Site-112 against the backdrop of surrounding hills and morning clouds.

Author Collection.



Close-up of a jar's cavernous interior at Site-112.
Author Collection.



Side view of two ancient jars at Site-112. Curious Meo watch from their hilltop village.

Author Collection.

miles south of Moung Kassy. Boarding additional FAN staff, he was directed further north to another Ban Lee (LS-253) site overlooking part of Route-7, and then to the Phou Vieng (S-197) area of Route-7, ten miles west of the Sala Phou Khoun 7/13 junction. With the task complete, Mike returned the principals to Ban Na Then and Vientiane.

Thousands of refugees had been generated from the Plain of Jars operation, so with most goals and objectives on the PDJ accomplished well beyond anyone's expectations, and the rumor of an enemy division forming on the border, part of our mission in the H-34 program was to move Lao, Lao Theung, and Meo people out of harm's way to safer environs. Tantamount to a mini scorched earth policy, this effort was also calculated to satisfy Vang Pao's desire to deny the enemy human assets to exploit.

Weather was still sometimes a concern in Military Region Two, particularly in the Long Tieng bowl, where low clouds and fog often prevented early morning work. This was the case on the 29th, when I only flew a little more than half a day. The rest was welcome, for I was well over a hundred hours that month, something I had not done since 1965.

Jarina did not encounter the same problem with weather on the Vientiane area flatlands, and found Sam Tong open. Refugees had moved from the low ground around Xieng Dat and concentrated in the Phou Da Pho (LS-103) area. Therefore, conducting thirty-seven landings, Mike moved hundreds of people to established AID-supported sites.

On 30 September, as our guerrilla troops moved uncontested into Moung Soui proper and discovered that the enemy had departed days before, I continued shuttling goods and men into Lima Lima and to surrounding outposts.

Flying over ten hours and conducting fifty-three landings, Jarina had a very active day shuttling troops from the Xieng

Khouang Ville strip twelve miles east-southeast to the northern foothills of Phou Houat, located almost equidistant between Routes 72 and 42. With Route-7 under almost constant scrutiny and interdiction by AC-130 gunships and the new technology 2,000-pound laser guided bombs and AGM 12 Bullpup missiles, Vietnamese movement along that artery was drastically reduced. The alternative was Route-72 through the Xieng Khouang Ville Valley. Therefore, current defensive actions were calculated to plug that portion of the valley and enemy movement along toward the Ville and the Plain.

With the Lima-03 move complete, Mike was directed west to Phou Pha Langmou (LS-170), nine miles north of the Sala Phou Soung 7/13 road junction, approximately the same area where H-34 Captain Charlie Jones "bought the farm" during early March 1965. When Site-108 was discovered abandoned, there was some concern that remnants of the enemy battalion were evading or lurking in the local area. Therefore, Mike picked up a load of troops at Site-170 and headed southeast toward San Louang (LS-41). He deposited the ADC troops three miles south of Site-41 to comb and clear the area. Then he flew overhead Moung Soui to Phou So (LS-57) to shuttle fleeing refugees to Sam Tong for processing and relocation to southern sites.

Low cloud cover often necessitated flying from the Moung Soui area to Sam Tong at relatively low levels. There were two relatively "safe" routes available in marginal weather, a northern and a southern one. The southern route paralleled the Nam Ngum,¹³ while the northern route skirted the southwestern Plain of Jars and reentered gaps in the hills north of Ban Na.

¹³ During previous years when low clouds prevailed, I occasionally returned to Sam Tong late in the day, flying low level directly over the river.

One time, while flying on the northern route, Mike heard a report over the radio cautioning all aircraft to remain clear of the eastern edge of the Plain of Jars, as a laser release was imminent. Always curious, Mike flew in that direction for a look. As he closed on the hill grotto complex, an F-4 Phantom pilot commenced a bombing run. Prior to the drop, Mike spotted an orange beam of light illuminating terrain directly above the cave opening. Mike surmised that this was one of the first field applications of laser beam technology that heralded the so-called smart bomb era. As he was not supposed to be flying in the area, he wisely kept the sighting to himself. ¹⁴

Jarina's most enduring memory while participating in the PDJ operation occurred when the local people were still present in the fields. One day he saw several individuals dressed in traditional black clothing. As he approached for a better look, they stood still, bowing their heads with hats either on or off. He thought this strange until later learning that it was standard procedure in South Vietnam. When aircraft were observed overhead, instead of running and subjecting themselves to fire, they stood motionless attempting to look like a tree stump. ¹⁵

[Accumulated during eighteen actual flying days, plus three extra non-flying ones in the field], **"I flew 132 hours last month and it looks like it will be in that range for the rest of the year."**

Letter 10/05/69 Home.

¹⁴ Still in its infancy, smart bomb technology was introduced for theater combat testing to an Ubon, Thailand, based F-4D squadron in the spring of 1968.

¹⁵ Mike Jarina Interviews.

"...feeling is one of optimism. Having observed the rhythmic pattern of events over a period of years...what now is different is that we are in the aftermath of unprecedented military achievements by the forces of Vang Pao. We must now anticipate an almost certain response by the DVR. We should not, however, over-react. Things move slowly in the area and we should do what we can-physically and psychologically-to beef up the RLG."

From 11/06/69 Minutes of the Washington Special Actions Group.

MR-2 Cricket ABCCC and strike operations in October were adversely impacted by seasonal early morning fog and low stratus clouds on the Plain of Jars. These conditions also hampered Raven launches to communicate with the multitude of FAG located with the many battalions scattered over the area prior to our departures at Long Tieng.

Moung Soui was "captured" by our irregulars with very little opposition. Basically, with their supply lines cut off, the few remaining bedraggled and sick enemy simply faded into the jungle, allowing government troops to walk into the site.

While investigating the site, despite allied bombing, RO officers, including Dick French, discovered substantial amounts of equipment still intact or salvageable. When Site-108 was hastily abandoned in June, the undisciplined FAN characteristically left armed crew-served weapons in place with no attempt to destroy or deny the enemy tools of war. Materiel previously delivered by air still liberally littered the hilly drop zones adjacent to the runway, with parachutes still attached. In addition, inaccurate Air Force bombing had failed to destroy many larger crew-served weapons, including heavy artillery pieces at Ban Khay, but many new buffalo wallows dotted the landscape. On the upside, bulldozers could easily

fill and pack runway craters, enabling the strip to be quickly restored to accommodate T-28 operations.

Apparently, the enemy battalion responsible for area control had other tasks in mind--likely survival--than employing the abandoned war booty for their own purposes. Moreover, with LOCs largely unusable, there was no method readily available to move supplies east. Probably for the first time during my tenure captured U.S weapons would not be used against us.

RO inspection of 155mm howitzers left at Ban Khay deemed four guns repairable. Therefore, during a spate of foul weather, a heavy lift Crane, plus Chinook helicopters and crews, were dispatched to Long Tieng for the purpose to extract the tubes and deliver them to a strip where C-123s could ferry them to Korat, Thailand, for repair. Unfamiliar with the area, the U.S. Army pilots were unsure of Moung Soui's location. Therefore, when the ceiling lifted and conditions permitted, Mike Jarina led the ships to the site by following the Nam Ngum. The howitzers were reconditioned and reintroduced to the Lao Theater in November. ¹

Wednesday, 1 October, I continued my upcountry stint in the UH-34D with thirty landings, shuttling to outposts into and around the LL forward supply base area.

Since Moung Soui was now in our hands again, excess troops were redeployed to their home areas or to new defensive positions.

Mike Jarina began his thirty-eight-landing day ferrying troops from the Phou So (LS-57) area to L-03, where they fanned out in the hills and assumed positions to guard the Xieng Khouang Valley.

¹Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 216-217.
Mike Jarina Interviews.

Plain of Jars activity generated many new refugees throughout the entire region, including the Phou Cum (LS-50) area. Consequently, Mike carried refugees to San Pa Ka (LS-33), five miles north of Site-50. Completing this assignment, he returned to Phou Fa (LS-16, generically called Agony) west of Phou So, where he boarded ADC troops for Ban Houayduan, equidistant between Nam Chong and Than Heup (LS-238). Their mission was to help clear the area, create new outposts to plug gaps in defenses, and to guard the western flank of Sam Tong and Long Tieng.

After working for seven years in the Thai/Lao Theater, I considered that I had seen it all, and did not anticipate many new experiences to impact my job. Granted, I had never been shot down, and, except for the current surprising and stimulating PDJ operation, really, what other occurrences could I expect? ²

Thursday marked just such a first: I flew two dissimilar helicopters in a day. I had conducted fifteen landings out of LL for most of the morning and into the afternoon, when the Customer called on his HT-2 radio instructing me to land and shut down. I walked to his location near a bunker and stack of ammunition boxes, where he indicated that a multi-aircraft Special Mission was planned out of Bouam Long. Since all such operations required double crewed cockpits, I was to fly with the PIC of Papa Foxtrot Juliet.

I crawled into the cockpit (unfortunately, I did not record either the PIC's or Flight Mechanic's name) and was informed that I would log deadhead pay (one plus five hours) except for

² Eliciting the adage of never say never, of course I was wrong. Attesting to my continuing naiveté, sierra continued to plague me and even escalate. Within little more than a year the ultimate, somewhat anticlimactic, but largely anticipated experience would occur to the Author.

the actual time flown during the mission (forty minutes) in which I logged two landings.

Bag briefed us at Site-32. We were to deliver troops and supplies to a pinnacle type position northeast of, and overlooking the Nong Pet crossroads, and remove the sick, lame, and lazy.³ The very requirement for a Special Mission implied potential danger in the area. Therefore, after flying thirteen miles directly south over the Phou San range, we approached the landing zone with caution, forming to the west and avoiding overflight of the actual junction where enemy patrols reputedly roamed. Within forty minutes of the mission's inception, we landed at Bouam Long without incident, where I again reverted to a wooden Indian status for the ride to L-22.

The en route flight presented adequate time to reflect on the day's proceedings. I had flown minimum time in a Bell on 21 September during a double-crewed mission; eleven days previous to that was the last time I actually piloted a Huey by myself. The way events were unfolding lately, it looked like I might be called upon to fly both machines by myself someday. Largely expected, that issue did not particularly bother me, for I could fly both machines to some degree of proficiency. What really concerned me was the fact that emergency procedures and techniques, like autorotations (except for dissimilar depth perceptions involved in the smaller and larger machines), were essentially standard from machine to machine; other procedures were vastly different between turbine and reciprocating engine machines. Granted, one could not dwell on experiencing an emergency, but we were flying helicopters with hundreds, if not thousands, of moving parts, and it did not require a brain

³ For purists with correct maps: UMT coordinates are located at UG312642.

surgeon's mentality to know that failures occurred, invariably at the worst possible time.

Because of the quick reactions essential to some emergencies, we had to commit published procedures to memory.⁴ Unlike crews who flew multiengine fixed wing, we lacked the luxury of redundant engines and pilots who had sufficient time to analyze and then react to an emergency. I had had an opportunity to view this first hand while deadheading from upcountry in a C-130. When an engine began malfunctioning, there was no panic. The PIC calmly instructed the copilot to retrieve the handbook from his flight bag and read the checklist procedures for engine shutdown, item by item. I was amazed and impressed at the pilots' nonchalance during the emergency.

After completing the day in Hotel-44, I made a mental note to discuss my concerns with the CPH.⁵

While I had fun wrestling with my two dissimilar aircraft, Jarina spent the day shuttling refugees from Phou Fa to Phou So for STOL pilots to move to Sam Tong or other refugee sites.

On the third, I had the rare opportunity to deadhead home in the cavernous cargo section of USAF Jolly Green 284.

Before returning to Tango, Jarina again shuttled refugees for AID. He began with a lift of Meo from Houei Tong Ko (LS-184) in the far north to Sam Sen (LS-112). These shuttles involved other trips to Tha Tam Bleung (LS-72) and Moung Soui to Phou So.

⁴Those not published were acquired by experience.

⁵Wayne Knight later stated that he never had any problem flying different aircraft types. He believed he was current in six types at one time with Air America. However, with all due respect, as a manager, Wayne was not a line pilot and flew upcountry mostly in an IP role. Moreover, much of his actual work outside the office was local training and FCF-not combat.
EW Knight Email, 10/13/00.

Although not equipped to inflict great losses, enemy units continued harassing Vang Pao's troops throughout the region. On the fourth, FAG Rocket Mobile in eastern Zone Steel reported TIC twice in the morning. Two A-1 flights discouraged further enemy harassment.

In the hills above Moung Soui, FAG Blue Moon at Phou So encountered TIC. This was addressed by another Firefly flight.

Fast movers continued to destroy vehicles on Route-7 as they were discovered.

All was not quiet at Xieng Khouang Ville. The next morning FAG White Rose reported enemy contact as Cricket arrived on station.

During the day, FAGs Red Tiger, Black Lion, Pogo, Blue Moon, and Lulu all reported either TIC or areas of troop concentrations.

Early morning on the sixth Peacock reported TIC. Fireflies from NKP had the situation in hand by 0830 hours. Lobo in zone Steel ten miles north of Moung Ngan (LS-236) was supported by Raven-47 and strike flights. ⁶

MANAGEMENT ATTITUDE

On the fifth, while waiting for a ride to the airfield, I composed a letter to the folks:

"I am trying to hurry up as I have to go to work again. As always, there is either too much or too little flying."

I mentioned the latest regarding organization of the Far East Pilots' Association:

"The union is coming along. We have a contract and it will be submitted to the Company shortly. We haven't been recognized

⁶Extracts from ABCCC Reports.

by the Labor Relations Board in the States because of political pressure. [This was not completely accurate for the LLRB had no jurisdiction in foreign countries.] **The Company has been aloof, but less so lately. I think we will win in the end or it will be the end."**

Negotiations between top Company management and FEPA representatives were not always cordial. Sometime during the prolonged bitter fight to gain union recognition, President Grundy was reputed to have said, in effect, that we could all be fired; helicopter pilots were a dime a dozen. Individuals could be easily hired off the streets of America. Never actually substantiated, perhaps this was only a rumor floated by local union leaders to firm rank and file members' resolve. Whatever the case, if true, the statement was a slap in the face to us old timers who had paid our dues in the trenches. There were also implied threats to introduce U.S. military pilots to assume our daily role in the Lao operation. Although, like President Roosevelt's "civilian" American Voluntary Group (AVG) Flying Tigers in China during World War Two, such a move had actually occurred in March 1961 when "sheepdipped" military H-34 pilots, called temporaries, and several additional H-34s were introduced to the Theater. The process did not last long, and the original men were replaced on a one-by-one basis by bona fide former military civilians. Now, with a much larger war to contend with in Laos, and scarce assets required in South Vietnam, the introduction of bona fide military crews and their machines would not prove an easy option. Although the Air Force had already clandestinely employed their helicopters and crews in Laos, their experience, motivation, performance related to navigation, and elevated altitude work in many cases their ranking was seriously in question. Additionally, a large influx of military helicopters or fixed wing to support the war would

have been quite difficult to keep secret from the American public and other nations, while totally destroying the concept of the Geneva Accords neutrality. No, although not impossible, we did not consider the matter feasible.

It was not the first time such innuendo reached our ears, for at the peak of our H-34 R-1820 engine problems in 1965 some in the Udorn pilot force, like strongman Charlie Weitz, who was often our group spokesman, called for a stand down until the problem was resolved. Before there was any pilot industrial action and management reaction, under the auspices of maintenance man, Jack Forney, the problems were identified, largely reversed, and we continued to march.

Although I went out to the Air America facility with all my RON gear on the fifth, I did not venture upcountry that day.

I did fly the next day, but it was obvious that I would be subjected to all the trash runs no one else wanted. With Wayne away, perhaps the assignment was retaliation for pleading my case to Goddard and McEntee about not flying both the H-34 and Bell in one day. Then again, they might have thought I could benefit from additional time in the H-34 without dealing with pressure. Anyway, it was all flight time.

Assigned to ferry Hotel-53 to Udorn from Luang Prabang with Delacerna, I deadheaded on C-123B 374. ⁷

WASHINGTON COGITATION

During an early October afternoon meeting of the Washington Special Actions Group to discuss a comprehensive paper on Laos, a question was posed as to when the 12,000 Vietnamese troops moving along Route-7 would be in place to attack. This was

⁷ EWKnight Email, 10/16/00.

answered by an individual who indicated that lead elements had reached the PDJ and were already exerting pressure, while the bulk of the force was still en route.

Speculation then centered on the tactics and motives of North Vietnamese leaders. Current enemy moves could either be part of a grand plan, or in reaction to VP's successes. Our destruction of enemy supply caches had caused them to move supplies in tandem with the troops.

As to current Democratic Vietnamese Republic (DVR) strategy, it was theorized that the Vietnamese believed Laos would fall after South Vietnam. It was merely a waiting game. Moreover, they had only pushed the envelope to a point where USG would not respond with additional military response.

Another talking point focused on artillery support, specifically introducing a Thai 155mm howitzer unit. Thai volunteers were currently training Meo in such weapons. However, the guns were not deemed particularly suitable, for it was difficult to move them in the mountains by helicopter. 105mm howitzers would be more practical from this aspect and one of logistics.

Of course, this all depended on the will of Souvanna Phouma, who was visiting Washington. The issue of using B-52s was tabled pending the Prime Minister's opinion. A recommendation was forwarded that Thai forces should be trained for possible operations in Laos.

Two weeks later, Henry Kissinger forwarded a letter to President Nixon:

"The Washington Special Action Group has developed a plan for providing military assistance to the Lao Government forces. This plan lists actions which are already under way, and also contains agreed recommendations on further actions for your approval. The actions already taken include providing the

regular and irregular Laos Government forces with M-16s and more artillery, giving the Air Force additional T-28s, improving and maintaining U.S. aerial reconnaissance capability and tactical air operations, increasing Thai training and support of the Lao forces, and supporting political moves by Prince Souvanna Phouma to improve his posture as a genuine neutralist."

The memorandum also contained, and sought Nixon's approval for, other items including B-52 reconnaissance missions over Barrel Roll when the North Vietnamese offensive began against RLG forces on the PDJ. When precise targets were identified the missions would develop strike information. This was calculated to send the Vietnamese a signal not to proceed with their plans.

On the 23rd, the President approved the recommendations. ⁸

MEANWHILE, ACTION IN MR-4

I was on the schedule to fly Hotel-32 to Pakse on Tuesday, the seventh, with Baccay as my Flight Mechanic. I had not flown with some of these capable men in years and it seemed like everything in my life was revolving full cycle.

I disliked being excluded from Military Region Two action, but as opposed to short shuttles to include many takeoffs and landings per day in Military Region Two, Pakse work was normally not difficult or fatiguing. Flying long legs in almost any direction contributed heavily to this, but it tended to create another problem: boredom. Also, on the downside, flight hours rarely reached identical proportions as those attained working

⁸ U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian, Foreign Relations of the United States 1969-1976, Volume 6, Vietnam, January 1969-July 1970, Document 131: Minutes of Washington Special Actions Group Meeting 11/06/69. 2:34-4:30 p.m.
Memorandum from the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon, Document 138, 11/20/69.

out of Long Tieng, and the arbitrary lines delineating project pay areas greatly reduced hazard pay.

Hotel-32 was not out of the barn and declared airworthy until early afternoon. At that time, I launched 220 miles southeast, arriving too late for work that day. Instead, when the Air America Jeep arrived, I gathered my gear and we drove to the hostel east of town.

"Government offensives in southern Laos are being checked by heavy enemy counterattacks. Government units have been forced to abandon the town of Toumlane [Toumlan] and withdraw to the south, and several irregular companies have been driven from the high ground overlooking Route-9, just southwest of Tchepone. Reinforced government elements have begun moving from the northwest toward Moung Phine in an effort to regain the initiative there." ⁹

Unlike action in the Moung Phine area, where panic withdrawals, refugee evacuations, and the shoot down of two USAF CH-3 Pony Express helicopters during site reinforcement to reverse enemy pressure made things interesting, hostility in the Pakse area was fairly quiescent.

Not to be outdone by the Savannakhet operation, a western offensive, called Diamond Arrow, was planned to prevent enemy reinforcements from reaching Moung Phine. During the third week in September two SGU and three FAR units assembled at Saravane and moved slowly north out along Route-23 into the lower Toumlan Valley. Besides relieving Saravane pressure, their mission intended to establish a blocking force and prevent enemy movement north to the Military Region Three battlefield.

⁹ CIA Daily Bulletin, 10/15/69...In Southern Laos enemy attacks have erased some government gains.



Looking south at a portion of Pakse, the largest river town in southern Laos. The town was separated by the Se Kong tributary that flowed into the Mekong River. The airfield was located to the west (unseen, but to the right of the photo) and the Air America hostel across the bridge was to the east of town.

Author Collection.



Vegetable patch adjoining the Mekong River near the Air America hostel at Pakse, Laos.

Author Collection.

As the Moung Phine operation began unraveling around Tchepone, to supplement the original group that failed to penetrate far north on Route-23, one FAR and one village-recruited guerrilla unit moved out of Khong Sedone (LS-289). government-controlled Site-289 was located on Route-13, thirty-three miles north of Pakse. Both units marched along Route-16 toward Saravane. After arrival at the 16/23 crossroad, the guerrilla battalion diverted northwest on Route-23 toward the periphery of Toumlan.

By the end of the second week, they were poised to move onto the airfield (Ban Don Boung, LS-64). Somewhat encouraged by this unit's success, the FAR unit tentatively entered the valley. However, after encountering and clearing weak resistance, they stopped, probably not wanting to be too far removed from Saravane's perceived security. Further up the valley, as massed enemy troops counterattacked and attempted to breach the Military Region Four blockade, friendly tactical air exacted a satisfactory toll on their numbers. Although withdrawing from Toumlan proper, the guerrilla battalion continued to remain in the area for almost a week, but when additional FAR infantry support failed to arrive, by mid-October, they promptly withdrew to Saravane.

The first day of the RON, Wednesday, October 8, I only flew a little more than five hours supporting the northern troop movement and project time was nearly the same.

I launched earlier the next morning. Flight time was considerably higher, but working within areas considered friendly, hazard time constituted only twenty-five percent of the total. That was both the blessing and the curse of working at Pakse. Still, it was work, which tended to alleviate boredom.

Friday was back to normal, low flight time, low project time.

On Saturday, the eleventh, I was assigned a change of venue. Sent north to Savannakhet, I began shuttling troops into forward positions recently developed to reverse communist gains and retake Moung Phine. By then the enemy had retrenched. After rejecting this attempt, they forced the government troops west. Overall, the operation had expended a lot of energy and scarce assets. Interdicting the communist LOCs produced no lasting gains, except to expose the government troops to combat and increase the knowledge that they could engage and temporarily defeat Vietnamese and Pathet Lao troops on their home ground. Additionally, evacuation of an estimated 6,000 refugees denied the enemy slave labor and displaced farmers who could provide them food.

Following a restful night at the hostel, I ferried Hotel-32 to Udorn on Sunday. ¹⁰

JARINA GOES UPCOUNTRY

Tuesday, October 7, the same day I departed south for Pakse, Mike deadheaded to Alternate on C-123 576. After taking control of Hotel-74, a newly bailed aircraft in September, with Flight Mechanic Joe Gaculais he was assigned work on the Plain of Jars. With consolidation in progress, he flew several local shuttles out of the Lima-Lima base. Late in the afternoon, he was sent to retrieve an aircraft engine at Phon Hong (LS-133) thirty-nine miles north of Vientiane on Route-13, sling it to Wattay Airport, and RON.

¹⁰ Ken Conboy, 223.
Victor Anthony, 321.
Tom Ahern, 359-360.
Bernard Nalty, 118.

In the morning, Jarina flew back to Sam Tong to work for USAID. He spent the day carrying refugees from Houie Tong Ko (LS-184) in the far north to Sam Tong. He also hauled civilian refugees from Moung Soui to Site-20.

That same Wednesday, October 8, attesting to General Vang Pao's increasing struggle to hold and even expand vast territory with few available troops, Captain Frenchy Smith hauled twenty deceased soldiers to The Alternate for disposition to their villages.

Enemy units were not completely vanquished in the Moung Soui area. FAGs Pogo and Red Tiger reported TIC, which were addressed by Raven-40 and forty-three pilots.

Far to the east in Zone Steel, enemy targets were reported to Cricket late in the day.

Just after dawn on the ninth, Pogo reported TIC. Raven-40 worked the position, and by 1000 hours hostilities were over.

Black Lion reported TIC at 0900 hours. Raven-44 worked a flight of fast movers and contact was broken by 1300.

The following day Raven-22 reported TIC at Ban Nanoy, east of Phou Sani. After working two A-1 flights, the fighting was contained by the time Cricket RTB.

Adequate fuel and war supplies were constantly replenished at the forward LL base by STOL planes. This drastically reduced helicopter ferry time to Alternate, allowing pilots an opportunity to remain in the field and perform yeoman work. On Thursday, conducting an amazing sixty-three landings, Mike Jarina spent the entire day on the PDJ working for RO. He supplied surrounding landing zones where resupply and consolidation of positions was still underway to the northwest on high ground at Phou Kheng and north at Phou San.

The next morning, the 10th of October, he departed Site-20 and flew across Skyline Ridge to Long Tieng, where he was loaded

with provisions for Lima Lima. Although his flight time equaled that on Thursday, working sites further away, Mike conducted twenty-five fewer landings.

On the eleventh, Mike was sent to Luang Prabang to work the 713 contact. Starting a day of musical mountains, he flew more than thirty-five miles north to the Phou Houay Mok Range west of Site-186 to retrieve prisoners. When he arrived there were no prisoners, only people who loaded the cargo compartment with pigs. Once in the air, Joe asked Mike if wanted one of the smaller porkers, as he had claimed one for himself. Mike declined the kind offer. When Mike checked in the air operations man at Luang Prabang, a retired Navy chief, inquired over the radio as to the number of prisoners he had onboard. Mike humorously replied that he had twelve enemy pigs that were tied up and certainly must be prisoners.

Arriving at the airfield, Mike asked Joe what he was he was going to do with his liberated enemy. Joe allowed that the Filipino mechanics in the radio shack would take care of it. Filipinos were masters at cooking pig.

They went back to work at a Meo site eleven miles southeast of Site-54, located on a formidable range where he had previously landed. From there he was directed eleven miles further southeast to the hills of Ban Tai Si. A final trip was conducted twenty miles east of LP to Mok Chang.

After securing for the day, the crew collected their RON gear and departed to the hotel for dinner. Three radio shack people waited at the table along with the dressed roasted suckling pig, complete with an apple in the mouth. Mike considered the culinary presentation a work of art. Mike had never eaten pit roasted pig before and considered it very tasty. While they were eating, a waiter delivered two bottles of wine. Mike rarely drank alcohol and was surprised at their appearance.

Asking the source, the waiter indicated General Ouane at another table. Mike thanked the general.

The meal over and with everyone sated, Mike asked for the bill. The waiter indicated there was no bill. The general had picked up the tab. That had never happened to him before and was likely to show appreciation for bringing back the prisoners for the general's table.

Lloyd Higgins joined Mike on Sunday. They made three trips to Mok Chang, a site twenty miles to the east. After one trip to the Phou Houay Mok area, they RTB Udorn. ¹¹

PROGRESS IN MR-2

"Dick have to work a lot now, he be able to stay at home only seven days a month."

10/11/69 Letter to my parents from Tuie.

I went upcountry in Hotel-32 with Joe Gaculais on the fourteenth. In general, all of our Filipino Flight Mechanics were capable and willing to work. However, I liked to fly with Joe about as much as I had with Chris Chrislogo. Among his varied talents, personality, and good qualities, in addition to being courageous, he anticipated and understood what I wanted.

Government forces were making minor advances and were continuing to consolidate elevated positions northwest and northeast of the Plain. They were largely defensive in nature, but with an increase in patrolling and raiding enemy concentrations, which still existed in hill areas to the west of

¹¹ Mike Jarina Interviews.
Bill Leary 10/69 Notes.
Extracts from ABCCC Reports.

the Plain of Jars, those overlooking parts of the Ban Ban Valley, and in the ten mile buffer zone along the border east of Nong Het.¹² However, because of the 312 Division's entry in mid-September stimulated by Vang Pao's success, the ensuing build up, and huge amounts of ammunition and supplies entering into the latter area, Ambassador Godley and CINCPAC leaders wanted more access to the zone. Consequently, high level civilian and military lobbying resulted in the zone's dimensions being reduced by half.

The Air Force bombers went right to work and target areas were currently being pounded by USAF assets with satisfactory BDA reported. Still puzzling to those in our camp was the reason enemy forces had withdrawn, leaving the field with so much rolling stock and caches intact. Denied laboriously stockpiled supplies, some in place from 1962, perhaps the units were awaiting supplies, fresh reinforcements, or a spate of foul weather to curtail allied bombing and cover their advances.

There had been a few contested areas during the operation, but these had either been bypassed or eliminated and our troops were now moving slowly forward northeast from high ground at Phou San and Phou Keng toward the Route-71/74 junction near Ban Pong, to seal the east-west road system and link up with the Bouam Long group assailing Nong Pet.

An ADC company was moving toward, and was about to seize, the complex of hills at Phou Khout located four miles north of Phou Keng. Commanding Route-7 and Route-71, and much of the northwestern Plain, this enemy position had always been a tough nut to crack. Despite T-28 strikes and numerous ground assaults, it marked the only objective that FAN had failed to seize and hold during and after the successful Triangle operation.

¹²CIA Daily Bulletin, 10/15/69, The military situation in northern Laos remains generally static...

Within the Xieng Khouang Ville region, troops had moved a considerable distance east and controlled high ground overlooking parts of uncompleted Route-72.

With the intent of clearing and reclaiming areas along Route-4 north of Borikhane, one of Military Region Five's FAR battalions moved into the Tha Thom (LS-11) Valley with further designs on Tha Vieng (LS-13) to the west.

In order to minimize losses of their men, which were increasingly in short supply, but to make our forces aware that they were not immune to punishment, the enemy relied on standoff indirect mortar fire. After this was reported by Lulu on the 13th, two 60mm mortars and crews were destroyed by friendly air.

Mid-afternoon two days later, FAGs Pogo, Black Lion, Lulu, and Blue Moon reported TIC. Additionally, Lima-22 reported six incoming mortar rounds. All was quiet on the Plain of Jars front by 1700 hours.

Shamrock, Lulu, Red Tiger and White Rose all reported TIC on the 16th. Most of the action was in the form of mortar fire, and was easily dealt with by air support. Early the next morning Shamrock was in contact. Poppy reported TIC in the afternoon. On the 21st both Shamrock and Black Lion informed ABCCC of contact, after which strike aircraft successfully addressed the situation. ¹³

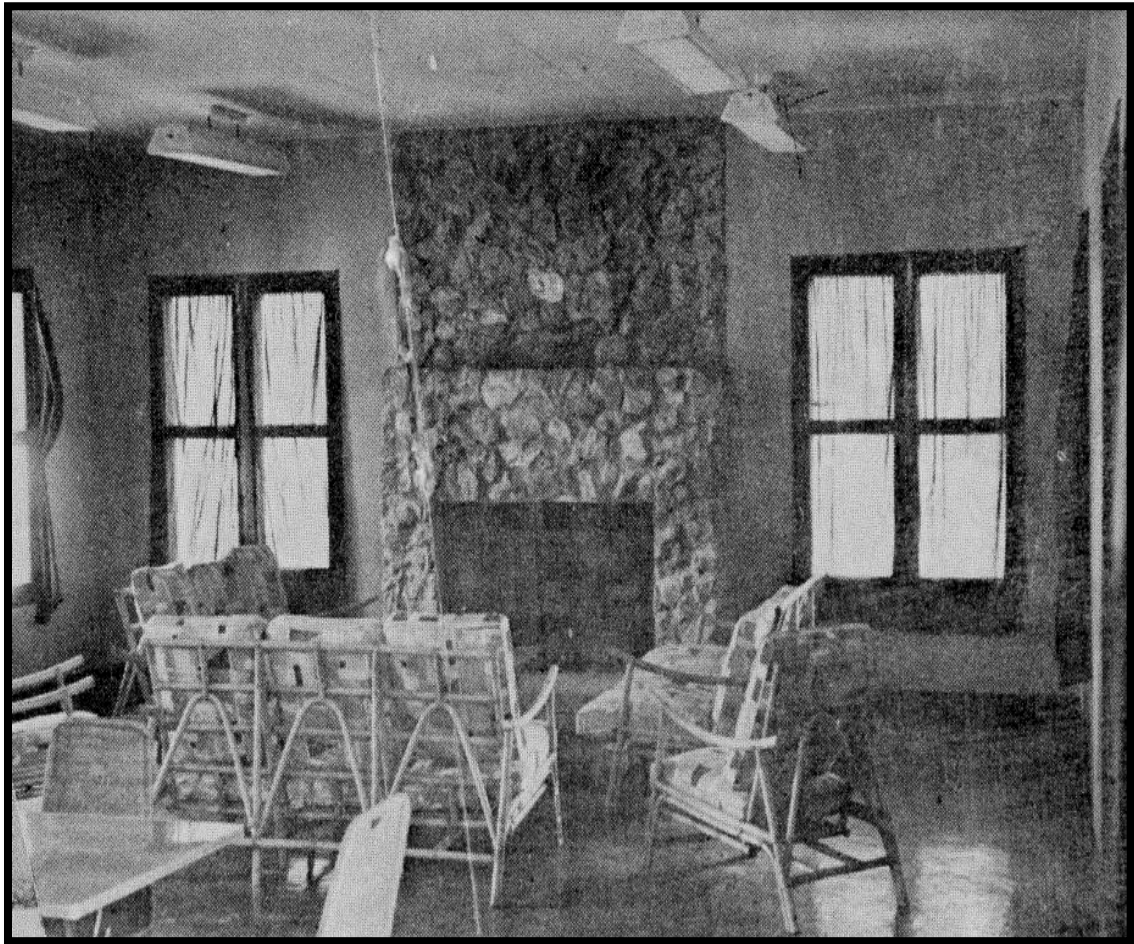
Since reverting to the UH-34D program, for the first time in several years, I RON at the Sam Tong hostel. The reversion

¹³ See the Author's 1964 account of the Operation Triangle campaign in Book Five.
Ken Conboy, 247-248.
Tom Ahern, 321, 328.
Extracts from ABCCC Reports.



Air America UH34D Hotel-52 parked in front of the Sam Tong hostel during a mobile tanker refueling process.

Author Collection.



The small, but comfortable crew lounge in the Air America hostel at Sam Tong, Laos.

Air America Log.

subjected me to working USAID and RO assignments instead of a steady diet of 713 work. I had no other choice. The missions and four consecutive RONS at Sam Tong were acceptable, for in addition to a change of venue, they allowed me to converse, work, and billet closer to recent additions to the program and with those I had formally rubbed elbows. A downside of staying overnight at Sam Tong was the inability to brief daily with Raven pilots and the Customer regarding current conditions on the Plain of Jars. Flight time was very good during this period, and once again I felt "armchair" comfortable in the H-34 workhorse. Old Punzalan (Punz) replaced Gaculais on Friday.

YIPPE-YI-YO-KI-YAY

Returning to familiar territory, on 18 October I was assigned to fly Bell 204B 13F with Dave Crowell and John Melvin.

After Ralph "Cotton" Davis tragically died on Skyline Ridge in August and his family departed John Melvin rented his house. The young man enjoyed building model airplanes, and during his time off he often remained awake all night working on them. Having attained a reputation of being a little odd, he shaved his head and married a Chinese lady, who used to complain to my wife about John's peccadilloes with other women.

Since the beginning of human conflict, the maxim that an army moves on its stomach was paramount to success. With Vang Pao's northern and eastern mountain top positions fairly well secured, attention shifted from supplying the men with ammunition and defensive items to providing the best food possible—mainly protein for energy. This was provided from livestock readily available on the Plain of Jars. Ever since the advent of bombing and ground operations, with handlers no longer available to tend them, herds of cattle fled west from the eastern reaches of the plain where they normally grazed.

Eventually reaching remote northwestern foothills, unable to proceed any further, the enemy cattle temporarily milled about in relative safety.

While preparing food for outposts, troops normally captured and slaughtered an animal then hacked the meat into smaller pieces and bagged it in jute rice sacks. These were placed in helicopter cargo compartments and delivered to positions. If not performed ahead of time, the inefficient process was time-consuming and very messy with the bags invariably leaking vital juices on the helicopter plywood, and through tie-down holes onto the decking. The method fostered other problems, for the fluids drew flies, smelled horrible, and necessitated washing the floor with copious amounts of water at night, a commodity often in short supply. The method also required landing at sometimes questionable landing zones. Instead of wasting time on the deck waiting to unload, a clever efficiency expert conceived a plan that proposed shooting an animal or two from a helicopter, securing ropes around their necks, and slinging loads to the pads--all in a fraction of the time it would take using the other process. As Phou Nok Kok was increasingly coming under pressure from indirect fire, the sling load method was quite appealing to us as a means of providing support and avoiding battle damage.

Since the concept was entirely new to us, we had no experience or specific instructions on how to proceed, so we had to experiment and develop our own techniques. I found that circling the beasts and rounding them up into a tight cluster made it easier for the sharpshooter to perform his dirty work. While I hovered near the group, Dave initially shot an M-16 rifle, but discovered the high velocity bullet penetrated the entire body, generally wounding and failing to immediately drop an animal. Apparently, if not striking a critical area, the foot

pound impact of the light M-16 round was ineffective. Switching to a Chinese or Soviet-manufactured AK-47, he found that one round normally performed the job. Other tasks were accomplished by ground troops who secured ropes to the animal's neck and hooked them to the cargo sling for the twenty-five-mile flight north northeast to Phou Nok Kok landing zones. Uncertain of an animal's weight, through a process of hovering and trial and error, I worked up to slinging three animals at a time. The operation must have looked peculiar to the starving enemy troops in the surrounding hills, but the radio operators at the pads always thanked me for the meat.

Although some might consider our method unsportsmanlike conduct, the men required meat, it denied the enemy food, and playing cowboy was actually enormous fun. However, because the process necessitated working within a few feet of the ground, I had to pay close attention not to be caught up in the excitement and crash.

We continued hauling meat like this for a few days until people began complaining that cinching a rope around the neck of a dead animal was taboo in the Meo culture. We initially disregarded the talk, for we were moving a lot of meat in a relatively short time. Whether he agreed with what we were doing or not, to keep the peace, Vang Pao intervened and ordered the cattle sling load operation stopped. We could still cull and shoot the animals from the air, but to comply with VP's wishes, we were obliged to return to the original process, whereby soldiers laboriously hacked the beasts into smaller pieces, placed parts in empty jute bags, and loaded the helicopter. Since the rotors were still turning, it was all flight time, but messy, costly, time consuming, and allowed more exposure at the forward sites.

Mike Jarina ran into a similar situation. One day a Customer shot a water buffalo from the cargo compartment. Mike slung the animal to Long Tieng and deposited the load at the Buddhist temple located at the east side of the valley. Later, someone who observed this said, *"You know that was a dead animal and you are aware that Buddhists do not kill. You probably did a very irreligious thing by dropping that dead buffalo on them."*

WHOOPS

Saturday morning, I experienced yet another first, a hairy incident I never wanted to duplicate. Melvin and I were assigned to work Bouam Long and the area of responsibility accorded the site. After arriving at Site-32, I was loaded for a flight ten miles south to a pinnacle type fort overlooking a portion of Route-71 between the junctions of Nong Pet and Ban Pong. I had never been to this position before, and except for map coordinates and the signal of the day, no one provided a good briefing as to the condition of the actual pad and enemy situation.

I found the position and received the correct ground panel. In addition to a wind direction, the high recon revealed that the outpost had likely been in use for a while, for the top's circular perimeter was surrounded by foxholes with a landing pad large enough for a Huey in the center. I did not like this type of landing zone, for they normally were very dusty and littered with abundant trash. Therefore, to minimize foreign object (FOD) damage to my rotor blades, I approached the hill at a steeper angle than normal and arrived at a high hover before landing to help dissipate debris. While John rapidly unloaded the stacked ammunition boxes, I felt exposed and anxious to depart the front lines.

I took off to the west. While clearing the hills' edge, to my immediate right out of the corner of my eye, I observed a poncho or half pup tent soar out of a foxhole. To my horror, the flying object thwacked against and wrapped around a portion of a blade root near the rotor head. The ensuing loss of lift, resulting in a delicate imbalance in aerodynamic forces, causing severe vibrations of a magnitude I had never previously experienced. The oscillations were so bad I thought the rotor head would be thrown off, or transmission mounts ripped from the decking. Semi-level terrain was only a few hundred feet below, but I was loath to either autorotate or land with power, for I was unaware of whether enemy patrols were deployed below, or close by on the road. A decision was necessary, and seconds were critical in an obvious life or death situation. About the time I was convinced that I should land before the machine tore itself apart, the offending material dislodged and I had a viable helicopter again.

Considerably shaken by the experience, I had little other option than returning to Bouam Long, where I could shut down and examine the machine for damage. Careful inspection of visible components revealed no overt problem. Unconvinced that any machine could withstand the tremendous stress of such an incident, I suspected there might be internal damage that only professional maintenance crews had the ability to detect. Therefore, after contacting Udorn and explaining what had happened, I flew the machine home for an inspection team's findings.

COURTNEY

After undergoing training for a year or more in the States, Don Courtney, my former roommate at USMC Camps Upshur and Barret in the Quantico area boonies, was assigned to Kenya, Africa, as

an undercover operations officer selling Cessna aircraft and contacting spies. He returned to Southeast Asia in 1969 and had worked on the Military Region Two desk at AB-1 Udorn under Jim Glerum since mid-year. As Agency people departed the field on leave or R&R, or extra personnel were needed for the Plain of Jars operation, Don went upcountry to temporarily fill the voids.

While Blue Battalion special guerrilla units were still staged on three strategic hills northeast of the Nong Pet intersection, Don left his Udorn desk to spell Mike Glass, a Military Region Two Case Officer who often worked out of Bouam Long supporting Blue with logistic requirements.

Before Mike Jarina departed for time off, he and Don explored a cave along Route-7. The cavern contained many items, including a U.S. M-79 grenade launcher that had belonged to a member of Blue Battalion. It appeared that the cave served mainly as a personnel clearing house where Vietnamese troop replacements checked in and out when coming from or going on leave. To better assess documents, paperwork was placed in a homemade aluminum footlocker for delivery to The Alternate, where translations could be conducted. Translations revealed many names that were helpful in forming an order of battle analysis, but little else of import. ¹⁴

Meo troops discovered nine gigantic caches southwest of the 7/71 road junction while moving northeast. Informed of the finds, Mike and Don examined the piles of mixed 12.7mm, 37mm, 120 mortar, 82mm mortar, AK-47 ammunition, and other boxed supplies stacked mostly in the open, but others under trees for concealment. Evidenced by near misses that had failed to destroy

¹⁴ Don Courtney kept the footlocker, which now resides in his shed/workshop behind his Montana home.

the piles, apparently some caches had been discovered by airborne visual reconnaissance (VR) and had been targeted.

After Glass departed for R&R, Courtney considered merit in preserving some of the equipment, and proposed removing what was possible. Therefore, he and others arranged for USAF CH-3 crews to ferry selected booty to Lima Lima, where it was then shuttled to Udorn for distribution to field units possessing Soviet weapons. Don continued to honcho the ammunition lift for about a week.

One day, accidents, fuel requirements, and other factors combined to reduce the CH-3 fleet helping him to one ship. Nearing dark, Don was still on the ground with forty-five Thai laborers when he spotted the last CH-3 at altitude headed south. The Meo guard unit had already left to find a secure position for the night, and Don only had his .38 pistol for protection. Concerned that he would be left in the field overnight, he called the Air Force pilot, identified himself, and requested a ride to The Alternate. When the pilot landed Don asked him how many he could load.

"Ten"

"Oh, shit!"

"How many do you have?"

"Forty-five."

After a long pause the PIC said, *"Ok. Put them on."*

The cabin section was filled to capacity, leaving standing room only with no subway straps to hang on. The ship was so overloaded that the pilot ground around in circles while ascending out of the valley. Don later heard that the ship was magnafluxed to discover if the fuselage had been overstressed.

When the Air Force could no longer supply assets to remove the booty, Agency tech people moved in to destroy the remainder. To their dismay, they quickly discovered that demolition charges

merely scattered the ammo throughout the area without destroying it. Only a hot fire would serve to demolish everything. This was later discussed with representatives from CINCPACAF. After taking notes, they decided it would be far more effective to strike the caches with napalm rather than high explosive iron bombs. ¹⁵

REVELATIONS

In the States, minority antiwar dissenters were becoming increasingly more vocal and aggressive, hoping to stir the nation into action and end the Vietnam War. Demonstrations were planned throughout the U.S, with other rallies planned for 15 November.

A letter dated October 16 from my Dad (even on a bad day, a highly opinionated and thoroughly imbued WASP type individual) attests to the extent of the anti-war movement and at least one concerned person's objection to it. However, Harry Russell Casterlin's strong patriotic feelings may have been representative of what President Nixon had described as the 'Silent Majority' in America:

"This is the day after the so-called great 'Moratorium,' [on Vietnam] and in my humble opinion it was nothing but a great big 'Bust.' I flew my Flag up to the top of the pole and kept my lights on the car burning during daylight while driving. According to my figuring from statistics, less than half of one percent of the people in this country took part in the most unpatriotic demonstration of all time. A bunch of mangy, hop-headed, treason minded, Red indoctrinated leftists pulled the

¹⁵ Don Courtney Emails, 08/14/02, 08/18/02, 08/19/02, 08/27/02, 08/28/02, 08/30/02, 08/31/02, 12/17/13, 12/18/13, 12/19/13, 01/05/14.

greatest hoax of the Century, quoting the Commie line all the way, even wishing the North Viets would win the war and push us into the sea. This is how I feel towards my fellow American bastards who would sell you boys down the river."

Despite my Father's heated diatribe, it was not only dissenting young people and leftists in the States who strongly objected to the war. With a Republican in the White House political winds had shifted in Washington. For various reasons, theatrical Congressional leaders, vying for attention among their constituents, switched allegiances from being "hawks to doves" and chose to abandon both Vietnam and Laos ASAP. To accomplish this agenda, they wanted to expose a major portion of the Theater conflict, especially Laos, previously kept under wraps from the American people by former administrations.

Senators Stuart Symington and William Fulbright were among two leading Congressional pot stirrers. During an initial three days of "secret" ¹⁶ Senate Foreign Relations hearings regarding the Lao conflict, Symington interviewed both former Lao Ambassador William Sullivan and present Air Attaché (AIRA) Colonel Robert Tyrell.

The subcommittee meetings were staged and much ado about nothing for at least one senator. Symington had been previously briefed in 1966 on the Meo army program and CIA's part in the Lao War, Moreover, he had visited the country and stayed at COS, Ted Shackley's house in Vientiane during a fact-finding mission. Later, after Ted Shackley testified before a Senate committee during the fall of 1967, Symington "praised the Laotian program

¹⁶ In politics, the word secret, or classified, is akin to a misnomer, for little discussed in Washington ever remains secret long. There are too many varied interests and repayment of favors involved among principals to prevent leaks. In addition, sometimes leaks are sanctioned for specific reasons.

as a sensible way to fight a war. The CIA was spending in a year what the U.S. Army was spending in a day in Vietnam." So, it was received with some disbelief when Symington and others, previously briefed on the Agency participation in the Lao War professed surprise, alarm, and outrage at the later 'revelation' that CIA was conducting a clandestine war in Laos using surrogates. A total CIA facade, but not unexpected from unprincipled Washington bureaucrats, the public servant's protests reminded one of a favorite children's jingle, "Liar, liar, pants on fire..." ¹⁷

In regard to Lao fighting capabilities, Sullivan divulged in part during questioning:

Negating the United States International Agency Department's (USAID) role as a purely humanitarian entity and divulging the organization as an umbrella to implement almost all contracts and shield actual USG policy, Sullivan indicated that as of September...558 Americans were employed by USG in Laos. This number included 59 State Department, 15 Marine guards, 19 U.S. Information Service, 338 direct hire personnel with USAID and 127 as military attaches (this military number included Project 404, but not 91 TDY people). Contract personnel included 53 International Voluntary Service, 207 Air America, 73 Continental Air Services [in Laos]. In addition to humanitarian efforts, USAID contracts administered Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma's request for military aid. These included provisions by AID embedded Requirements Office types to ensure supplies arrived safely to FAR units and were properly employed.

¹⁷ Because dialogue providing insight into the disclosure affords historical value, recapitulates some past facts, and introduces information almost to the current period in this account, snippets of the later 1969 Congressional meetings are included. One can only surmise what was sanitized.

Other AID contracts established plausible cover for clandestine missions from the joint RLAf/USAF base at Takhli, Thailand; other supporting flights that provided supplies to General Vang Pao's army; and other (unspecified) activity. AID afforded cover to Agency Case Officers acting as military advisors, but also those who gathered intelligence on enemy dispositions. In addition, these types directed air strikes in MR-2."

Ambassador Sullivan went on to say:

"The principal military shortcoming in Laos is leadership. Senior officers are often selected on the basis of family, wealth, or political connections. They tend to have limited military training or experiences. Aggressiveness and combat proficiency of Lao troops suffer. Since the army's educational level is low, its attitudes are rarely public-minded.

Soldiers and unit commanders are reluctant to serve outside their regions and will sometimes desert rather than transfer long distances. Morale is low because of inadequate leadership, insufficient rations, difficult field conditions, poor pay, and fear of NVA prowess. The logistics system is primitive. There are occasional Lao units who respond magnificently in the face of attack, particularly those that have competent or charismatic leaders.

Lao paramilitary [also called irregular] forces perform better than regular army units because they are directed by the CIA. Food allowances and incentive pay stimulate them to greater efficiency.

The tactical arm of the RLAf is one of the most effective indigenous combat units in Southeast Asia [There was no mention of Thai participation in the form of T-28 drivers, PARU, or artillery units]. Pilots are skillful, devoted to the job, and familiar with the terrain.

[The ChiCom] goal in Southeast Asia is establishment of a weak chain of neutral or commie buffer states. They have rendered the Neo Lao Hak Sat (the political wing of the commie movement) important assistance while accepting North Vietnam's paramount position.

A shorter-range objective in Laos is to keep the frontier secure and out of hostile hands.

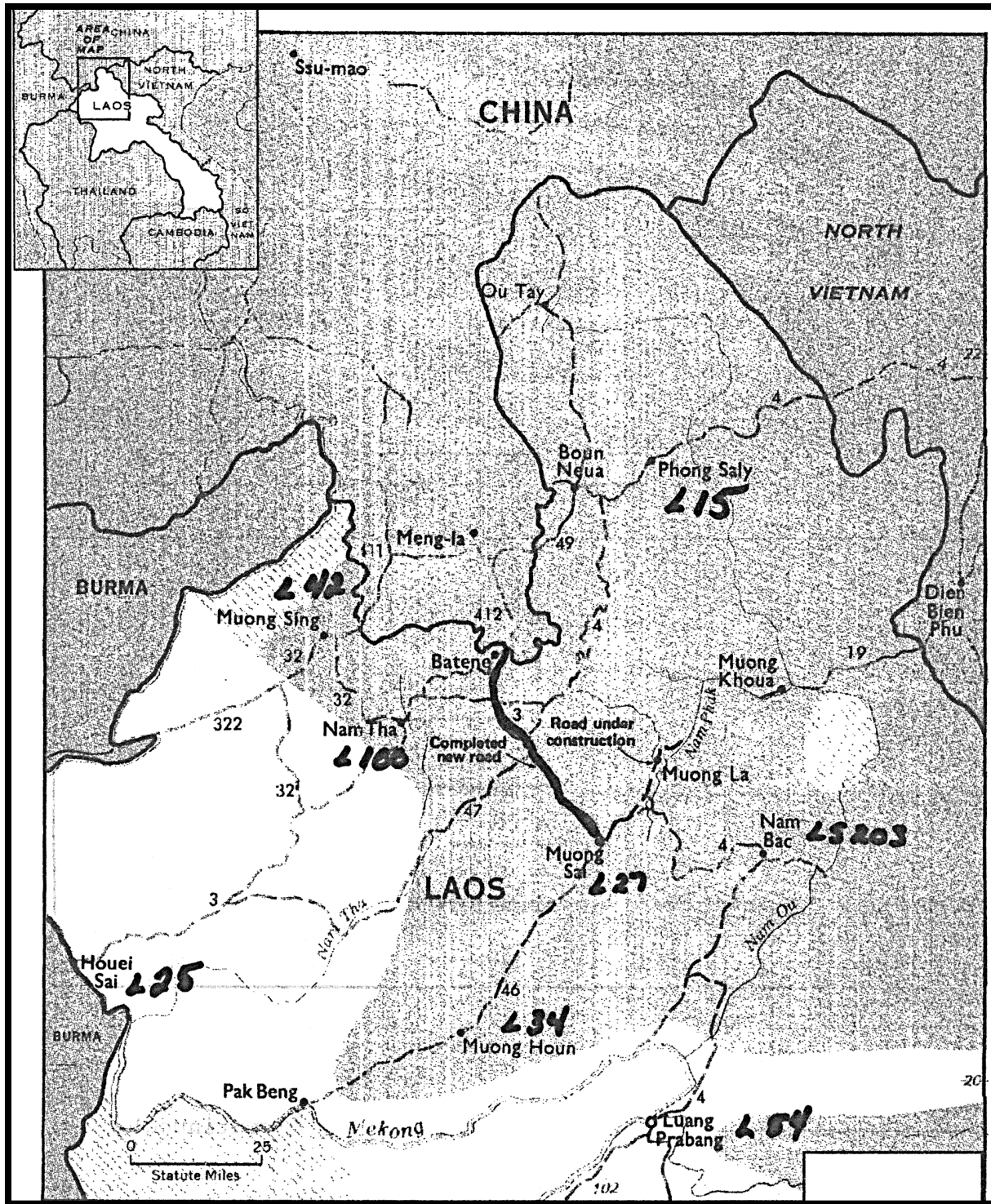
In the northwest where communications with North Vietnam is difficult, the communists have long directly supplied the North Vietnamese Army and Lao People's Liberation Army (NVA/LPLA) with weapons, ammunition and essential nonmilitary goods."

THE CHINESE ROAD

Sullivan continued on this sensitive subject: ¹⁸

"Chinese road construction crews have worked intermittently in North Laos [MR-1] since 1962. At the request of Souvanna Phouma, they completed a route from Meng La in Yunnan Province to Phong Saly in April 1963. Subsequently, communist roads leading to Lao towns on the border were constructed and improved. One such route, running from Meng La, was extended fifty miles into Laos from the Lao town of Batene in September 1968. The [gravel all-weather] road was completed 50 miles southeast to Mounng Sai in January 1969 and turned northeast twenty miles to Mounng La and linked with a trail from North Vietnam. [Because of the monsoon season] there has been little activity since March, although the [3,000 man] work force

¹⁸ Chinese Roads: There was a lot of intelligence and information relating to this project, but little was done to impede it.



04/04/69 CIA map depicting a Chinese-built hard topped road inside Laos stretching from Batene to Mung Sai.

remains [in place]." ¹⁹

Contained in weekly intelligence bulletins, the CIA divulged that as of early April, the number of Chinese support buildings erected along the completed section of road north of Moung Sai had increased from a January number of 350 to 750, and generally followed the road work progress. Despite this fact, there was no indication of increasing road building or an attempt to commence construction in different directions.

By May aerial reconnaissance revealed that the sixteen nautical mile stretch of road from Moung Sai in the upper Beng Valley northeast to Moung La, located at the confluence of the Nam Ma, Nam Puck, and Nam Phak, was able to accommodate vehicular traffic. Furthermore, there were indications of survey work from Moung La northeast to Moung Khoua on the Nam Ou, where Route-19, the Vietnamese LOC from Dien Bien Phu, terminated on the east bank.

Speculation centered on the Chinese completing this section prior to the monsoon season.

At this time, despite much of the Beng Valley being cleared of government forces, intelligence revealed no evidence that roadwork was underway south of Moung Sai.

By late October new road work was underway in Military Region One. Five miles of vehicle-ready road was detected southwest of Moung Sai. The construction was accompanied by the presence of mobile air defense weapons. Evidence of road survey was noted twenty-five miles below Moung Sai to Moung Beng, located north of Moung Houn.

¹⁹ At this point in the narrative the Author attempts to provide more detailed information regarding the Chinese Road in Laos during 1969. As road work proceeded toward Pak Beng on the Mekong River, it became more disconcerting to western principals. Its presence would also later contribute to loss of life for two Air America fixed wing crews.

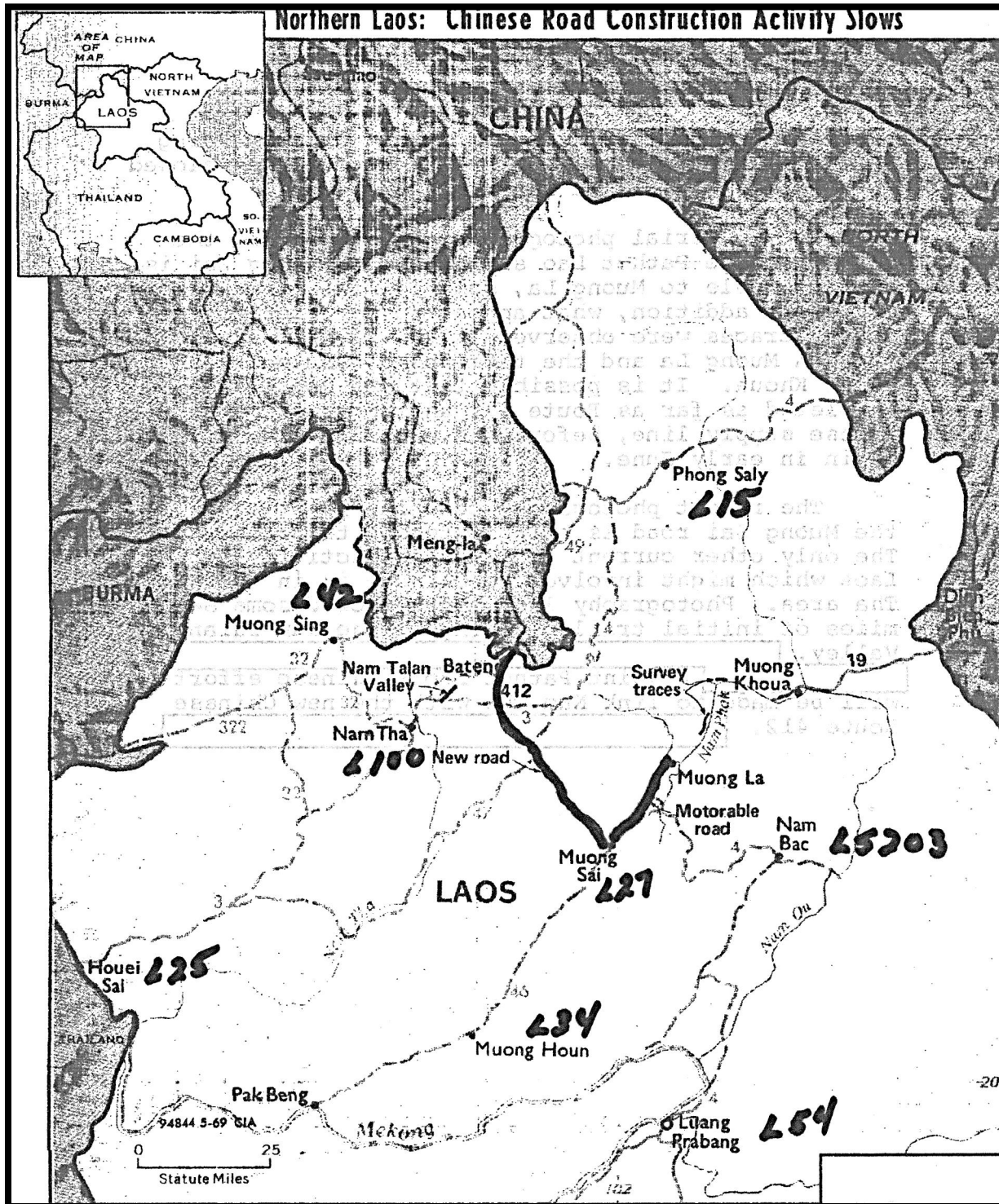
To the northeast of Moung Sai, construction had resumed on a bridge near Moung La. This led analysts to believe efforts were underway to link the road to Route-19 at Moung Khoua.

During September and October, irregular Agency guerrillas recaptured several former positions ten miles from the road construction at Moung La.

"Chinese road building has not only facilitated their supply effort, but will also aid that of the North Vietnamese. The routes give the Chinese long-range potential for assisting Thai insurgents. The Chinese maintain an embassy in Vientiane and a consulate general in Phong Saly (not recognized by the Royal Lao Government)."

As Hanoi's leaders always maintained for worldwide consumption, Chinese government officials denied any physical presence in Laos. Therefore, much intelligence regarding the road and its progress was accumulated from aerial recon and road watch teams.

During the summer months, because USAF pilots were somewhat restricted from participating in Chinese Road recon, Raven pilots assigned to the Luang Prabang air operations center (AOC) photographed sections of the road numerous times. The first daring recon mission commenced at Moung Sai and covered twenty miles of the lower road work to the south. Information revealed that there was no attempt by the Chinese to conceal daytime work, and photo interpreters (PI) counted fifty vehicles. The mission also revealed a modicum of Asian efficiency employed to save construction time. Using a segmented road building technique, laborers pushed individual road sections toward each other. When eventually linked together, the road would be ready to accommodate traffic. Intrigued, interested parties from Thailand, Laos, and the United States demanded additional information. Therefore, a Udorn-based photo



05/03/69 CIA map of the Chinese Road inside Laos. Black line indicates a vehicle ready road extending northeast from Mung Sai to Mung La toward Route-19 and Dien Bien Phu in North Vietnam.

plane with advanced equipment and crew was dispatched to Luang Prabang and launched for the Beng Valley. American and Lao T-28 pilots from Luang Prabang accompanied Don Moody flying the USAF AT-28 photo aircraft (called Guppy from its bulging appearance). Although they encountered heavy AAA fire and suffered a few near heart attacks, the mission was completed without recording battle damage.

Intermittent construction activity was most likely slowed by the year's unusually heavy monsoon conditions. However, by September full construction resumed on the road stretching south from Moung Sai. During that month, after discussion and pressure, the U.S Embassy sanctioned the Luang Prabang AOC unit to strike some of the large supply areas clearly depicted in the reconnaissance photographs. Plans went forward describing targets in detail and ordnance thought necessary to implement the task. The final plan was submitted to chief of station by the embassy officer in charge of clearance. After fifty percent of the original strike plan was scrubbed for various reasons, the strike commenced.

The mission was considered highly successful. Bomb damage assessment (BDA) indicated that the strikes resulted in a large supply area being destroyed.

However, rarely satisfied, intense displeasure arose among some embassy bureaucrats when photos revealed damaged villages outside the target list. The Agency intervened and smoothed over the problem. Moreover, construction temporarily ceased in the Beng Valley and the supply areas remained vacant.

Inactivity in road construction did not persist. By 18 November, eleven miles of hard topped road had been completed from Moung Sai. In addition, fifty miles south of Moung Sai, road survey and brush clearing had reached Moung Houn (L-34), only twenty-seven nautical miles from Pak Beng and the Mekong



Existing and projected Chinese all-weather roads in Military Region One in 1969 that in later years extended south to Ban Pak Beng on the Mekong River. A Vietnamese road ran from Dien Bien Phu to the Nam Ou at Moug Khoua to link with an artery from Moug Sai. Since no bridge existed across the Nam Ou, supplies were offloaded and barged to the west bank or south on the river to enemy units located north of Luang Prabang.

Godley (prepared by Mia Jacob. Site numbers added by the Author.)

River. By this time, two AAA battalions were introduced, complete with radar van equipment to provide fire control support for 37mm and 57mm guns. These formidable weapons, along with 12.7mm and 23mm guns, were positioned on adjacent mountain tops, accompanied road crew progress, and again began firing at planes entering the area in December.

It was considered that at the expense of other road projects, high priority was assigned to this road, and a rough portion would extend to Pak Beng sometime in 1970.

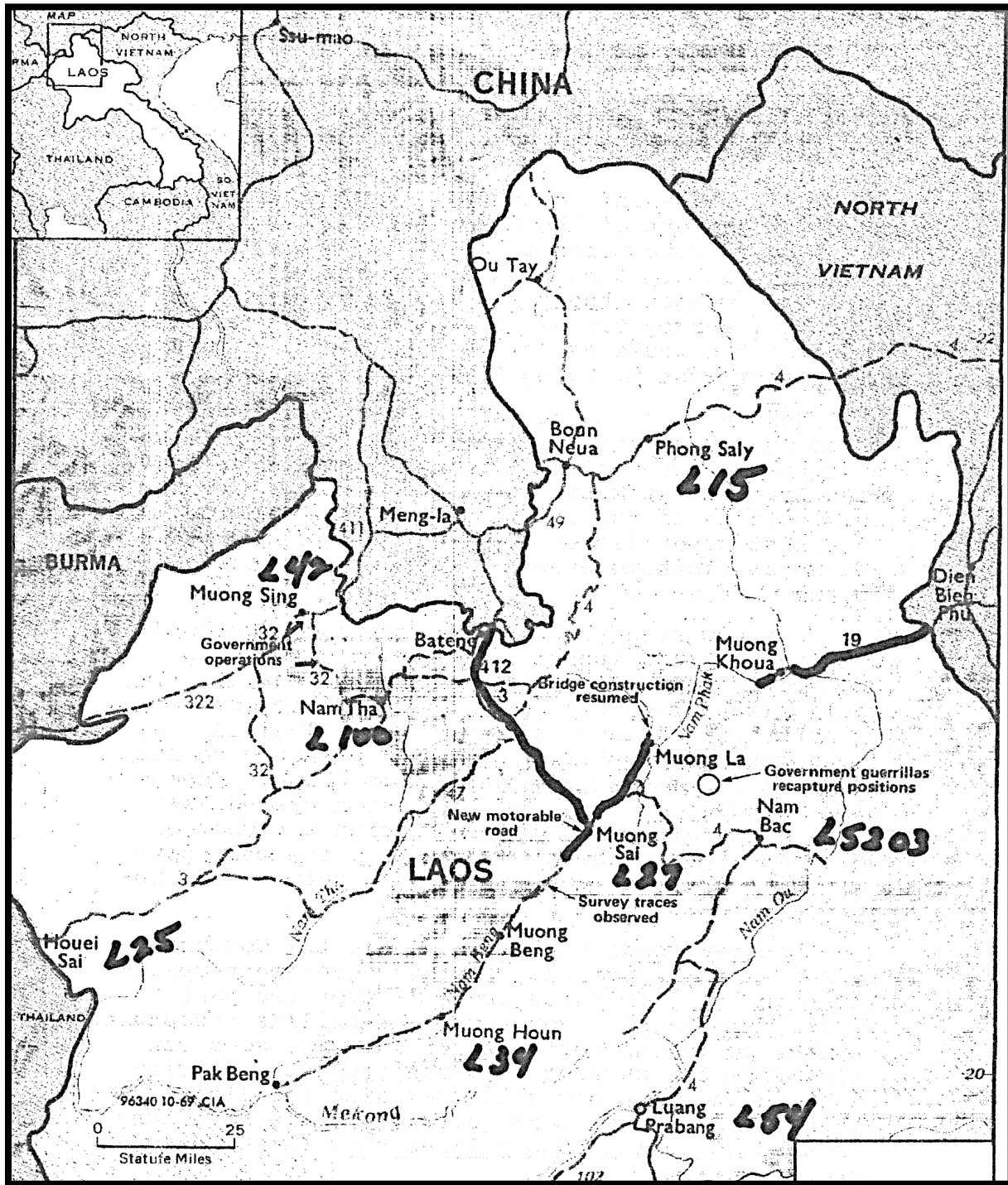
Naturally, Thai leaders, perplexed and concerned over the intent of constructing such a road, feared a Chinese invasion.

Concerned Lao leaders took a more pragmatic view. The Chinese attaché in Vientiane denied any involvement in the road project, and the Pathet Lao representative there falsely stated it was merely a Lao communist effort. Even though these declarations were generally considered bogus, the RLG believed it better to avoid a diplomatic skirmish at this time.

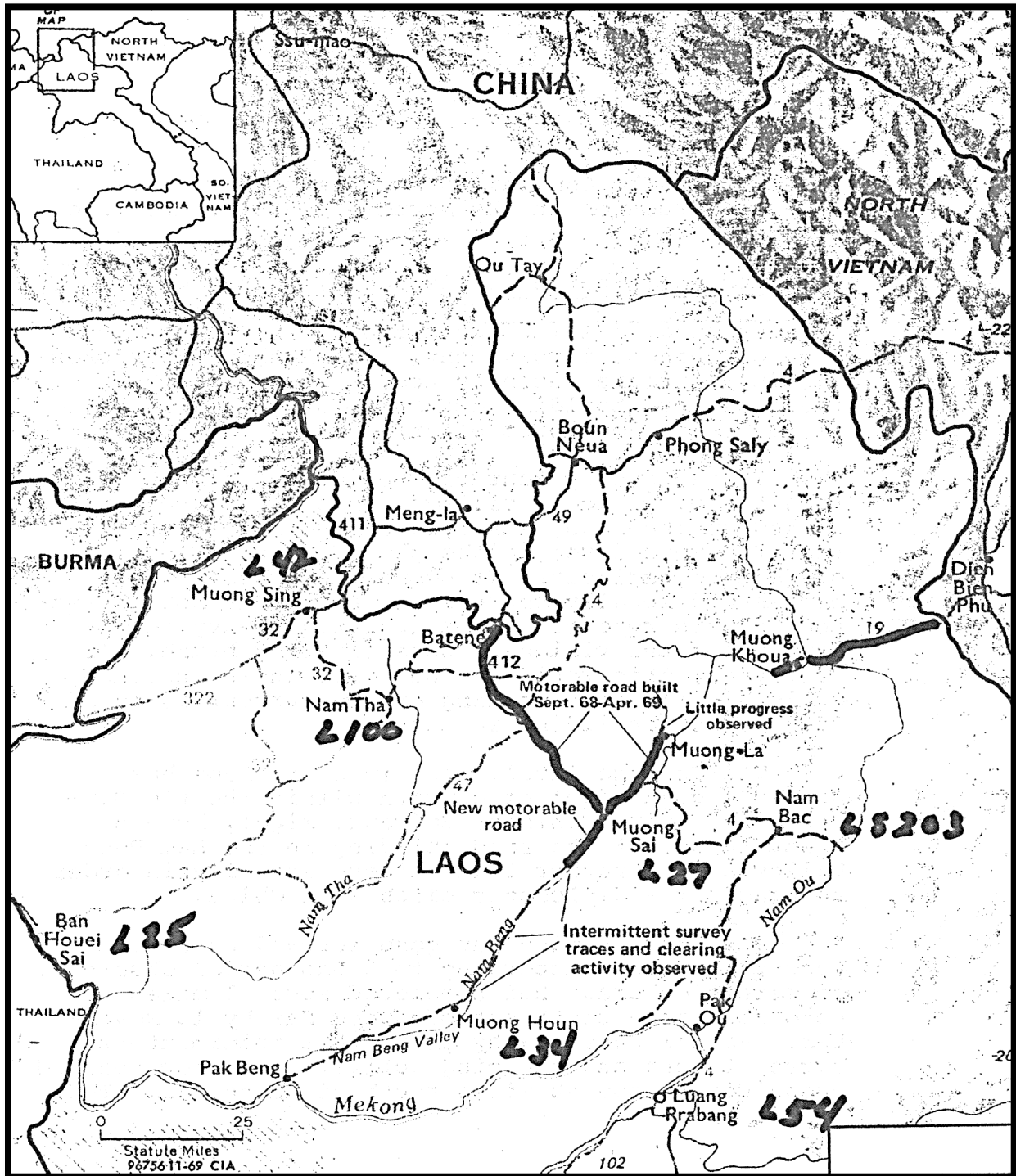
Accelerating road construction, by the second week in December, the drivable portion of Route-46 had progressed and been extended ten miles in one week. By then it was twenty-seven miles from Moung Sai and about halfway to Moung Houn. However, there was still no tangible evidence of construction activity south of Moung Houn.

Since October, almost forty-five miles of road had been completed southwest of Moung Sai. By late December and early January, an unfinished, but vehicle-capable road was open five miles from Moung Houn. Using the more efficient segment technique, further construction progress was noted along some sections of the road.

Reconnaissance revealed a recently installed AAA site near Moung Sai that increased the number of guns to fifty in that area.



10/25/69 CIA map of Chinese road construction progress south of Mung Sai toward the Mekong River. Route-19, the Vietnamese supply line from Dien Bien Phu, had been improved on both sides of the Ou River.



11/21/69 CIA map showing accelerated work on the Chinese Road southwest of the Mung Sai crossroads toward Mung Houn.

Bill Sullivan continued his spiel in the Congressional hearings with a bit of history and reality from a State Department perspective: [North Vietnamese leaders] *"long range objective in Laos is to control it through its Lao communist clients. In 1950 [they] set up the Free Lao Front (Neo Lao Issara), later named the Lao Patriotic Front (Neo Lao Hak Sat).*

The Pathet Lao (the fighting arm was renamed as of late 1965) are a façade [a favorite word of government types] to gain domestic and international support. The North Vietnamese supply and encadre the NLHS and the LPLA, and regular NVA units are critical to any sizable LPLA military operation.

The NLHS would be weak without North Vietnamese political, military, and economic support. The long-term goal is to govern Laos. [The Pathet Lao order of battle] as of September was 48,375 troops: battalions included 25 infantry, 64 mixed LPLA/NVA, two armored, 12 field artillery, eight mixed AAA, 13 engineer, plus 18 dissident Neutralist. [The Soviet interest was tailored to] increase influence in the area, check Chinese influence, and undercut the USG position. The USSR has played a restraining role. [The leaders] would prefer neutralist solutions in Laos and Cambodia to provide buffers between Thai and North Vietnamese people. Little change was expected in Lao Soviet policy.

United States policy and interests were best suited to an independent and neutral Laos. [Therefore], USG wants to preserve the Geneva Accords [on Laos] of 1962. The aim is to preserve the structure of the Geneva Accords and seek their full implementation. Because of the nature and strength of the North Vietnamese in Laos, the problem of maintaining both the independence and neutrality of Laos has been very complex.

[To achieve this] our policy has been to limit our objectives and limit the means devoted to the achievement of the

objectives. [There is however a] danger that Laos could become another SVN...

[Currently], the Plain of Jars [operation] has no overwhelming military value, but figures in the fighting because controlling it confers political advantage [in any ceasefire negotiations].

[There are] two geographically distinct conflicts in Laos. One in the panhandle where North Vietnamese are trying to keep supply lines to South Vietnam open. This is essentially a military conflict related to the war in South Vietnam and of secondary interest to the RLG.

The second conflict in North Laos is almost political as military. The outcome will define the character of Lao neutralism and if it will survive at all."

Air Attaché (AIRA) chief at the U.S. Embassy, Colonel Tyrell, added other useful information for the congressional subcommittee to digest:

"In 1969 additional air effort started after the fall of Na Khang [LS-36]. The request came from [Meo General] Vang Pao through the RLG. Ambassador Sullivan was phasing out, so a vacuum [existed in regard] to old policies. AIRA developed a plan to provide air support that VP said he needed to stop the on-going enemy offensive. This was submitted to 7/13 Air Force for the assets. [The additional aircraft resulted] in a 100 percent increase in strikes. This enabled VP's initial success at Xieng Khouang Ville. Then the enemy attacked Moung Soui in the rainy season and surprised everybody. VP tried to take it back and was not successful, probably because there were more enemy [forces involved] than anyone had estimated. Then VP went on the PDJ. [We] think the air effort hurt the enemy more than anyone realized. They were overextended and VP hit to the east instead of Moung Soui.

Just before Tyrrell left Laos Colonel Duskin indicated the NVA had reinforced the area north of the PDJ."

Seeking coherent ways to withdraw from Southeast Asia, particularly Laos, during the course of meetings, looking for prime fodder, Symington managed to wheedle an admission from Sullivan that there never was any written formal obligation by USG to either Meo or Lao leaders to remain in the country should geopolitical factors dictate a prudent withdrawal. In fact, USG's early intent was to structure aid to Laos in such a way that it would be easy to depart the country at a moment's notice. However, as the war continued to escalate, entanglement and stakes measurably increased, making the original policy more difficult to achieve.

Reinforcing Sullivan's reflections on USG obligations to Laos, at the same time as the subcommittee meetings, in Paris Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma stated that a tacit agreement existed with USG, based on an unwritten agreement made in 1964 with the U.S. Ambassador (Unger). The U.S. would provide aid to defend Laotian independence, neutrality, and territorial integrity.

Disclosure of the Lao war continued to increase with additional hearings and new principals. Before month's end, on the 28th, Senator Fulbright officially "let some kittens out of the bag," admitting in a media interview that USG involvement in Laos constituted a major operation. Now many American people, previously unaware of the formerly unpublicized aspect of the Second Indochina War, received a legitimate, unvarnished taste of yet another adjunct to what was actually occurring in Southeast Asia.

Fulbright divulged during the interview that the Lao operation was conducted by the Central Intelligence Agency under the auspices of the National Security Agency (NSA) and for some

time had been approved by both Democrat and Republican administrations. Reaffirming what Souvanna Phouma had recently revealed, USG had no tangible written defense agreement with Laos. Assistance to Laos was sanctioned under Article 6 of the 1962 Geneva Agreements.

A secret normally remains a secret only if a single person holds the information close to his vest. With Fulbright's admission, whatever thin veneer previously existed in respect to the Lao War was forever shattered.

For years reporters, normally relying on U.S. Embassy briefings or scuttlebutt derived from questionable sources in local Vientiane bars, or plagiarizing from freelance peers to file timely dateline reports, had been attempting to worm their way into the Military Region Two hinterlands to obtain an actual glimpse of what some called the secret war. Although extremely rare, some correspondents who did manage to arrive at Long Tieng, for example, were summarily and not too gently ejected by enraged Case Officers like the burly reporter-hating Tony Poe. Their fate could have been far worse if Vang Pao had his way--the hole was not kind to those who were incarcerated in its depths.

Reporters had no access to our Udorn-based Air America facility, but at times we were approached by media types at eating or drinking establishments in Lao river towns, Bangkok, or Udorn town. However, at the cost of termination, we had been cautioned not to talk to these people. Nevertheless, one was a target anywhere, even while on leave in the States. If someone in the news business discovered that you were associated with the Lao war, they would attempt to arrange an interview. I personally declined one. Wayne Knight only conducted one Company/Agency-approved interview. He was so badly misquoted

that a bad taste lingers today when he thinks about investigative news reporters.

Denial of battlefield access in Laos was totally unlike the situation in South Vietnam, where vetted and accredited news people were able to ride to the front on military aircraft, and allowed to view war torn areas. Media attached to Laos normally had only been accorded this privilege during crucial periods when large refugee movements were underway at Sam Tong, or when deemed politically expedient to further expose North Vietnam's participation in the war. Events in 1968 that involved large reversals in RLG gains, loss of territory, and many refugees loosened the strictures and worldwide reporting escalated.

The summer's successful PDJ operation was impossible to conceal, and stimulated increased interest in the kingdom. Mentioning "freewheeling, CIA-paid Air America pilots, the Lord Jims of Laos," *Time* reporters filed a somewhat accurate article in the magazine:

"...Though there are no U.S. ground troops fighting in Laos, the country has become even more of a client state than Viet Nam [Vietnam]. Laos received more U.S. aid per capita than any other country...in a country of 2,825,000 people, one-third of whom live in Communist-held areas. The Americans admit to the presence of 75 military personnel serving as advisors in the capital and the [deleted] military regions. There are also more than 200 CIA agents. 'Laos is an agency country,' a longtime Vientiane observer notes. ²⁰

The silver fleets of the CIA contract carriers, Air America and Continental Airlines, have for years provided tactical support for the most effective government force in Laos-General

²⁰ Quoting unsubstantiated sources was and still is a favorite method of reporters' fabrication when they do not have the facts or have an agenda. One could call this creative writing.

Vang Pao's Meo tribesmen. The CIA men and the military advisors train, equip, support and transport the entire Royal Laotian military effort. Americans have been known to advise on tactics on the battalion level.

The Americans justify their involvement in Laos on the ground that the North Vietnamese were there first. It is largely clandestine because like the North Vietnamese presence, it violates the 1962 Geneva Accords, which supposedly neutralized Laos. The military-aid program, for example, is not run by the military-assistance group (MAG) but by USAID through a euphemistically titled 'requirements office.'

...The U.S officially admits to flying 'armed reconnaissance' missions over Laos (i.e. firing only when fired upon). But in fact, besides bombing the Ho Chi Minh trail, Thai based American planes provide considerable tactical air support to the Royal Laotian Army, flattening whole towns in the Communist Pathet Lao zone. In the last eleven months the bombing has increased fivefold..."²¹

²¹ Segment Sources:

Portions Gleaned from the United States Subcommittee Meeting on U.S. Security Agreement and Commitments Abroad of the Committee on Foreign Relations, 11/20-22/69.

Powers, *The Man Who Kept the Secrets: Richard Helms and the CIA*, (New York: Knoff, Inc., 1979), 204-205.

CIA Bulletin, 04/04/69., CIA Bulletin, Chinese roadbuilding in northern Laos continues but the effort has slowed considerably in recent weeks, 05/03/69.

CIA Bulletin, Recent aerial photography confirms that the Chinese are pushing ahead with road construction in the northwest, 11/25/69.

CIA Bulletin, The communists are presenting their road construction in the northwest as a Pathet Lao program, 11/21/69. CIA Bulletin, 12/11/69.

CIA Bulletin, There are no signs at this time that the Chinese intend to push road construction further south than Moug Houn this dry season, 01/06/70.

PL Lamy, *Barrel Roll 1968-73: An Air Campaign in Support of National Policy Foreign Relations*, 29, Research Report, Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama 05/10/95.

Joe Leeker, *Air America in Laos 2: Military Aid*, 50, 58.

THE FIELD

"I'm trying to whip another letter out as they have me scheduled for standby to go upcountry. I only get one to two days off at a time now. It is getting old fast as I am not the ball of fire I once was.

It looks like we are being publicized more now due to the prying senators. There have been teams of reporters and newsmen in Laos trying to make something out of nothing. Of course, they don't see everything either. I suppose the TV coverage will be greater now. Remember, you don't know anything and as far as you know I am working for the refugees and I carry rice as cargo [as in the book's title-Rice, Refugees, and Rooftops].

Politically this notoriety will do our operation no good. Sometimes I think that these people who stir up these things that are part of our foreign policy are not loyal Americans and are probably on another country's payroll. What else could it be? The news media is particularly bad along this line."

10/21/69 Letter Home.

After a thorough examination in the hangar by maintenance personnel, followed by a test flight, late on Tuesday 204B 13-Foxtrot was declared airworthy and released to me for upcountry work. Bennie Shaffer was scheduled as my backseat companion. It was still daylight when we arrived at Long Tieng, but we flew only a little over an hour.

EW Knight Email, 10/11/00.

Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 314.

Greenway and Marmon, *Time Magazine*, *The Unseen Presence*, 10/17/69.

Time, *The Chinese Highwaymen*, 12/05/69,
www.time.com/time/magazine/printout.

Don Moody, 4-6, 8-9; John Pratt, *Vietnam Voices*, 407.

Unusually late rains curtailed some allied air strikes, but with allied air leading the way, and friendly outposts constantly being established, like the hilltop where I recently had the tent fly incident overlooking the road to provide additional support, our troops continued to move northeast in force from the Khang Khay area to join with Nong Pet units. Additional caches like the one I was involved with earlier were discovered and removed from the communist inventory by USAF and our helicopters.

Wednesday, we spent the entire day at Lima Lima shuttling supplies forward to hilltop positions in support of troop defense and movements.

Thursday another pilot joined me for a mission out of Luang Prabang. We remained on station until the mission was canceled because of foul weather in the target area. Since I had soared through a hundred hours, I was relieved and deadheaded to Alternate on 13F, and then to Udorn on Caribou 393.

JARINA IN THE SOUTH AGAIN

On the day I left for Site-20A, Jarina had a proficiency check with the CPH in Hotel-76. Then he departed the Udorn air base late for Savannakhet in Hotel-66 with Tom Cournoyer.

Even though the Moung Phine operation was in its final stages, on the 22nd, Mike moved troops east from the SGU training camp located southeast of Lima-39 to Moung Phalane Southwest (L-61A). The movement was likely tailored to reinforce a north-south defensive line and to cover units disengaging from forward areas.

Thursday, he continued working east, backhauling troops from Lima-61A to Keng Ka Boa (LS-235), General Ma's remote airstrip northwest of Savannakhet. From there, he moved units to the Moung Phine area.

The following morning, he was directed to Pakse and to the Bolovens Plateau, where he spent the entire day shuttling between PS-38, PS-22, and other area outposts.

On Saturday, in a rare assignment, Mike was sent across the river to Ubon, where he conducted operations with the Thai border police countering border crossers and insurgents. I had done this in the past, working newly developed and marginal landing zones in the southeastern hills.

The next day Jarina was recalled to Udorn. ²²

BACK TO MR-1

The object of my temporary affair in Bells again became clear when I was scheduled for a proficiency check in Papa Foxtrot Hotel on 27 October. The exercise likely included an FCF, for the CPH had conducted a proficiency check with Dick Lister on the previous day.

I did not expect to fly again so late in the month, for I had already accumulated considerable flight time. However, working on the premise that work in northwestern Military Region One, where a distinct lull in action garnered less time, two days later I was scheduled for a RON at Nam Yu. Unless assigned a helicopter, getting to or from the remote base could be frustrating and time consuming. As usual, this was the case.

Early Wednesday morning, I boarded CASI C-47 XW-PDE at the "Q" warehouse. With an interim stop at Luang Prabang to unload cargo, the extreme distance covered placed me at Site-118A about noon. As expected, I was assigned to fly Hotel-75 with Joe Siaotong and training Flight Mechanic Hill. I had not flown out of Nam Yu in some time, but managed to struggle through the remainder of the day without incident. Since the opening of the

²²Mike Jarina Interviews.

Air America hostel at Ban Houei Sai and vastly improved accommodations available there, we had stopped RONs at Tony's somewhat imperfect digs. As a result, rapport suffered proportionally, but that had actually occurred years before when we began RON at the Sam Tong hostel.

Management was right about reduced flight time, for a dry season front moved south into the area from China on Friday and I only managed to fly about two and a half hours.

Priority and requirements for scarce rotary wing assets to support the Plain of Jars operation superseded Customer needs in other military regions. Therefore, on the last day of the month, I was directed to ferry the ship to The Alternate. The last-minute respite from a low to a high flight time environment allowed me to almost duplicate the previous outstanding month.

During the day, the crew of Papa Foxtrot Juliet received battle damage while working the area overlooking the 71/74 Nong Pet junction twelve miles northeast of LL. There were no injuries and the crew recovered at the Xieng Khouang strip. PFJ was later ferried to Udorn for repairs. ²³

JARINA CONTINUES IN MR-2

Paralleling my sojourn upcountry, Jarina rode 653 to Long Tieng and CASI Porter XW-PEK to Sam Tong. There he joined Wayne Knight and Frank Fee in Hotel-49 for a line check. The CPH had arrived the previous day in Hotel-45 with Izzy Freeman to accomplish the same requirement and obtain a current taste of the PDJ operation.

During the abbreviated day, Mike and Wayne worked the northeast corner of the PDJ and around the high ground at Phou

²³ 10/31/69 Air America XOXO.

Pheung, where a FAR battalion from Military Region Five had recently been air lifted. At the end of the day, calling the flight a spot check, Knight rode back to Udorn with Elmer Munsell.

With adverse weather investing the entire region, Mike's work on the Plain was limited. Moreover, while flying at low level near the 7/74 junction, he was shot at over Ban Na Boua.

He deadheaded to Udorn on C-123s 293 and 653.

During my absence action continued in the Plain of Jars operation. As the enemy introduced more forces into the region, troops in contact (TIC) and some friendly losses increased. Despite interdiction of Route-7 and the occasional truck destroyed, Phou Nok Kok, as an impediment to through traffic to the Plain, continued to be a primary target. Foggy morning conditions were perfect for attacks, and at 0820 hours on the 25th Black Lion reported TIC. When conditions improved, a A-1 Hobo and other flights supported the site. Enemy contact was broken after 1100 hours.

At Phou So, FAG Blue Moon experienced TIC. A brief encounter occurred late the next morning, but was soon over.

On the 28th, as enemy moved west from the border toward the Xieng Khouang Ville Valley from eastern Zone Steel, Alleycat advised Cricket control that Red Tiger FAG had reported TIC. No radio contact was established. Poppy indicated that Red Tiger had an enemy concentration in his area, and by 0717 hours Raven-45 had talked to Red Tiger. Firefly made contact with Red Tiger over an hour later but could not work the area because of adverse weather.

Poppy also reported that Rocket Mobile, formerly located on commanding ground near Ban Sa Noi (LS-119) to observe and harass new road construction from North Vietnam, was no longer viable. The Rocket Mobile position was lost during the night and the

troops had moved a little over a mile northwest. A-1 flights were again unable to help because of weather.

Black Lion reported TIC during the early afternoon. Raven-44 and a Zorro flight arrived to silence an 82mm mortar. TIC was terminated by 1435 hours. ²⁴

²⁴ Segment Sources:
Mike Jarina Interviews.
EW Knight Email.
Extracts from ABCCC Reports. Although intensively interesting and revealing as to the action associated with VP's operation, October was the final 1969 ABCCC reporting from the Author's research.

A lengthy letter I posted home in early November tended to summarize some recent activity on the Plain of Jars and my relatively unvarnished participation in the operation to date. Also, in response to my Father's 16 October letter, were my thoughts regarding the seething caldron of war dissenters in "America the Beautiful":

"It is finally turning cool, but we have had an extension of the rainy season much to everyone's surprise. It had affected the air support that the boys need so badly to equalize the odds. Nevertheless, they are doing outstanding work. They drove into Xieng Khouang with three [captured] tanks and an armored tank with AA mounted on it the other day. They captured five 85mm guns in one sweep, and are finding caches every day. I continue to sight some from the air and relay the information for demolition teams to act upon.

It is becoming more difficult to fly low on parts of the PDJ, as enemy units are starting to roam about. In the main though, it is interesting as there are many parts that I am seeing for the first time. I have taken several pictures, some in color, which should prove interesting. The camera broke down the other day and cost me 10 dollars to have fixed. Probably the [aircraft] vibrations had something to do with it.

I have been collecting various items which I think I can have shipped home. Guns are out as the post office won't allow them to be shipped through the mail. So far, a Crosley sewing machine, Chinese gas mask, temple gong, field telephones, [Chairman] Meo buttons, and PL money. Of course, it is junk, but

it has some [sentimental] value to me as war booty. You learn to be a real pack rat in this game.

I am surprised that we still own the PDJ. There are small units of NVA moving into the PDJ area from the east and they are reputed to number in the thousands. I suppose when [the enemy offensive] comes they will hit with massive force. Our air is doing a good job discouraging them from massing and they are taking their lumps. Intelligence has [sources project] us wiping out entire units.

Since we captured the PDJ thousands of people have rallied to our side. Of course, they want to get away from the bombing, but this is not the only reason. They [the refugees] want a society which doesn't lie to them and prevent them mobility. Perhaps under General Vang Pao and [with] our help they can find this life. These are things that are not reported and probably never will be, for our biased news media won't [permit] it. Some of these people have been living for years in communist controlled territory and were only too glad to leave when given a chance. It has been this way ever since I have had this job. Now those PL & NVA who are left in the hills around the PDJ are issuing chits to those people left saying that they will return and make good on the debts. The enemy will never enjoy the benefits they once had on the PDJ.

[These are] reasons why dissenters in the States should just be quiet [on the Lao subject] as they 'know from nothing.' They must leave war to those of us that know it. It is all part of foreign policy and is needed. If it wasn't the war, they [the most vocal] would be yapping about something else. ¹

Whatever happened to those who wanted a good education and were willing to work hard for it? Whatever happened to those

¹ At this point in the letter, I begin waxing philosophical.

who loved their country and would never compromise it? Whatever happened to those who loved their parents, girlfriends, baseball, football, and all the things that used to be the American way of life? I think it is time for the great silent majority to stand up and be heard as Dick Nixon referred to them the other night. I realize that it is hard to organize the good guys, but the good guys are not stupid. Why let a bunch of miserable [individuals] tarnish our image, prolong a war, and attempt to wreck our society, young as it is, but well proven? I think this nasty thing should be brought out into the open now-right now while it is still controllable. It is your duty and those like you to voice your dissent against the dissenters and make them realize that they, not the majority or the government are wrong. Let them damn the murderers of Hue, the violators of human dignity, the true aggressors. [Condemn NVN leaders] for mistreatment of our prisoners and a super plan to keep the world in a constant state of turmoil-not our government and a people who saved the world from totalitarian aggressors in the past and must do so in the future to enable these self-same dissenters to exist.

So, [in conclusion], I hope that those dissenters who are now focusing their attention on Laos are not able to disturb the trend of events, as they are definitely in favor of the free world. Think about this, for you probably don't hear this kind of talk where you are.

11/07/69 Letter Home.

MR-2 AFFAIRS

Saturday, 1 November, was a full working day out of the Lima-22 forward base in Hotel-75. It was pleasant to return to a familiar region and perform work I so enjoyed, a place where I

felt like I was actually contributing something to the war effort.

Adverse weather moved in the following morning, permitting only half the time in the field as the previous day.

I flew a little more on the third, but was relieved in the early afternoon. I deadheaded to Wattay Airport on C-123 556, where, after a considerable wait, I boarded PFJ late for Udorn.

During my short RON at Long Tieng, I conducted an unusual mission. Vang Pao requested that I fly him east to Pha Khao. He indicated that there were factions who wanted to get rid of him.² Therefore, he wanted to recon the hills surrounding Site-14 to find a good hiding place should he be seriously threatened. I was surprised, for I was unaware that anything bothered the brave man. The high hills of Pha Khao were one of the worst places to land an H-34, particularly for a pilot who was just gaining confidence in the machine again. We circled western

² Blaine Jensen Letter, 06/08/96. Vang Pao had been under pressure from Meo elders before, but had always prevailed. This time however, *"The threat was from the Lao in Vientiane, plus a little from Touby Ly Fong."* USAID nurse, "Dee" Dick found out about the plot at a high-level Laotian party in Vientiane. Dee was a good-looking single gal and the Lao officials invited her to parties...
...Vang Pao was really shaken. What was happening was very predictable. The company [Agency] was plowing large amounts of cash into VP's operation. VP had virtual control over all of that. In the minds of the Lao military [officers] and Touby, if Vang Pao was out of the way, they would be the ones getting rich-instead of VP. VP may have been making money, but he never shorted the soldiers' payroll, which was common practice everywhere else in Laos, nor did he have a phantom army on paper, which was also a common practice."

That threat reinforced VP's decision to continue using loyal body guards, who were paid very handsome salaries and given a lot of perks by AB-1 officers. Also, an American Case Officer accompanied the general everywhere he went.

All of the Americans realized that the loss of VP would mean the end of the entire operation...The theory proved true when VP was wounded at Na Khang in 1968. *"Things would have fallen apart had we not flown a high-powered group of Meo to Korat to see him and ascertain that he was alive and would truly recover."*

karsts out of sight of the village located in the eastern portion of the bowl until the general pointed to a grassy area that interested him. The landing presented a challenge, but light on fuel and payload, I managed to touch down on the slope. Vang Pao exited the cockpit and with a couple of his men, he walked the area. After a short period, he returned and climbed into the cockpit. Apparently satisfied, he directed me to return to The Alternate. That was the last time that I was aware of, or the general, mentioned any problems.

UDORN

Rick was still doing well after yet another bout of tonsillitis in October that caused spike fevers at night. The medicine prescribed by the Air Force doctor after a seizure seemed to be keeping this condition under control.

My speculative investments in Kuala Lumpur and Steamboat Springs were still viable, but did not produce any income.

In Kuala Lumpur the concrete block business, Concrete Masonry, a subsidiary of the Asian American holding company, was still operating, but there were continuing problems. It looked like some time would be necessary for the factory to become self-sufficient. Reports had New Era Oil finally operating at a profit, stimulating optimism that the company would prosper. However, there were problems with stockpiles and producing enough refined waste oil to satisfy the thirsty market.

Following Asian American's restructuring, we original investors lost a great percentage in the company to other parties. Therefore, the few of us remaining in Udorn considered dissolving Asian American and dividing up the shares. We had been attempting to get our share certificates in order for over two years, but had not because of Jim Coble's ineptness. If and

when this was finally accomplished, no one had any idea how much it would cost; perhaps it would not be worth the trouble.

Although I had written to the people in Steamboat Springs three times, I had not heard from anyone. I was a little upset, but assumed they were very busy, perhaps having problems with the Terry Peak project, and had nothing positive to report. I learned from the Steamboat paper that conglomerate Ling-Temco-Vought (LTV) had bought the company that owned the slopes and ski lifts at Mount Werner. A gondola was under construction with plans to reach the top of the mountain by 1970. The company also purchased all the adjacent land around the slopes that was available. As far as I knew this did not affect Sunray, except for the influence and funds that were projected to pour into the area. I had an idea that this would eventually increase the total worth of our company.

Charlie Williams finally wrote me toward the end of November, with positive information regarding Sunray's current and future projects. At Mount Werner, an addition to an existing Sunray facility would be completed by the middle of December. There were four other construction projects either planned or nearing completion. One was expansion of Ski Times Square with twenty-two additional condominium units, shops, and restaurants. The South Dakota project at Terry Peak was looking somewhat improved. Roads were functional. Organization and finance of the company had stabilized. There was some problem with the former Warbonnet management over the transfer of mineral rights that was being addressed.

Closer to home, FEPA union leaders continued attempts to keep members informed and interested in developments. In late October a handout was disseminated by the Vientiane group regarding injury and death benefits for Air America employees. Settlements for dependents in case of a provider's death

included Workman's Compensation payments under the Longshoreman's Act. Company benefits amounted to 25,000 dollars if death occurred only during extra-hazardous conditions (less than half this total under normal conditions), which was solely dependent on Company Board of Directors' determination. Of course, the language used for extra-hazardous was quite vague and egregiously open to interpretation. Compared to Stateside carriers who provided 100,000 dollars of accidental death and dismemberment (AD&D) insurance, our pay and benefits were obviously so substandard as to be laughable.

In the case of capture, full salary was payable from the Department of Labor under the U.S. War Compensation Act.

Non-U.S. citizens were covered under the Company Personnel Manual.

It was apparent from the information contained in the handout, some I had never seen before, that the Company's insurance policies were not consistent with the U.S aviation industry in regard to pilots. In some respects, the Company did provide for employees injured in the line of duty. In addition to covering medical expenses, an injured pilot was provided full salary while convalescing.

As of November, membership in the Far East Pilots Association included eighty-five percent of all 500 Air America pilots. This number included bases in Thailand, Laos, Vietnam, and Japan.

In an effort to remain one step ahead of the fledgling union, and perhaps dissuade some individuals from joining, the Company offered a pay raise that I considered inadequate-too little, too late. It included a one dollar sixty cent hourly increase in the pay scale, insurance and medical benefits, and a new home leave program. I was underwhelmed by the Company generosity.

The association had a contract completed that was slated for presentation to the Company by the middle of the month. No one knew what the end result of the upcoming negotiations would be, but the assumption was that we would receive slightly more benefits than the Company offered.

The International Federation of Airline Pilots Association had invited FEPA to join the IFALPA organization. Doing this would strengthen the union's overall position, especially since recognition was still not forthcoming from the National Labor Mediation Board negating any decision appeals to the organization. Media publicity that was certain to surface was touchy because of the nature of work Air America performed and other unmentioned factors.

Unfortunately, the honest workingman was constantly challenged to fight for an equitable position in life. Thanks to Senator Albert Gore and others yearly intent on slicing our overseas tax exemption to the bone, a bill emerged from Congress that, if passed, would restrict our annual 25,000-dollar physical presence tax exclusion to just 6,000 dollars. Unless a company made up the difference, such a bill would drastically reduce incentive for an individual to remain overseas. In addition, it would create a situation whereby an overseas employee would have to reevaluate the positive and negative aspects of working in a foreign land. It would seem that without a substantial tax benefit, the cons of enduring endemic diseases and foregoing stateside creature comforts would greatly outweigh the pros.

Toward the end of the month Taipei Company management was presented a copy of the Far East Pilot Association (FEPA) work agreement with the intention of negotiating in December. Company refusal to discuss bilateral terms of an agreement would result in a forty-eight-hour work slowdown or actual work stoppage.

Because of the high level of activity in Laos, the industrial action would commence in Japan and proceed through the system with Udorn, the weakest chapter, being the last to stage a walkout. Since helicopter pilots were a peculiar breed, and could rarely agree on anything tangible, there was some question if all the pilots would participate.

All expected the Company to introduce as many nasty tricks as possible. However, the military option was not deemed one of them, for it would result in excessive and adverse media publicity at a time when agenda driven whistle blowers had already exposed the Lao operation and seriously muddied the waters. From current talk, I believed that friends would be lost, but no broken heads would result.

As part of Air America management, Wayne Knight was out of the loop, not privy to current union activity. Exacerbating this lack of information, he was extremely busy performing FCFs and the training of many new pilots, hence he had little time, energy, or interest to digest and filter inane rumor.

He purported to have known nothing regarding any Company subterfuge to quell the association, and claimed that if he had he would have spoken out against them. Although various Customers weighed the pros and cons of introducing military replacements, this was not in the domain of Air America.

As to the unsubstantiated "helicopter pilots are a dime a dozen and I can hire them off the street" quip attributed to President Hugh Grundy, he was doubtful. ³

"Old Hugh was understated. He seemed to talk mostly in legalese, and Wayne could rarely pin him down in regard to anything. Wayne was not a Grundy fan, but it would have been unlike him to utter such a statement, even in total privacy.

³This despite a letter I wrote home to that effect.

*However, he could think of others who may have made such a statement, but he never heard such a declaration from any in Taipei Air America management. He suspects it might have originated closer to home.”*⁴

Since FEPA's inception and pursuit of recognition, several pilots had asked Mike Jarina to join the pilot union. He refused. Mike had his monthly retirement and was generally satisfied with Company policy. As a young man, when Mike worked in a factory for twenty-five cents per hour between high school and college, the CIO union was beginning to recruit people. At that time, he failed to understand what a union was really doing for workers. Now the only real problem Mike had with unions was the insistence that they initially and continually deliver something to justify their existence.

Mike at one time remarked that he was well aware of what was going on, so some pilots assumed that he was part of the Company.⁵ Other individuals asked his opinion regarding FEPA and its goals. Mike said frankly, *“It doesn't make any difference to me what you do. I am a Company man. If the Company doesn't make money, none of us will have a job.”*

⁴ It is entirely feasible the supposed Hugh Grundy rumor could have been mere smoke, manufactured and advanced by local FEPA leaders' intent on extending union membership, while enflaming and strengthening hardline members' resolve. Anything was possible at this critical juncture in union formation.

I for one loved my job and was not going anywhere. Flying in Laos offered an extraordinary challenge not often experienced by an individual in the course of the normal and mundane phases of life. Moreover, the experience smacked of absolute power, for like any captain of a ship, an aircraft commander, responsible for everything related to his machine and crew, was the head honcho. This responsibility often included decisions affecting life.

Still, after many years working for the Company, the statement and threat sorely pained me, as I am sure it did others.

⁵ In the late fifties when the CIA was being organized, Mike had actually refused a job offer with the Agency.

Mike wholeheartedly believed the pilot group needed someone to speak for the pilot force. However, the matter really did not affect him and he did not think he should exert any influence. He indicated, *"If you people want a union, this is fine, but he was not sure he could ever go on strike if one was called."* He added that if you fellows wanted to go by the book, then the Air America flight time rules would constitute grounds to legally slow operations if everyone complied with regulations.

As one of a few holdouts, Jarina, who did not have as much to lose as other pilots, eventually agreed to join FEPA with the stipulation that he would never strike.⁶ At someone's house one evening, Knight and Goddard ushered Mike aside and inquired why he had joined the union. Mike attempted to explain that it did not make sense for individual pilots to complain to Wayne over common matters. Citing an example that bothered him, he said that sometimes he went into the CPH office with a bona fide gripe and no one was available, or it was impossible to make his point understood. This was particularly the case with Goddard. Sometimes the office pogue's answer was, *"You are taking up valuable CPH time or I don't have enough time to discuss this with you."* He earnestly believed it would be far more convenient and efficient for all concerned if a spokesman approached a manager with pilot complaints.

Goddard was renown for having a short fuse. He was particularly upset when Jarina joined the union, and took umbrage with Mike's accusation saying, *"What do you mean, you can't talk to anybody?"*

Winking at Wayne, Mike replied, *"See. That is exactly what I mean."* That declaration concluded the conversation.

⁶ Billy Pearson, Ed Reid, Dick Elder, and Phil Goddard were others.

Mike had a particular reason for joining. He had constantly been on the schedule, flying a lot during a ninety-day period. Needing a rest, he asked to go on early scheduled time off (STO). However, Assistant Chief Pilot for the H-34 program, McEntee said he was only allocated four days STO. Moreover, he informed Mike that he could not use his time off because of the time restrictions: ninety hours in any thirty-day period. ⁷

He pleaded his case with Goddard next. Phil said no. *"If you are tired and want time off go see the doctor."*

Frustrated, Mike said, *"He is only authorized to give me four days."* Then he went home.

Presented with a rare day off the schedule, the following morning Mike visited the Air America clinic and informed Doctor No he was tired.

The Chinese gentleman said, *"You only want time off."* When Mike acknowledged, yes that was true, Kao indicated he could only accord him four days off.

At this point, Goddard entered the clinic saying, *"Sorry Mike, if you still desire to go on STO, go ahead. We looked at your flight time."* Not only had Mike flown ninety hours during the month, he had thirty consecutive hours tacked on to the previous month making a total of 120 hours. Exasperated, Jarina had had enough of the Flight Department's petty games; the helicopter group needed FEPA. ⁸

BACK TO MR-2

On the seventh, following an FCF of Hotel-53 and finding it unsuitable for upcountry work, Mike Jarina was reissued Hotel-32

⁷This was 120 hours in 1965 when Mike Jarina arrived in Udorn.

⁸Mike Jarina Interview.
EW Knight Email, 10/14/00.

after which he and Frank Fee departed for Long Tieng. Despite arriving late, Mike was sent to the Lima Lima base for an abbreviated amount of work. When working on the Plain of Jars, he often flew north from The Alternate fully loaded underneath a cloud cover. Sometimes he raced Phil Goddard, who was flying a Bell. If shuttling or during the late afternoon and there was still an overcast, he would punch through the layer and, using the non-directional beacon (NDB) on Skyline, fly south on top and find a hole to descend just north of Sam Tong or on the Ngam Ngum.

Saturday morning Mike hopped over Skyline to Sam Tong. He picked up some passengers and launched east deep into Zone Steel and into Khammouane Province. Close to the border, the site was located twenty-three miles east of Moung Moc and seven miles north of Moung Tiouen (LS-91). Refueling at Site-46, he spent most of the day working the area. Upon return to Site-20A, he was recalled to Udorn.⁹

On the same day, I boarded CASI C-47 Papa Delta Echo at the "Q" warehouse for the early morning run to The Alternate. From there I caught a ride on Air America Porter 96X north to LL, where I joined the crew of Papa Foxtrot Foxtrot for an exfil mission with Papa Foxtrot Juliet at UG444650. This placed us in the hills three miles southeast of Phou Nok Kok, where friendly outposts had been established to protect Woodpecker Mountain's flanks and our patrols were beating the brush investigating and engaging enemy movements.

Upon return to Lima-22, I took sole command of PFJ with John Melvin.

⁹Mike Jarina Interviews.

Sunday developed into another day working out of LL. With defensive strong points planned at Nong Pet, Xieng Khouang Ville, and Lima-22 (Xieng Khouang), there was so much to do and so little time available. The urgency to accomplish these defensive measures was evidenced on the ninth when Lima-03 was attacked by enemy forces. Xieng Khouang Ville was held temporarily.

Following breakfast on the tenth, I ferried Vang Pao, his staff, and bodyguards out to a position on the Plain, dropped them off and continued to march.

Early that afternoon, arriving at Alternate, I was assigned to fly Hotel-15 with Flight Mechanic Gaza Eiler. I was not overly pleased to fly two dissimilar helicopters the same day. There was too much room for error, with gross differences in aircraft size, difference in sight pictures during approach, differences in control manipulation, and especially diverse differences in corrective emergency procedures. Never one to maintain silence when I considered a policy wrong, I had voiced my concerns, but with little stroke with management, I had no choice but to comply with their wishes.

Since there was no mention of my returning to Udorn in order to attend the first Marine Corps Birthday Ball to be held in town, I wondered if Dick Elder, still delegated to light duty in the CPH office while convalescing from a severe back injury after a Bell accident, had remembered what I had told him on the eighth about my attending the ball. ¹⁰

Gaza Eiler, a neighbor when I lived at the Godnoma compound on Soi Mahamet, had paid his dues and opted out of field work for less innocuous ground duties. A Flight Mechanic H-34

¹⁰ We had only recently begun celebrating the Marine Corps birthday in such a fashion.

supervisor, except for training and aircraft recoveries, he rarely flew the line, and I had not worked with the exceptional man in years. In fact, the only time I normally saw him was in the Club bar.

I was sitting in the cockpit with the rotors turning when someone in the air operations shack radioed me to hold in place. I was contemplating the nature of my next assignment when Vang Pao approached the helicopter with several people. As was his custom before boarding an aircraft, not overly confident regarding the performance of all pilots, he looked up to see what klutz was going to fly him that afternoon. Now, I am not the most recognizable individual on the pampas--sort of a face-in-the crowd type, however, VP and I had flown together several times over the years. Therefore, upon seeing me and recalling that I had flown him to Lima Lima in the morning he did a double take, grunted, and smiled in recognition, as he entered the cabin section.

Vang Pao was intent on conducting a fact-finding mission at some forward outposts. He also planned to issue orders for further troop movements and to show his face in order to help instill morale in the fighting men, who had been under pressure for several months, if not years.

After the general talked to officers at LL and at some other positions, we arrived at a low hilltop position south of Moug Kheung (L-109) in the northwest corner of the operating area. With the Site-109 area not considered entirely secure, the position represented the sector's front line. The former enemy LOC, Route-71, flowed over terrain east of Nong Pet, and remaining NVA/PL units had reputedly withdrawn into the western hills to avoid allied air strikes. I had not flown in the area since the early sixties, when it was controlled by Kong Le's

Neutralists and deemed safe to fly direct at altitude from Ban Na across the Plain of Jars to Phou Vieng and points north.

I was informed by hand signal (a cutting motion across the throat) to shut down while the general checked maps and parlayed with the site commander regarding the current situation. Chattering continued for some time while I stewed about not being called home for the ball. Finally, everyone was satisfied and we departed.

Before turning south toward LL, the transmission chip light mounted on the upper edge of the instrument console flashed red. This was a rare occurrence. After thousands of hours flying the H-34, it marked a first in my experience. Such an indication could indicate impending transmission gear failure and catastrophic seizure of the component, followed by blade stoppage, resulting in a "falling leaf" situation that gravity would resolve with ground contact. Somewhat different from an engine chip detector light, which might be caused by a defective wire or minor metal fuzz, I chose to treat the illuminated transmission light with concern. Therefore, somewhat tense, I turned right, intending to return to the pad. Before touching down, I radioed my deferred emergency in the blind. Pending inspection of the chip plug to determine a go-no-go situation, I deferred asking for immediate assistance.

After shutting down, I briefed Vang Pao as to the problem as we knew it. The general was unfazed. He had experienced and survived many crashes and incidents over the years--enough so he was not particularly concerned.

Gaza and I both climbed onto the fold-down transmission decks located on either side of the aircraft to investigate and attempt to isolate the problem. Inspection revealed that the output bearing of the tail rotor drive shaft was disintegrating. This had produced sufficient metal chips to activate the light.

It was not an immediate life-threatening situation, but certainly enough to ground the machine. I called for an aircraft to retrieve the general and his people. I did not like the idea of leaving Hotel-15 on the front lines, especially perched in the open and exposed 360 degrees on the hill, but I had little choice and there were sufficient troops available to guard the machine.

After Vang Pao left, we boarded 96W for a ten-minute flight to LL. A CASI Porter pilot flying XW-PCB took us to Alternate, where I talked to Udorn and had Gaza explain details of the damage. Since I had no machine to fly, I was recalled, not because of the Marine Corps Ball, but the incident. Toward the end of the day, I rode home in PFJ. Having plenty of time to think during the one hour and twenty-minute flight, I now had sufficient ammunition to press my point with the CPH regarding different model helicopters and different emergencies.

Since Elder was the only person remaining in the office, I had no chance to vent my anger on someone in authority. Wayne and Phil had already departed the facility to prepare for the birthday ball. Curious, I asked Dick why he failed to call me home so that I could attend the function. He answered that he forgot I was a former Marine. His reply did not make any sense at all, for Elder was known to have a steel-trap mind.

Tuie and I arrived at the party a little late, but not too late to participate in the pleasant camaraderie and bonding the Corps function inspired. As usual, the festivities stimulated boyish tendencies, as Ted Cash and others reveled in exploding nitrogen-filled balloons with their cigars. Fortunately, I did not have to fly the next day.

On the same day I was enjoying fun in the "Barrel," Mike Jarina was tapped for a day flight out of Paksane. He and Mick Forrest departed for Wattay in Hotel-44. Picking up some FAR

officers, they continued to Lima-35. After discussing future tactics, additional people boarded for inspection and work in the Tha Thom and Tha Vieng areas. Representing FAR's most forward advance on Route-4, Site-13 had been recovered by the third week of October, essentially sealing off enemy forays toward the Mekong River town. Mike recovered at Wattay Airport, where he left Hotel-44 and deadheaded to Udorn on C-123 555. ¹¹

KNIGHT

Since upcountry requirements remained at high levels, the month of November was very active for Udorn management types and CPH Knight in particular. Six new pilots requiring training were hired for the H-34 program--at least two additional in December. Although the actual reason was not established, it was assumed by some FEPA members that this constituted a Company-inspired last-ditch attempt to pack the helicopter program with especially culled new people who might oppose union formation. But, with the PDJ operation in question, it could also have represented a current need for H-34 double crew cockpit requirements.

Because these pilots arrived about the time FEPA was about to be accredited, among several pilots, Mike Jarina was skeptical of company motives. Management was telling people the pilots were being hired for their protection. Perhaps it was coincidental. During the latter stages of the Plain of Jars operation, there had been a real need for dual pilots in the cockpit, but there had not been much previous concern for such a requirement. Along with others, Mike believed the Company was packing the pilot force with new pilots they could control.

¹¹EWKnight Email, 10/13/00.

Mike Jarina Interviews.

Moreover, the recent arrivals most likely did not realize that they were potential scabs.

The new hiring push marked a distinct deviation from any previous influx of employees, in that not all the newbies were slated for command positions. Some would temporarily remain First Officers until it was judged that they should be upgraded to Captain, while others would permanently remain First Officers. As this policy marked a new normal, and there was a rush to provide warm bodies in the field, previous training requirements for First Officers were abrogated slightly. Those who recently arrived from the killing fields of Nam required considerably less attention and training. Others who were deficient in the operation of a throttle-twisting H-34, or had lied about their qualifications, required more attention. Unless someone knew a pilot and his training, the hiring process often proved a Washington crapshoot that did not always immediately produce a viable pilot. However, it did not take long to judge deficiencies, and bad pennies often weeded themselves out of the program.

New pilots receiving proficiency checks and deemed acceptable to send upcountry without further local training were:

Danny Kawalek (DOH 10/18/69), FG Steele (10/22/69), Fred Frahm (11/01/69) and Bill Foster (11/05/69). Bennett was an exception, who required additional training.

Robert Bailey (11/19/69) and PM Stuebe (11/19/69) checked in later in the month.

Established H-34 Captains receiving six-month proficiency checks during the period were: ACP Jerry McEntee, Larry Frazer, JJ McCauley, Tony Byrne, Tim Woosley, John Ford, John Burkeholder, Bob Caron, and Joe Lopes. All were considered

seasoned Lao veterans, some who had been employed for years with Air America.

Wayne did not conduct much local Bell work. That fell into Phil Goddard's realm. However, in Phil's absence, he filled in, as Jerry McEntee was not Bell qualified. The Company standards IP, Wayne Webb, disliked flying upcountry, so Knight normally conducted this task.

On 27 November, Wayne flew in the Plain of Jars area with Ken Wood in PFH. The two were often at odds regarding Ken's perceived poor division of attention on scan performance and instrument readings.

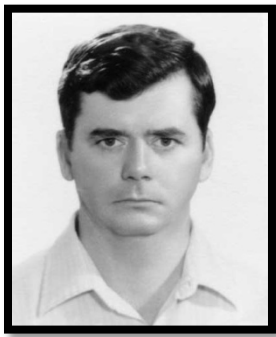
Correct scanning techniques had been hammered into Knight as a member of Marine Squadron HMR-163, while conducting cross country work at an elevation of 500 feet. As CPH and check airman with Air America, on upcountry line checks he looked for a pilot's awareness of potential landing spots in the event of forced landing requirements. More often than not, no suitable landing areas were available. He witnessed some pilots paying no attention and flying over densely forested areas with no suitable openings, when other options were available. ¹²

THE LINE

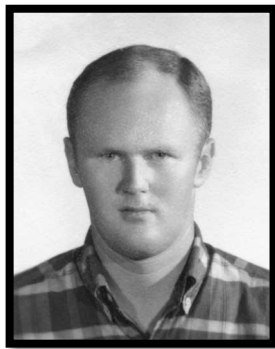
Something changed. Perhaps to placate me or to acquiesce to FEPA pressure, my complaints were actually heeded by management, for on Thursday, the thirteenth, I was assigned a FCF flight in Bell 204B 96W with John Melvin. Although assigned upcountry duties, the ship failed to meet my airworthiness requirements and remained in Udorn another day. We were still having problems

¹² EW Knight Emails, 06/29/00, 10/11/00, 10/13/00.
Mike Jarina Interviews.

A mix of Air America H-34 Captains, First Officers, and local Company management pilots.



Tony Byrne



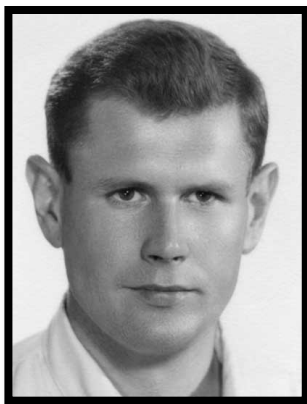
John Burkeholder



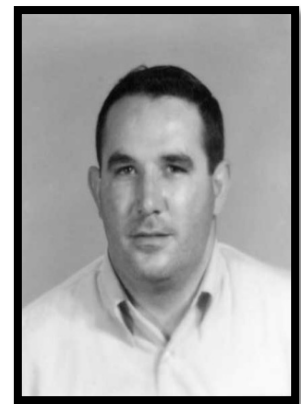
Bob Caron



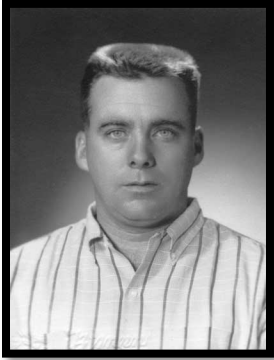
John Ford



Larry Fraser



Joe Lopes



JJ McCauley



Jerry McEntee ACPH-H34



Ken Wood



Phil Goddard ACPH/Bell



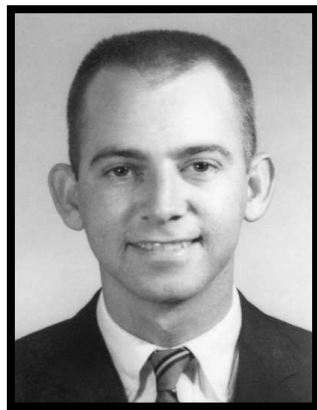
Bill Foster



Fred Fram (FO)



Dan Kawalek (FO)



P Steube (FO)

with linear actuators, fuel control units, and governors. Since nothing was objective, trouble shooting was time consuming, often necessitating component swaps until the problem was resolved.

The same morning Captain Mike Jarina flew to Luang Prabang on 545 to join Ron Allendorfer and Joe Siaotong in Hotel-32. A two-hour and twenty-five-minute Special Mission was conducted.

Early Friday morning 96W was repaired, tested, and parked on the ramp ready to fly upcountry. Consequently, Charlie Weitz, John Melvin, and I ferried the aircraft to Long Tieng. Since enemy activity had increased around the Plain of Jars, helicopters were often double crewed to conduct either pre-programmed or emergency missions that required immediate attention. Beside "normal" work two Special Missions were planned that day. The first involved an exfil at UG443648, located in the hills southeast of Phou Nok Kok, by then a familiar area to us where we maintained flanking positions. Troops were always rotating from these pads, but there was also intermittent enemy contact from minor probes, and these often resulted in casualties.

Aircraft musical chairs was not completely finished. Even though originally assigned to fly the Bell, I switched to Hotel-74 with Captain Harold Thompson (Umbrella Hal) for the second mission. This undertaking, an exfil, was located far to the east at UG6439, a hilltop landing zone overlooking the enemy Route-72 construction project. Marking a substantial penetration during the Xieng Khouang Ville operation, the unit likely attracted considerable attention, which led to casualties. And there were always requirements to address sick, lame and lazy individuals.

My squawking about flying two dissimilar helicopters, or union efforts to push seniority, must have had some effect, for this was the last time I flew a UH-34D, at least in its present

configuration. However, there were perhaps other reasons that I was unaware of.

At Luang Prabang Jarina, who took command of Hotel-32 with "Champy" Champanil and Thai training Flight Mechanic Campity crewing, was reassigned to Military Region Two. During a twenty-eight-landing day, Mike worked Moug Soui and the Plain of Jars.

A large-scale mission was planned to remove troops from the Blue Battalion pad on the edge of the Plain. Charlie Weitz, who was leading the flight, briefed to load ten people per aircraft until the number dwindled, after which he would see how many soldiers were left. The single ship position only allowed one way in and one way out. Charlie landed and was departing when a pilot inquired how many people were onboard.

"Fourteen: twelve inside and two on the struts. Oops, now I have thirteen."

While headed south, Charlie picked up groundfire. When someone asked where. Weitz replied, *"Wait a minute, I'll check."* When he turned around and groundfire erupted. *"Yep, there they are again."*

All troops were removed from the contested area.

Flying almost nine and a half hours, Saturday was a full day for Melvin and me on the PDJ. The L-22 base was a busy place, with helicopters and fixed wing constantly shuttling in and out from Alternate to outlying landing zones. Although some action had been reported to the north, I managed to avoid battle damage by circumnavigating hot spots and flying higher than before. At night I continued to receive good intelligence regarding enemy dispositions from Raven pilots, who were only too happy to provide information. The young Air Force men were well aware that their lives might possibly hinge on our quick response should they be forced down.

Jarina, who had RON at Sam Tong, changed helicopters and doubled up with Captain Dave Kendall, who was now flying Hotel-30. Dave was another Bell transferee fleeing from Bob Hitchman's Saigon program. Fairly senior, but with no Huey slots available, he would first have to pay his dues in the H-34. Working north of Site-20, the crew performed forty-seven shuttles from Phou So (LS-57), Phou Fa (LS-16), Moung Soui, and also the PDJ.

By mid-November, four 155mm howitzers, delivered by heavy lift Army helicopters on loan from Saigon, were in place at the Ban Thang (LS-275) airstrip on the PDJ's western fringe, located close to Kong Le's old headquarters at Moung Phanh (LS-106), and six miles southwest of LL. Ban Thang offered an almost 3,500-foot strip that could accommodate C-123 and Caribou planes. Advised by a Thai unit, the Meo-serviced battery had the capability to provide adequate artillery coverage to much of the western third of the PFJ. However, one intangible was the lack of experience of the Meo unit, recently returned from two months of artillery training in Thailand.

Morning launch time largely depended on Customer collation of radio reports from the field. It was also influenced by ground fog more prevalent in valleys, along streams, and on the PDJ toward the end of the year. Although the magical ten-hour daily goal was not often attainable to us pilots, this delay allowed a more leisurely breakfast that included a sack of sandwiches for lunch.

The next day included the same drill working out of LL, until we received a request for an emergency exfil from the position south-southeast of Phou Nok Kok. There was such urgency involved that I had no Co-Captain available and likely performed the SAR role without one. The frequency of these missions attested to the increasingly fluid situation and enemy

encroachment developing around this critical blocking mountain complex.

So far, communist attacks took the form of small unit ops. This was attributed to a lack of supply capability and crippling air strikes on any concentrations. Still, their efforts were effective in reducing the number of irreplaceable government troops.

In what was considered an attempt to recapture a strategic and politically important site, enemy forces had been conducting attacks on our outposts in the Xieng Khouang Ville area. The heaviest fighting occurred near the Site-03 strip, which frequently changed hands.

On Monday, despite our efforts to support the battalion located at the Ville, the unit, under pressure, withdrew to the west and into the mountains. With reserve troops either non-existent or in short supply, troops were stripped from Houei Tong Ko (LS-184) and delivered to the battlefield.

Using captured enemy armored vehicles, PT-76 tanks, and newly acquired 155mm heavy artillery, a counterattack rolling east on Route-4 successfully regained the Site-03 area by the final week in November. ¹³

After working all morning and part of the afternoon out of L-22, I was relieved on site. I caught a ride to The Alternate on CASI C-47 XW-PFT. From there I rode home on C-123 617.

Mike Jarina, First Officer Dave Kendall, and Flight Mechanic Delacruz launched for Luang Prabang in Hotel-63 on the seventeenth. They conducted a mission sixty-five miles northeast of the royal capital and a little west of the Nam Ou. When a

¹³ Ken Conboy, 249.

CIA Bulletin, 11/20/69. Laos: Communist attacks are on the increase...and the Plaine des Jarres in the north.

minor problem developed with the H-34, Mike spent twenty minutes flying a functional flight check (FCF).

Flying only four hours, which included twenty landings, the crew went twenty-four miles southeast to a point on Route-13 a little east of Kiou Kacham (LS-04), and shuttled troops to the Nam Bac area. After this was completed and they returned to Lima-54, a trip was assigned twenty-one miles southeast to Ban Tao Si.

The next day Captain Ben Van Etten replaced Dave Kendall. Since a river watch Special Mission was planned, Mike reconned the mission area in 62G. The actual landing zone was located forty-six miles northeast of Luang Prabang at a loop in the Nam Ou near Then Ken. During the mission, Mike damaged the tip of a rotor blade cover while landing in the confined area. This was not an earth-shaking problem, for I had experienced this before. Performance was not affected and the only difference I noticed was an annoying blade whistling noise. The sound was suppressed by removing all four rotor caps.

Delacruz had sufficient time to replace the rotor cap on Thursday. After Mike reconned a potential landing zone in CASI Porter XW-PCN, the mission was aborted for bad weather.

Mike joined Captain Larry Henesy and Flight Mechanic Bill Long in Hotel-75 on the 21st for additional road watch team Special Mission work. Following a recon in CASI Baron N4681, the helicopter force launched for TJ0554, eighty-seven miles north of LP, located south of Route-48. Condensing three missions into one, the group proceeded south to TH1289, four miles south of LS-121 and north of Route-4. After stopping at a Meo pad, a final landing was made at RC0872, a position near Mok Sapo, twelve miles south of MOUNG Sai, where road watch teams monitored construction progress of the Chinese Road and enemy military activity in the Beng Valley.

With his RON complete, Jarina deadheaded to Udorn with Ben Van Etten in Hotel-63. ¹⁴

THE VAGARIES OF AVIATION

"I was starting to get a cold and felt bad. I was scheduled to fly [on 20 November] and tried to beg off of it. They were shorthanded so I went. Now I am suffering for it. I got two [serious] ear blocks that haven't cleared yet. This is along with a bad head cold. This was six days ago and the left ear feels the same. I am on company sick leave which is some consolation. I expect it will be another week or two before I am ready to go again."

11/26/69 Letter Home.

The time of the year, with frequent temperature variations, and raising two young boys who carried about every germ in the world, led to my being ill a lot. In addition, I am sure that different venues, food, water, and the stress of combat tended to lower my immune system defenses and allow infections to develop.

Despite pleading and claim that I was not fit for flight duty, Udorn management insisted that I proceed upcountry. I had experienced bad head colds before and was always very careful to avoid ear problems. I knew from the Pensacola Naval Training Command experience that, depending on the extent, ear blocks could ground me for long periods, if not permanently. However, I had gone upcountry to fly with such problems before and was confident that I could control this condition by climbing and

¹⁴Mike Jarina Interviews.

descending at low rates while vigorously chewing gum as my ears adjusted to pressure changes.

On the Air America parking ramp, I climbed onboard C-123 293, piloted by Frank Renigar, recently reinstated as Captain after dinging an airplane. Loaded to the gill with items of war, our destination was the PSP runway at Lima Lima on the Plain of Jars, where I would take over a Bell. Frank was a little fast on final approach. At touchdown, he applied full reverse propellers to help stop the plane's forward motion and a long rollout. The quick deceleration negatively impacted both my eardrums in the form of two complete ear blocks. I did not believe they were perforated, but they hurt badly and the ears felt full from the middle ear further inside my head. In that instant, all planning to take care of the head cold condition came to naught, and I was aware that I could not fly and better seek medical attention before the condition worsened. Frustrated, I explained the problem to the on-site Customer and solicited the first available ride to Long Tieng. I was lucky, as the PIC of Air America Porter N392R was shuttling between sites. I described to the pilot what had happened during Renigar's landing, and earnestly requested that he remain as low as possible and that he conduct no sudden decelerations. He complied, and we arrived with no further complications.

I walked up the hill and found the Raven's young flight surgeon. After a thorough examination, he declared that because of the severity of my injury, I would have to remain at The Alternate for about a week. This revelation stunned me. Even spending a couple of days on the ground in that valley during spates of bad weather was boring, something I never relished. Moreover, it would be extremely lonely while everyone was out flying during the day fighting the good war. Considering that I would be a complete basket case at the end of seven days, I

decided to chance returning to Udorn, where better medical attention was available.

The demand for H-34 pilots was such that with previous experience and if found highly proficient, the men were upgraded to Captain in record time. Bill Foster was one of these individuals. Since Bill was returning to Udorn that evening in Hotel-39, I joined him. I sat in the left seat, mainly to explain my plight and caution him to avoid any maneuver that might aggravate my condition. Bill was very sympathetic and cooperative.

From years of experience, I knew that we could safely maintain relatively low-level flight all the way to home plate. Therefore, after departing Alternate, although it might take a little longer, I directed Foster to fly south at a low level along the narrow Nam Ngum Valley. When reaching the Vientiane flood plain beyond Ritaville, we could descend even more and cruise at 500 feet all the way home.

My precautions worked. As we neared the airbase, there had been no appreciable change in my ears. However, during the last fifty feet during the approach, while Bill was decelerating, my eardrums popped and became fully blocked again, aggravating the inner ear condition. Perhaps a slow run-on landing would have prevented the block, but we did not think that far ahead. Anyway, I was in bad shape and angry at management's reluctance to listen to my initial pleas not to send me upcountry with the head cold. Now, instead of a few days at home recovering from a cold, they would not be able to use me for an undetermined time. They lost a pilot and I would be denied precious flight time and the excitement of the PDJ operation.

DIFFERENT STROKES

On the 24th Jarina was tapped for a mission out of Paksane. He, First Officer Bennett, and "fat" Frank Fee crewed Hotel-57 to Chinaimo army camp outside of Vientiane, where they picked up FAR and FAN officers and then flew south to Lima-35. Additional personnel boarded at Paksane for a trip north to Tha Thom (LS-11).

After losing Moung Soui in June, remnants of the Neutralist group had been flown to Thailand for additional training, and eventual reintroduction to the Lao war. Upon return, two battalions were stationed at Tha Thom. In support of the Xieng Khouang Ville operation, FAN troops were consolidating recent battalion movement into the Site-11 Valley and beyond. A couple of short missions ensued to Tha Vieng (LS-13), where leading units had progressed three days previously.

Bennett, a former Army pilot with a receding hairline, was considered a real odd-ball type. Aware that Paksane was an excellent training and familiarization ground for new hires and weak sisters, Mike told Bennett that the flat area was a simple place to work and navigate. Like Porter Hough and Marquardt had done previously, Bennett unfolded a gigantic map and spread it out on his side of the cockpit. Since the chart covered the cyclic and most of the area, Mike asked him what he was doing. The action prompted Jarina to wonder if the man had actually been around helicopters that much, and if he might suffer from a military-engendered copilot mentality. Rumors and innuendos always followed weirdo types. Fortunately, they were not in abundance in our organization. Mike had heard that while Bennett was flying with another pilot, he opened his cockpit window, unzipped his trousers, and attempted to defecate out the opening. The action was not easy to fathom, for movement in such a restricted cockpit would have been extremely difficult, if not

physically impossible; it required the flexible movements of a contortionist. Although unsubstantiated, Mike would have expected something like this from the guy.

After the daily flight, with only half the more than eight-hour day conducted in project pay areas, the crew returned to Udorn.

The crew rolled out of the parking lot early Tuesday morning for basically a repeat of the previous day. First stop was Wattay Airport, then Lima-35 to Tha Tom and Tha Vieng. After ten landings supporting the FAR advance up Route-4, while shuttling fresh troops and bullets into Site-13 from Paksane, Mike returned to Vientiane for the night.

The following morning he landed in the FAR camp to retrieve personnel for Paksane and Savannakhet. Because of the hornet's nest stirred up by the Moung Phine operation, there was some concern about maintaining open passage of Route-13 to Pakse. Therefore, the crew was tasked to support efforts to bolster units close to or on the road. The first flight was assigned to Ban Dong Thankou (LS-304), twenty-one miles east of Lima-39 and just west of the road. They proceeded thirty-four miles southeast to a point on the south-flowing road. Another flight eighteen miles further southeast to Ban Houaymun (LS-310) completed the day and the crew returned to L-39 for the night.

The crew returned to Udorn on the 27th.

CONTINUING SAGA OF MR-2

Deadheading on Hotel-59, Mike returned to Military Region Two on the 29th, where he took command of Hotel-47 at Sam Tong. First Officer Hal Miller and Ramos filled out the crew requirements. Conducting twenty-one landings, they worked out of the L-22 forward base and supported troops at the recently re-liberated town of Xieng Khouang.

Toward the end of November, the northern portion of the Plain of Jars around the 71/74 junction came under increasing pressure from enemy units. The action culminated in the temporary loss of the under-strength defenders on Phou Pheung's commanding high ground.

Our small inventory of Bell helicopters was temporarily diminished by one on the 29th when the crew of Bell 205 Papa Foxtrot Juliet experienced an engine failure or malfunction on final approach to a pad on the southern slopes of Phou Hok overlooking the Nong Pet junction. This was followed by a hard landing that substantially damaged the skids. The helicopter was recovered and returned to Udorn for repair. PFJ was soon returned to service and I flew the machine on 16 December.

By the first week in December, a newly formed Meo mechanized unit, supported by 155 howitzers and accompanied by portions of three disparate battalions, counterattacked the position. After Phou Pheung was reclaimed, elements moved into the 71/74 road junction at Lat Bouak.

BLACK LION

At Phou Nok Kok, where current intelligence indicated that elements of two Vietnamese regiments were concentrating in the vicinity of "Woodpecker Mountain," the original Pakse battalion, partially advised by Case Officer Tom Ahern, and also responsible for the Meo ADC San Tiau unit, was rotated south in favor of another Lima-11 SGU unit, the 3 SGU Battalion. General Phasouk's fresh unit from Military Region Four was advised by the competent, no-nonsense Case Officer Wil Greene, who trained the unit and had already amassed quite a reputation as an aggressive hard-charger. He was also esteemed for his support of pilots, and courage during road watch operations from the Bolovens Plateau PS-22 site. His attributes reminded us of Tony

Poe for, unlike other Case Officers, Wil often accompanied his troops on road watch missions.

I liked to think Wil and I shared some rapport. Whenever I learned that a man was formerly in U.S Army Special Forces, it was my custom to inquire if he knew my cousin Chaplain Robert T. Anderson. Most did. Wil knew Bob well, for the families lived close to each other at Mount Holly, New Jersey. Moreover, his wife had worked as a secretary for my cousin, while stationed at the Fort Dix, New Jersey, Army base.

The former Army major was anything but a shy person. Detecting potential deficiencies in Woodpecker Hill's defenses, and cognizant of the difficult days that lay ahead countering the assembling enemy onslaughts, he initiated immediate measures to better prepare and bolster site fortifications with all the tools of war available. Not long after Greene arrived on scene, the reinforced Phou Nok Kok fortress was accorded a new name by those involved. As long as we held the site, Wil and the position were called-**Black Lion**.

On the last day of the month, Jarina, now supplemented with new Flight Mechanic Baranagan, worked at L-22, L-03, and Moung Soui.

Taking the Plain of Jars had proven a beneficial factor for the Western camp, a far more successful operation than anyone had originally envisioned. Leaders in the Vientiane U.S. Mission realistically understood that the entire Plain could not be occupied successfully with the Vietnamese offensive believed to be facing Vang Pao's strung out forces. Still, for political reasons, Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma and the King wanted the Plaine retained as a bargaining chip for the negotiation process-neutralization in exchange for cessation of bombing and total withdrawal of North Vietnamese soldiers. Hawkish

Ambassador Godley also wanted the Plain held in government hands. ¹⁵

¹⁵Mike Jarina Interviews.

Segment Sources:

Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 249-250.

Victor Anthony, *The War in Northern Laos*, 323.

Tom Ahern, *Undercover Armies*, 330, 332.

William Leary Article Regarding Wil Greene in the 12/97 *Vietnam Magazine*.

Joe Leeker, *The Aircraft of Air America*, Bell 205 Papa Delta Juliet XOXO.

On Monday, 1 December, Jarina and the crew of Hotel-47 continued their efforts on the Plain of Jars with a twenty-nine-landing day.

Following a night at the Sam Tong hostel, Mike again worked out of the LL base. At the end of the day, he deadheaded home on C-123 293.

Cognizant that the commanding heights and the government stronghold on top of Phou Nok Kok marked the primary key to unrestricted movement back on the Plain of Jars, Vietnamese military leaders had units recon and probe the site for weakness. By early December, with sandbox instruction and offensive training complete, sizeable enemy units were assembled on three sides of the mountain, poised to commence what was to become a four-day offensive. During the evening of 2 December, men of the recently-established Pakse SGU battalion at Black Lion were welcomed to the Military Region Two battlefield by a softening-up process that included hundreds of 81mm mortar shells and grazing 37mm fire from a hill about the same elevation and within range of Phou Nok Kok. Under covering fire, sappers equipped with wire breaching equipment scaled the slopes toward Woodpecker's outer defensive trenches.

Weather permitting, A-1E pilots based at the Nakhon Phanom base performed nightly "armed reconnaissance" along stretches of Route-7 in the 2,000-foot ASL Ban Ban Valley. As customary, "loaded for bear" with napalm, bombs, CBU-14, 20mm cannon, and flares for vehicle interdiction, Major Albert E. Preyss and his Skyraider wingman launched northwest about 1700 hours to arrive on station just after sunset, when the enemy convoys normally rolled.

Finding the area socked in about dark, with clouds swirling down and around peaks of the 4,000 to 5,000-foot mountains, and visibility down to three miles, the pilots searched for a hole in the cloud deck to penetrate so that they could troll the LOC for enemy vehicles. After accomplishing this they found the ragged ceiling at 6,000 feet. With their position lights extinguished to prevent easy detection, the pilots turned west and observed Black Lion's summit "on fire," receiving numerous and accurate hits from at least six mortar tubes and two 37mm guns positioned to the east.

Preyss had helped stave off an enemy attack at Black Lion once before. Now it was time to do it again. As per Air Force standard operation procedures (SOP), lead requested and obtained permission from the C-130E Military Region Two nighttime airborne control ship, Alleycat, to engage. Contact was made with Black Lion on one of the many VHF frequencies used (119.1, 119.8, 124.2, 125.3). The excited FAG was more than willing to accept any and all help he could obtain at that moment.

Unable to maintain visual contact on each other, flying in and out of clouds on instruments, while receiving copious volumes of ground fire, the Skyraider pilots attacked the 37mm and mortar positions by using a napalm fire for reference. The pilots continued their runs for an hour, at which time enemy fire was redirected at them and not Black Lion.

After expending all ordnance except for some 20 mike-mike, unable to find a hole in the overcast, and using a predetermined heading, they punched IFR through the clouds. On top at 10,000 feet they contacted Black Lion, who was still highly stressed and requesting additional help.

Limited as to the assistance they could provide, they dropped flares through the cloud layer and requested directions to targets. Then, pointing the noses of their A-1s, they dove

IFR at a ninety-degree angle into the clouds and fired their eight guns. Then "Winchester," unable to further assist in the action, the pilots pulled up and RTB. It had been a dangerous mission, but one that enabled the Black Lion troops to fight another day.

At dawn, with sappers approaching their final goal, like U.S. Cavalry units charging into battle in the western United States, another A-1E flight arrived on scene. As the SGU defense was crumbling, one pilot was able to penetrate the early morning cloud layer and contribute support to the defenders. The pilot could not believe he was flying in such horrible conditions, but the critical situation warranted the effort.

As weather cleared and additional air arrived, Wil Greene, known for his courage, directed strikes against known or suspected targets. Caught in the open, Vietnamese units incurred severe casualties, enabling the reinvigorated SGU troops to return to their perimeter fighting holes.

The communists were not finished assaulting the mountain. Nightly attacks conducted by superior enemy forces continued over a four-day period. But the presence of the stalwart Black Lion, who really became the overall commander of the site, and effective USAF and T-28 air sorties saved the day. Finally, cowed by massive tactical airpower and the determined fighting motivation of the Pakse Phou Nok Kok defenders, enemy attacks temporarily diminished to a low ebb, and the continuing legend of Black Lion was assured. Thus far, the battle for Woodpecker Hill was costly for the enemy. During that one battle, estimates of enemy killed ranged into the hundreds, wounded one thousand. However, the attrition game was definitely slanted in their favor. With a five-to-one ratio, in the long run, it was almost hopeless to pit Vang Pao's 5,500 battle-weary men against 25,000

Vietnamese and Pathet Lao. Moreover, unlike the enemy, Vang Pao had no reserves to replace losses.

Phou Nok Kok defenses were stretched out along a long hill. The highest point to the east was defended by the Pakse battalion; the rest secured by under strength Meo SGU. From the beginning of the operation, with no replacements available and an inability to rotate troops in and out of the site, any Meo casualties reduced the number of men to defend their position. Despite the ability to hold the fort, the battle was not over. ¹

"I am just about well again and should start flying soon. It still feels like there is something in my ear but the doctor can see nothing. I hope that I will be free of head colds for another year."

12/04/69 Letter Home.

When my inner ears failed to clear well, I despaired of our clinic people's methods and went to the USAF doctor for help. With the decongestant provided, improvement progressed to a point where I felt confident about flying upcountry and persuaded old Doctor Kao to release me for work.

With the Company still mulling over the FEPA proposal, a curious and somewhat suspicious memorandum dated 22 October was forwarded from Taipei to the Air America Security Department for each individual pilot to sign. Signing was mandatory. It read:

¹Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 250.
Tom Ahern, *Undercover Armies*, 331.
John Pratt, *Vietnam Voices, Perspectives on the War Years, 1941-1975* (New York: Penguin Books, 1984) 414-417.
Victor Anthony, *The War in Northern Laos*, 323-324.

"Dear Mr. H.R. Casterlin

This is to advise you that Air America, Inc. has assumed the obligations of your employment with Air Asia Company Limited (and its predecessor companies) and hence forth shall be deemed for all purposes your employer. The terms of your employment remain unchanged.

Please acknowledge receipt of this letter and your approval of its terms by signing the attached copy and returning it to this office at your earliest convenience.

*Sincerely yours,
J.L. Madison
Director of Personnel"*

The letter arrived at our facility with no explanation. Moreover, the obvious legalese created a sense of wariness as to the ultimate motive. Also, the timing was suspicious. Therefore, the letter was tabled until FEPA's great minds could decide what to do. I signed the document on 3 December, but with my handwritten disclaimer:

"This document is signed without the waiver of any rights, benefits, or legal remedies that I or any of my representatives have."

MR-2 HANGING ON

I deadheaded upcountry on the sixth via Wattay Airport on 55F, and then by Air America Porter 97X to Long Tieng. Despite great demands for helicopters on the Plain of Jars, the Customer did not neglect road watch obligations to monitor and gauge enemy activity out of Sam Neua Town and eastern arteries from North Vietnam. This was not only necessary for targeting, but to

prognosticate time frames and movement south toward the Ban Ban Valley. Reporting was also required regarding dry season progress on ongoing main and bypass road construction.

Against this end, I joined Nikki Filippi and Andy "Tinkerer" Anderson in Bell 204 13F for an infil mission far to the north. To satisfy the penny-pinching Customer policy, I was relegated to a one-hour deadhead capacity, while my crew and another helicopter crew positioned to Phou Sam Soun (LS-231), located in the mountains fifteen miles north of Route-7. Beside Sam Song Hong (LS-201) a few miles south, these remote sites were the only ones to have survived enemy assaults over the past two years among a bevy of other Meo sites closer to Route-61 that did not share the same fortune.

After refueling and awaiting our escort planes, we launched for our infiltration site (VH117417) thirty-six miles northeast in the Phou Pha Lang Range, where we had flown numerous times. Affording sufficient cover and concealment, the area was perfect from a team watcher perspective, for it was within easy walking distance (for a Meo) to Routes-641 to the north and sixty-four miles to the east.

After dropping off three men and their equipment, we proceeded southwest to home plate. We had not been briefed regarding any specific anti-aircraft artillery (AAA) locations in the region, but managed to find some when we were fired on near Route-61 by large guns which could have been vehicle mounted. This was quite exciting, as I had not seen multiple black puffs created by airborne rounds exploding for several years.

Although we did not fly much that day, I was happy to be back at work and at The Alternate to RON, and enjoy the camaraderie of Customers and peers. It was a close bond that was

difficult to explain. In addition, my health was good with no recurrence of ear problems.

Nikki departed and Andy was replaced by Bennie Shaffer. With intelligence gathering efforts complete, on the infamous Pearl Harbor Day we went back to the Plain of Jars business working out of L-22, supporting the numerous positions on the northern periphery of the PDJ, and sidebar operations in the hills of the Xieng Khouang Ville Valley. After the recent action Black Lion seemed relatively quiet and was receiving supplies and ammunition by fixed wing air drop and helicopter sling load. One area where we did not venture was beyond Ban Ban, east to the border, where Vang Pao's ADC units were still probing. Although they provided valuable intelligence and conducted minor harassing operations, because of restrictive USAF ROEs, the presence of friendly forces prevented air strikes on early December enemy convoy traffic funneling fresh troops and supplies toward the PDJ.

Since the two FAN battalions sent to Tha Thom appeared to be performing satisfactorily, another Neutralist battalion from the recently formed regiment was assigned to reinforce the Lima Lima complex on the third. To show appreciation to his military base Neutralist Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma toured the PDJ to raise morale and "press the flesh."²

For the next three days, with weather cooperating, I worked uninhibited on the Plain consistently flying just under nine hours per day.

Our fun participating in the remarkable Plain of Jars operation was rapidly approaching an end game. Enemy movement

²Ken Conboy, 249.



Air America Bell crews delivering sling loads to outlying defensive positions on the northern Plain of Jars from the Lima-22 base at Xieng Khouang Airfield.

Mac Thompson Collection.

into our work areas and the necessity for increased caution among low flying crews became poignantly evident on 10 December when Phil Payton and JG Demindal were hit by ground fire in a Bell while flying in the western Xieng Khouang Valley. The battle damage location occurred near the small hamlet of Ban Tham, toward the north side of Route-4 five miles west of Lima-03. Hit in the right fuel cell, only eight miles southeast of LL, Payton quickly recovered and secured at the Xieng Khouang strip.

Enemy ground fire and battle damage to our Bells continued on the thirteenth, when Nikki Fillipi and Tod Yourglich were hit in the left forward fuel cell of PFG between Khang Khay and Ban Tay eight miles northeast of LL.

I looked forward to another session in the patch on Thursday while working out of LL, but it was not to be. After flying one fuel load, I was relieved. Since there was so much air traffic in and out of the Xieng Khouang strip, I soon boarded Caribou 393 for a short flight to Long Tieng. From there, I scrounged a trip home on C-123 576.

Wayne Knight arrived at The Alternate on the ninth to conduct line checks in Hotel-52 and Hotel-54 in the Plain of Jars area with "The Crazy Indian," Captain Don Henthorn and Lloyd Higgins. Wayne's professional duties continued on Wednesday while conducting another line check with Dave Kendall in Hotel-62. Wayne maintained his knowledge of the current situation by working pads in the area. He continued the upcountry checks with recently upgraded Hal Miller in Hotel-62 on Thursday. Toward the end of the day, Wayne returned to Udorn

with Hotel-39. ³

The day before I left for The Alternate, Mike Jarina returned to the field to work the Military Region Five Paksane region. His twelve-landing day in Hotel-57 with Flight Mechanic Alor commenced with a stop at Wattay Airport. After picking up FAN officers intent on checking their charges, he journeyed to Lima-35, Tha Vieng, Tha Thom, Paksane, and back to Vientiane for the night.

Saturday morning Mike was assigned a local mission to Phou Dam (LS-256), twelve miles north of Lima-54. The crew was joined by permanent First Officer Marquart, who had been living at and was semi-permanently assigned to Luang Prabang for two months. Marquart's incompetence in the H-34 reminded Jarina of officers in the military who were only drawing flight pay. Not qualified to fly the aircraft, you allowed them to go along in the Twin Beechcraft or helicopter as a special crew member to satisfy the four-hour requirement to obtain their flight skins.

With Special Mission SOPs satisfied, a road watch team Special Mission followed, eighty-seven miles north to a remote landing zone (TJ0555), where the team could monitor Route-48 plunging south from Phong Saly. The signal of the day was Juliet, which Jarina had plotted on the map. During the long trip, Mike kept asking Marquart if he would like to fly. The First Officer answered negative; he would rather look at the map. Nearing the target area, Mike told Marquart to look sharp for the signal.

Then Marquart interjected, "*I have it!*"

"*Where?*"

³ Air America XW-PFJ XOXO of 12/10/69, Prepared by ACPH Phil Goddard.

12/13/69 XW-PFG XOXO, Goddard.

EW Knight 10/11/00 Email Delineating Knight's December Flights.

Marquart lifted up the map and pointed to the "J" Mike had marked on the chart. If one was seeking a bit of comic relief in a stressful situation, there was no better person available than Marquart, except perhaps old Porter Hough.

Road watch mission areas north of Nam Bac were revisited many times. For this reason and Customer airborne monitoring of teams, SOP recons were often waived. However, located in the same areas, landing zones were rarely in the same place. This was especially the case for harassed teams monitoring Route-19.

Sunday's extraction involved a flight seventy-two miles north-northeast (TJ2912) of Luang Prabang, and four miles west of Route-19. During the mission, the flight aborted after being shot at with small arms and Hotel-44 receiving battle damage. After recovery at the Luang Prabang strip, Jarina and crew continued with a flight back to the Victor pad at Phou Dam. This was followed by another short trip to Ban Long Houay Noi on top of the high range nine miles southeast of L-54.

Unable to retrieve the team on the seventh, H-34 crews returned to the same area west of Route-19 where the SGU unit had moved to safer ground. They were returned to Phou Dam where some training and debriefing occurred away from prying eyes. Another team boarded and was delivered to TJ2613, three miles south of Route-16.

After two shuttles eight miles west of LP on the ninth, Boonrat replaced Marquart as Co-captain in Hotel-47. Customer emphasis was still centered on dry season traffic and construction on Route-19. Two Special Missions were conducted to TJ3004 about four miles west of a stretch of the road leading south toward Nam Bac.

Mike did a lot of deadheading on CASI Porter XW-PCN and 62G on Wednesday, but no flying.

He returned to Udorn on Thursday on Helio Courier Papa Echo Alpha (PEA).

"I just returned from a six-day RON and ears and cold are the thing of the past. The boys have colds now though.

FEPA will be recognized on the 13th by the company and negotiations will start January 5th..Very few of the laggard pilots are still not in the union. We represent a booming majority of the pilots." ⁴

We will be coming home this summer around the first of July. We will probably stay until 20 September. This may be revised because I was forced to take more [leave] than I wanted due to a new company leave plan. After the negotiations we may have our old leave plan back..This all depends on my decision to return to Southeast Asia to work.

Tuie was just involved in a fashion show in connection with the annual beauty show that is held every year during the [town] fair-1-10 December. I was working, but she said it was successful and she even was one of the participants. She likes this sort of thing and knows quite a few people.

Our small Christmas tree is up and I will put the lights on the outside one soon. I have been thinking of bringing a tree back from the PDJ as there are a number of them there." ⁵

12/12/69 Letter Home.

⁴ The October Congressional inquiry into USG role and desire to exit Southeast Asia had far reaching implications. By 18 December, after learning Congress had prohibited the use of current Department of Defense funds to introduce American combat troops into Laos or Thailand, we began to feel confident about FEPA's viability. At least there would be no more derogatory references to "dime a dozen helicopter pilots."

⁵ Early in my Air America tenure, Howard Estes and others returned from upcountry with small evergreen trees gathered from the southern portion of the Plain of Jars. Because of their small size, two trees had to be tied together for a pleasant effect.

UPCOUNTRY AGAIN

After four days off the flight schedule, I returned to Military Region Two on Caribou B-851. My assigned Bell was the repaired Papa Foxtrot Juliet. Since the crew was working out of LL, I had to wait to relieve the pilot. Len Bevan, with whom I had never previously flown, was the Flight Mechanic. While conducting my preflight on top of the Bell, Bevan chided me from the ground about shaking the pitch change control rods too vigorously while checking for loose rod ends bearings. This was a first. I normally got along famously with my Flight Mechanics. However, perhaps he was right, the rods were somewhat fragile. But even though we did not know each other well, and perhaps he was suffering from constipation, hemorrhoids, or some unknown personality conflict, he was anything but diplomatic in his approach to his new Captain. It was the last time Len challenged my methods. The abbreviated flight time for me that day was about one fuel load.

On the seventeenth, we managed a full day supporting operations from the L-22 supply center, the conduit for delivering required goods to forward positions north of the Plain of Jars, overlooking Nong Pet and parts of Route-71.

Since late October's commencement of the 1969-70 dry season, under the cover of foul weather, darkness, and reduced Air Force sorties, fresh enemy troops had been busy repairing roads and infiltrating west and south along drying LOCs. Increasing attacks against government positions, often numbering hundreds of enemy troops equipped with supporting arms, predicted future offensives.

Earlier vicious December attacks on Black Lion, even though sustaining heavy losses and failing to attain the targeted objective, poignantly depicted enemy tenacity and resolve in pursuing tactical objectives in recovering the Plain.



Author landing on a rough landing zone in the hills north of Nong Pet,
with the Route-71 valley in the background.

Author Collection as provided by the site Customer.

During the summer monsoon season, a point had been successfully demonstrated to all interested parties that coordinated air power and well supported aggressive operations worked even against the formidable Vietnamese Army--at least temporarily. We had controlled almost all the PDJ and territory east for several months, seized locations rarely or never previously occupied, and captured or destroyed vast amounts of enemy weapons and supplies. Now, with battle fatigued troops, insufficient numbers, and stretched thinly across dubious LOC locations on the northern Plain of Jars, it was time to retrench and concentrate forces along strong defensive lines constructed in depth: Phou Nok Kok, Phou Pheung to Phou Houat, Phou Keng-Phou Theung-Phou Khe, and finally, Phou Seu leading to Long Tieng. At an appropriate time of our choosing, when seriously pressed by superior forces, our troops could gradually withdraw south and allow allied air to decimate enemy ranks.

Victory fosters many children. Receiving numerous accolades from such notables as the Lao King and Prime Minister for his triumphs, Vang Pao was flushed with success. However, he was a man never schooled in strategy, advanced field grade tactics, or advanced military mentality conducive to conducting large scale operations. Therefore, the pragmatic and gut-driven guerrilla leader failed to fully comprehend his advisors' overall strategy, which proposed a planned, systematic withdrawal calculated to concentrate, trap, and destroy large numbers of enemy. Instead, desiring to hold existing defensive positions and pursue his long-term dream of liberating his traditional Nong Het homeland further east near the North Vietnamese border, he rejected the plan. Moreover, he was completely confident that allied air power would allow his troops to accomplish his goals.

In the past, Long Tieng Case Officers like Terry Burke had learned about Vang Pao's ego-driven idiosyncrasy the hard way

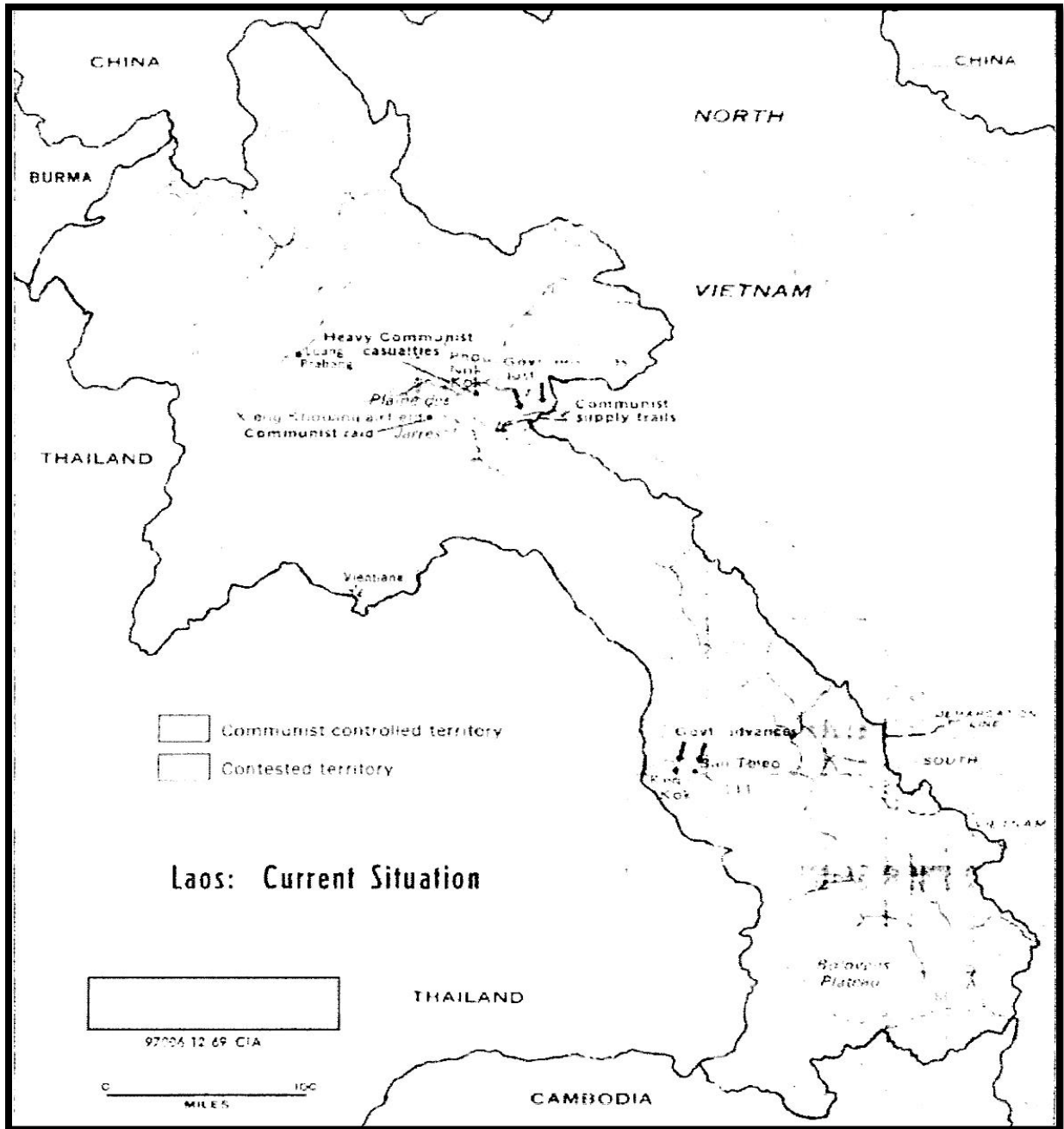
during a sniper team operation. He discovered that unless the proud general conceived and developed a concept himself, he would reject it. Terry and others learned that if a new project could be diplomatically and tactfully suggested to the general, so he believed that he devised the plan, it was feasible. This was the case with the disposable rocket pod delivery systems placed in the hills to harass enemy on the lowlands.

"A recent increase in communist military activity is highlighted by a [NVA] commando raid on 18 December against Xieng Khouang airfield..."

The communists are stepping up their efforts to secure their supply lines, which have been under steady ground and aerial harassment since early September. In recent days, government guerrillas have been pushed out of communist supply trails in eastern Xieng Khouang Province. In the Route-7 area northeast of the Plaine, the communists have had less success. On 19 December, a [NVA] force lost over 40 killed in an attempt to clear government troops from the area." ⁶

The extent of the enemy's ability to penetrate our Plain of Jars base areas was effectively demonstrated while we slept at The Alternate hostel. Calculated to divert attention from ongoing Black Lion operations, where Vietnamese forces had already lost over 500 men attempting to take the strategic position during the last two months, elements of two commando companies infiltrated LL, disabled an artillery piece, and destroyed several captured PT-76 tanks. At the time of the attack during the early hours of 18 December, Vietnamese troops

⁶ CIA Daily Bulletin, 12/22/69. Laos: There has been little change in the military situation, but casualties continue to mount on both sides.



Plain of Jars area where an enemy raid on LL and hostilities at Phou Nok Kok occurred.

CIA Map, 12/22/69.

engaged L-22 defenders in a vicious fire fight that saw numerous government casualties, including forty-three KIA. ⁷

There was a delay in launching Thursday morning, while Ravens departed first on recon duties. Then reports of enemy action and presence in the area were received by the radio room and sorted out. Eventually released to work, we did what we could to help stabilize and support the situation. At day's end Tod Yourglich replaced Len as my Flight Mechanic.

Well aware of the dangers involved in defending an exposed forward site, FAN and Meo regrouped, maintained alert status, and there were no more attacks on LL that night. If that was the intended plan, action at LL and at Xieng Khouang Ville failed to divert attention from the offensive to seize Phou Nok Kok. Time was on the enemy's side, so, after incurring numerous casualties, the Vietnamese units withdrew into the hills to reassemble, rest, and refit.

The situation returned to normal on Friday when Tod and I worked a full day supporting the Plain of Jars operations.

Bobby Barrow relieved Yourglich on the 20th. Later in the day, we were recalled to Udorn for an obligatory hundred-hour maintenance inspection.

JARINA DOWN SOUTH

Although most military action centered on Military Region Two, the two military regions in southern Laos also clamored for helicopter support. Scheduled to fulfill this requirement, on 13 December, Mike Jarina deadheaded to Savannakhet on Caribou B-851

⁷Ken Conboy, 250.
Former Case Officer Terry Burke.
Victor Anthony, 324.
Tom Ahern, 332.

via the Nakhon Phanom air base. He relieved the PIC of Hotel-47 and took command of the ship with Baccay as his Flight Mechanic.

Following a night at the Air America hostel, Mike was assigned to Pakse. Except for the ferry time to L-11, no work was conducted.

The reduced activity changed on Monday, when Fred Fram joined Jarina in the cockpit for work out of Saravane, where they spent the day shuttling troops from Lima-44, northeast to a SGU forward headquarters at Ban Kok Mai (LS-171) and further northeast to PS-39. Since the semi-aggressive Toumlan operation to block Route-23 had been wrapped up, there was concern that a vigorous enemy response would follow, but content that their supply lines were no longer threatened, nothing immediately developed.

Shedding Fram, Mike was directed back to Lima-39 on Tuesday, where he moved FAR troops to reinforce Moung Phalane (L-61) on Route-9.

On 19 November mixed Pathet Lao and Vietnamese battalions attacked the FAR support facility at Moung Phalane. Although heavy fighting ensued, the base held. Further west, the enemy routed local defenders at Ban Taleo.

Advisors concluded that enemy offenses were conducted in response to the government's fall Moung Phine operation, and intended to ensure an uninterrupted flow of supplies to South Vietnam.

Despite failing to achieve the goals of the earlier Moung Phine operation and losing Tangvay, efforts were still underway in Military Region Three to reacquire lost territory, relieve pressure on weaker sites, and stabilize the front lines east of Savannakhet without unduly upsetting the enemy. Consequently, SGU units marched south from Moung Phalane toward Ban Tangvay (LS-299), located on Route-111). Other troops moved along the

road from Keng Kok (LS-139). In the process, MOUNG PHALANE Southwest and other sites were recaptured.

By the end of 1969, much of the eastern front line had been established and stabilized.

Participating in this effort, on the seventeenth, Mike continued to feed SGU troops into MOUNG PHALANE from the remote airfield at Keng Ka Boa (LS-235), northwest of Savannakhet.

The following day Jarina ferried Hotel-47 home and was finished flying for the year. ⁸

DAY MISSION

After two days at home relaxing, I was scheduled to participate in a two Bell aircraft Special Mission in upper Military Region Two, where both current air and ground intelligence were critical to determine enemy intentions for the expected dry season offensive against General Vang Pao's Plain of Jars operation.

I deadheaded upcountry, but instead of landing at many en route sites, enjoyed the benefits of comfort and speed riding on Volpar 71C directly to L-22. At LL I switched aircraft to 96W for a flight to our launch site at Houei Tong Ko. After disembarking at Site-184, I joined Ken Wood and Flight Mechanic Velasquez in our new Bell addition, 12F.

The first of a two-part mission was an infiltration, thirty miles southeast to (UH7137) at Phou Soui, six miles west of Route-6. The second mission entailed crossing the road to (VH1141), twenty-four miles east of LZ-1, where we had landed on

⁸ Mike Jarina Interviews.
Ken Conboy 268.

CIA Bulletin, Communist attacks are on the increase near the infiltration corridor in the south..., 11/20/69.
CIA Daily Bulletin, 12/22/69. Laos.



UH-34D helicopter Hotel-44 sky lighted against clouds.
Jarina Collection.

the sixth. After retrieving one man, because we had previously received groundfire, another predetermined route was chosen for the egress and flight back to LL.

With the missions complete, I rode home on Hotel-44 via Sam Tong and Long Tieng.

UDORN

As per his annual long-standing policy, Wayne continued his policy to send single men upcountry over Christmas, allowing married men time off with their families. To be fair, this was reversed on New Year's Eve.

Christmas 1969 was fine at the Casterlin house on Benjarn Road. The toys my parents had sent by APO mail for the boys were well chosen. Rick's toys were mostly in line with, and somewhat reinforced what he was doing in playschool. Still under a year old, Pete was quite mobile if let out of his playpen; aided by a friendly hand, he could run very fast.

This year we kept the relatives at bay until the afternoon inside-outside party Tuie planned.

As usual, we were still having maid problems. Most girls we hired (or Khun Yai obtained for us) only remained a short time. Granted, the work was demanding and hours long, but wages, food, and a place to sleep were above that which could be normally achieved in other menial jobs by uneducated females. The last person who worked for us was the best of the lot, but she later revealed a husband. When she asked if he could stay with us in the adjoining maid's quarters, envisioning future trouble, Tuie refused. She left and the current maid was not good.

The new Company pay scale was retroactive and a tidy sum was sent the Plainfield bank. Extra hazardous pay for Special Missions was delayed for six months, and the last check arrived

without a signature. This was corrected and entered in my account.

I had learned that the Company recently hired a professional negotiator. This was totally unexpected by the members of FEPA, and was deemed a potential problem, for we had no one of a similar caliber, and hiring one would be very expensive. It was originally believed that our broad spectrum of pilots knew the Company best and could perform our own negotiating. Time would tell.

CPH Knight returned from scheduled time off and performed FCFs on Christmas day so other married pilots could enjoy their special day with dependents. Despite having a large family himself, Wayne was a very thoughtful and fair person, annually bestowing this boon to his men.

Using Hotel-54 and Hotel-47, Wayne spent Friday and Saturday training and administering proficiency checks to new H-34 hire, former Army pilot John Merkel. Within a relatively short time, Merkel left us under somewhat tragic circumstances.

Another new hire, JG Connolly (DOH 12/10/69) had a proficiency check in Hotel-69 on the 28th, and prior to going upcountry for area familiarization.

An unusual event occurred at Wattay Airport early Christmas morning. Sanctioned by the U.S. Embassy and USAID, a Braniff 707 loaded with 33,000 pounds of food, mail, and gifts landed as an interim stop envisioned to Hanoi, North Vietnam. The plane was chartered by Texas billionaire Ross Perot, with intentions of delivering the humanitarian cargo to 1,400 incarcerated American POWs still held for political reasons.

While Air America provided aircraft security and amenities for the large crew, talks with the North Vietnamese and Soviet Embassies failed to obtain necessary permission or clearance to continue to Hanoi. Therefore, denied access to North Vietnamese

airspace, the aircraft, crew, and party returned to Bangkok on the 27th.⁹

KNOTTS

One in a long list of Bell pilots fleeing Chief Pilot Bob Hitchman's clutches in Saigon, Jack Knotts (DOH 05/15/66), arrived in Udorn during the Christmas period. One day in December the Assistant Manager of Flight informed Jack that there was a possible opening for a Bell pilot in Udorn; a few more Bells had been sent west to augment the existing fleet for the PDJ operation and there was a need for additional flight personnel. Jack had already been to Udorn to attend an airplane transport rating (ATP) school with Dave Kendall. He liked the area and the personnel stationed there so he agreed to go. A week later, he was working out of Can Tho in the Delta region with Jon Stewart (DOH 03/07/67). Late in the day, the assistant manager of flight in Saigon called, asking if he still wanted to transfer to Udorn.

Jack said, *"Wait a minute."* Then he asked Jon, *"What do you think?"* Stewart was non-committal. Jack had almost decided to transfer, but he radioed that he would call with his answer later that evening after he landed. After dinner he called Saigon on the land line and instructed the person on duty to send a message to the AMF that he was ready to move to Udorn.

Jack processed in the personnel office with well-liked Personal Director Bob Klann. He went to work almost immediately.

Before long, he considered Udorn a great place. It suited him better than Saigon's tedious hustle and bustle and Company politics. Moreover, he considered what USG was attempting to do

⁹EW Knight Emails, 10/11/00, 10/14/00.
Air America Log, Volume 4, #2, 1970.

supporting the Lao was more meaningful than the South Vietnam operation. He was considerably unhappy with what was going on in South Vietnam--not only the military aspect but also the civilian. In his view, USG had wasted millions of dollars of taxpayer money and everybody was making money from the war. ¹⁰

SNIE

As the days counted down to the New Year, work was still underway in Spookville by Agency eggheads charged with composing a comprehensive Special National Intelligence Estimate (SNIE) report regarding Laos, to be released in 1970. Citing old information from previous intelligence reports and newly obtained information, the analysis concluded:

"Hanoi almost certainly wants to establish its hegemony over all of Laos, but subordinates this goal to its higher priority interest in establishing its control over South Vietnam..."

The communists stepped up military activity in northern Laos during 1968-1969 partly to counter U.S.-supported RLG military initiatives. Actions to which they were particularly sensitive included guerrilla and intelligence operations in areas close to North Vietnam and Chinese borders, and penetrations into areas regarded by the communists as rightfully theirs. The increased communist activity must also be seen as stemming from Hanoi's anticipations of favorable developments in Vietnam, and its related desire to bolster its political and military posture in Laos in order to be in the best possible position for any coincident movement toward a new settlement there.

¹⁰Jack Knotts Interviews at Author's House, 05/26-27/99.

While the communists believe that the U.S. has violated the Geneva arrangement-and have certainly done so themselves-nevertheless, they wish to preserve the symbolic authority of the 1962 settlement. They believe it affords them opportunities for an eventual return, without further international negotiations, to a legitimate and strengthened position in Vientiane. This concern among other factors, has operated as a restraint on their military actions. We do not believe that they are likely at this time to cast aside these restraints and embark on military actions as dramatic as a push to the Mekong.

Nonetheless, we expect a **vigorous communist military campaign over the next few months aimed at retaking the Plain of Jars**, the capture of which, particularly in the context of the intensified U.S. air campaign in northern Laos, they probably regarded as evidence of a surprisingly tough U.S. posture. They probably will also aim at **eliminating Vang Pao and his forces who have been carrying the major burden on the war in northern Laos**. If the communists are successful in these efforts, they will probably seek to take advantage of badly shaken RLG confidence to persuade RLG, Souvanna and the King in particular, that a new political settlement is necessary to bring an end to the war. Such a settlement would almost certainly require that the RLG obtain a halt to all U.S. bombing in Laos, and an alteration of the tripartite arrangements that would enhance the communist political positions. ¹¹

¹¹ Special National Intelligence Estimate, #58-70, The Communist View of the Situation in Laos, Submitted by the Director of the Central Intelligence, 02/05/70.

COMMUNIST PLANS FOR 1969 AND EARLY 1970 IN THE PDJ REGION

"...In mid-September 1969 the Vietnamese Central Military Party committees decided to launch a campaign codenamed 139. The goals of this campaign were to resolutely annihilate the enemy forces that had occupied the Plain of Jars and Xieng Khouang, with the primary focus being on destroying Vang Pao's special forces, to recover and expand the liberated zone, and to support and coordinate with the fighting in South Vietnam.

A Campaign headquarters and a Campaign Party Committee were formed. Comrade Vu Lap was appointed as the Campaign Commander and ...was appointed as the Political Commissar. On the allied side (Lao}, Comrade Si Phun, the Commander of the Plain of jars Military Region...

On 15 September the Campaign Party Committee held a meeting and approved the battle plan. The campaign was divided into three phases:

Phase [One]: From 25 October 1969 to 10 February 1970.

During this phase we would deploy our forces into position and create the necessary battlefield posture. In addition, during this phase we would also attack and destroy a portion of the enemy's forces, prevent the enemy from expanding their area of control any further, expand our control of Routes-7A and 7B, and create the necessary conditions to conduct Phase Two of the campaign.

Phase [Two]: From 10 February to 28 February 1970. This would be the primary phase of the campaign in which we would destroy the bulk of the enemy's forces and liberated the [PDJ] and Xieng Khouang.

*Phase [Three]: From 18 February to 25 April 1970, we would liberate the Sam Tong, Long Tieng, and Moung Soui areas and would destroy the tribal bandit clusters..."*¹²

UPCOUNTRY

On 29 December I deadheaded to The Alternate on 12F for a RON that would extend into the first days of 1970. After a short delay that enabled me to obtain a briefing at a FIC office on the south side of the runway, I rode with the PIC of PFG for a twenty-seven-minute flight to Lima-22 where I assumed command of PFJ with Flight Mechanic Bobby Barrow.

The following two days were involved in supporting friendly operations out of LL as they braced to prevent the communists from recovering lost territory in 1970. ©

Monday, November 04, 2013; edited 01/13/14, 11/07/14, 03/13/15, 02/02/17, 07/05/17, 07/18/20, 07/30/20, 02/03/21, 07/24/21, 01/09/22.

¹² *History of the Vietnamese Volunteer Groups and Vietnamese Military Specialists in Laos, 1945-1975: Group 100-Military Advisors; Group 959, Military Specialists.* 09/15/69.

Author Note: The communist plan to recover lost territory was ambitious but feasible as later events revealed in 1970.

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